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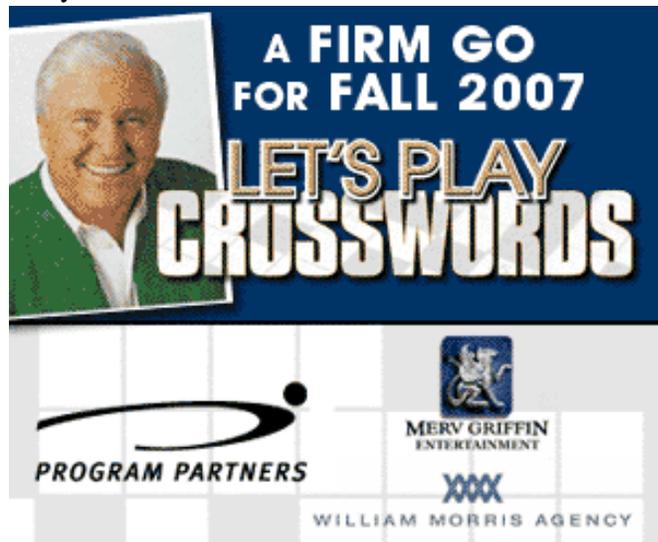
Media Planner
March 19, 2007

Ancient War Relevant to Brand Battle

'300's' Spartans Can Teach Today's Marketers Competitive Principles

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Special to *TelevisionWeek*

Story continues below...



As part of my birthday gift last week, my wife and kids gave me the afternoon off. I promptly made a trip to the local multiplex to take in the digital presentation of the new movie "300." The film did not disappoint.

For those of you who haven't seen it, the film's premise concerns a stand by 300 Spartan elite soldiers against the invading hordes of Xerxes, King of Persia. I couldn't help but tie a number of the war principles portrayed in the film to valuable media-planning strategies. Some of those principles are very instructive for brands that face the challenge of restricted media resources in an especially competitive situation.

Of the many included in the film, here are six principles that are highly applicable to brands in a low-resource/high-competition situation:

- Fight from your strength.
- Dictate the nature of the conflict.
- Choose the battlefield.
- Use the element of surprise.
- Accept help from unlikely allies.
- Do something memorable.

Fight From Your Strength

In the film, Sparta's King Leonidas leverages the biggest strength available to him: the unmatched skill of life-trained Spartan warriors. Every media-planning team has its equivalent of the Spartan: skilled practitioners equipped with institutional capabilities and outstanding proprietary tools. The key for the media team is to ensure these practitioners ply their trade to best advantage.

Best advantage means not falling prey to the power of the tools. Media tools aren't capable of outputting solutions by themselves, just as the spears and shields in "300" were useless without the skilled Spartans to wield them. Problem-solving ability is the media planner's greatest strength. That ability, used in concert with quality tools and consumer insight, can overcome many competitive obstacles.

Dictate the Nature of the Conflict

The Spartans do not let the Persians dictate the nature of the conflict. From the beginning, when Leonidas sends his reply by killing the sacrosanct Persian emissary, Sparta refuses to play by Persia's rules.

This principle is vitally important, especially for brands with limited resources. When the media team conducts a competitive assessment, noting how media resources are being invested in the category, it is easy for the team to believe they need to compete in areas where category resources are being heavily invested. That is not necessarily the best course of action for the team's brand. The competitive assessment only reflects where others in the category felt it was important to invest. When brands invest behind competitors in the category, they are playing by rules others have laid down and not their own.

Committing scarce resources to areas others think important could be disastrous. In order to dictate the nature of competitive conflict, brands should step back and commit resources to opportunities that have a better chance of influencing the conflict's outcome. Paying customers, not competitors, lay down the only rules that should matter in the marketplace; those rules are the ones to be mined via deep consumer insight.

Uncover and understand the rules of the conflict inherent in real consumer insights and honor them. Let the competition follow old standards and practices. Competitive assessments then can become a measure of how much of their resources competitors are squandering.

Choose the Battlefield

The Spartans use this principle to great advantage in the film. They beat the Persians to a key piece of territory on the road to Sparta and construct a wall that forces the Persians into a narrow gorge to continue their march. In that gorge, numbers mean nothing and the superior skill of the Spartans can be used with extreme prejudice.

This illustration is not unlike a brand with few resources available to it. In order to make brand messages achieve their greatest impact, use target audience insight to identify the best possible terrain of the brand's battlefield: the minds of target consumers. Then, beat the competition to that place, take it for your brand and defend it.

Let's say consumer insight uncovers a key media contact point in influencing the target audience. That point could be a place that provides continued, relevant awareness or it could occur at a critical place along the purchase cycle. Like the Spartans, a media plan can gain advantage by beating competitors to that point, laying claim to the territory and defending it deftly with available resources.

Are your current media plans laying claim to the best territory available, or do they only occasionally place messages at those contact points? If the contact point is valuable, do what you can to claim that territory for the brand and keep competitors out. Win with consumers by dominating a place of relevant mindset.

Use the Element of Surprise

The Spartans used a number of surprises in the conflict. Surprises get the consumer's attention. They can take the form of simple actions, such as investing resources in what is traditionally an off period or when times are tough. It may seem counterintuitive, but it may in fact be an opportunity that allows a brand to more easily gain consumer mind share when competitors are not assailing the marketplace.

In the marketplace, surprises are great because they keep the competition off-balance. Just two weeks ago there was a great example for the Visa brand. Visa was able to negotiate the brand into Milton Bradley's The Game of Life as a contemporary replacement for the fake cash traditionally used in the board game.

Beyond the ongoing value of kids learning how to make transactions under a Visa brand name, think about all the extra commercial time Visa will receive this holiday season when Hasbro airs spots for Life. How about the extra impact on toy shelves across multiple retailers? Do you think Visa's credit competitors are surprised? I imagine so. I also imagine this little surprise won't show up in traditional competitive reports.

Accept Help From Unlikely Allies

In "300," it is demonstrated how accepting help from unlikely allies can provide benefits and how rejecting it can potentially harm you. While the untrained Greeks don't take a huge toll on the Persians, they are able to inflict a measure of damage and give the Spartans a bit of a respite in the heat of battle.

In a media plan, those unlikely allies can take the form of strategic partners. Partners may be other brands, partners on the media vendor side or other communications partners working on behalf of the brand.

These types of allies are important because they can help share some of the communication load, helping make resources go farther. They also can help to open up other contact points, extending and adding more value to the message.

Seasonal brands frequently apply this principle. In general, they may have few resources available beyond those for the seasonal periods they have to cover. One strong way they make do is to enlist the partnership of related brands that happen to face the same situation. By pairing up, both brands can share the message, make each other more relevant and cover a much broader period of time than they could have individually.

On the media side, a partner can take the form of a company that can offer messaging opportunities across many media contact points that are "battlefield-relevant" to the target consumer. If that's the case, why bother to thin out resources across multiple vendors? Consolidation of resources with one strategic partner can create not only scale but synergy across multiple message contact points, thus increasing marketplace impact.

Do Something Memorable

The film also demonstrates the value of achieving something memorable. The feats of "300's" soldiers are used to inspire the populace of Sparta and the greater Spartan army in the larger conflict. Media history is full of examples where planning groups have converted relatively small resources into efforts that have industry, category and consumer staying power.

The Super Bowl has been a terrain for this, with excellent examples including Apple's 1984 and Masterlock's longtime use of their limited resources to air a lone spot. Masterlock also has gone the opposite direction and achieved memorable results in other dayparts by running one-second spots. Whichever form they take, memorable executions grab consumer attention, generating buzz and publicity far beyond their airing.

If your brand is low on resources but in a very competitive situation, you may want to consider some of the battle principles from "300." Doing so can increase your chances of delivering marketplace impact for your brand.

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