

Marketing: An Overlooked Aspect of Information Operations

Captain Stoney Trent, U.S. Army, and Captain James L. Doty III, U.S. Army

DEFEATING ENEMY formations on the field of battle is merely the first, and often the easiest, phase of a military operation. Ultimate success (accomplishing the political goals of the National Command Authority) hinges on a successful post-high-intensity conflict occupation in which the population comes to accept the new state of affairs. In all phases, understanding and influencing the people is critical to reducing the cost of victory in terms of lives, dollars, and time.

The U.S. Army has had varying degrees of success over the past 100 years in influencing the people of opposing nations. In Cuba, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, Italy, Germany, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Haiti, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, we have run the gamut from success to failure. Recognizing the need to win over populations, the Army has begun to emphasize information operations (IO) in every deployment. Such operations are one part of the Army's campaign to achieve information superiority during a conflict. Information superiority is "the operational advantage derived from the ability to collect, process, and disseminate an uninterrupted flow of information while exploiting or denying an adversary's ability to do the same."¹ According to U.S. Army Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, information operations are "actions taken to affect the adversary's and influence others' decisionmaking processes, information and information systems while protecting one's own information and information systems."²

The concept of influencing an enemy force's or local population's decisionmaking process is not new. American psychological operations (PSYOP) personnel have attempted to disseminate messages and influence enemy forces or local populations since World War II.³ Propaganda, the attempt to

influence threat forces and populations through directed messages, has been used by warring countries for centuries. Americans view propaganda negatively because past enemies such as Nazi Germany, North Vietnam, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union used it. Yet, propaganda, PSYOP, and information operations seek to accomplish the same goal: to influence the target audience to make a decision beneficial to the user. What is new in information operations is the integration of the plan to influence threat forces and local populations into a larger effort to achieve an operational advantage by controlling the flow of information.

Recent challenges in Iraq highlight the difficulty of developing and sustaining an effective IO campaign. The U.S. military's failure to adequately integrate and successfully execute IO campaigns is ironic; after all, Americans live in a society dominated by marketing communications. From political lobbying to commercial advertising, organizations sway Americans' decisions. Information operations have the same goal as marketing communications: to influence a target audience to respond positively to a message. Because IO and marketing both attempt to elicit physical as well as psychological responses, both ought to utilize similar methods. The U.S. military should tap the abundance of creative marketing talent in America and implement a more complete approach to IO planning and execution.

In units such as the 1st Armored, 1st Infantry, and 3d Infantry Divisions, field artillery staff officers under the supervision of the S3/G3 are responsible for information operations.⁴ This is because staffs approach IO planning from a targeting perspective. The decide, detect, deliver, and assess targeting cycle is, in fact, similar to the process many advertising agencies use: discover, define,

design, and deliver. However, the Army provides no training for officers who must plan, coordinate, and execute its version of a successful marketing campaign. Even IO career field (FA 30) selectees are not required to possess marketing training, although FA 30 Reserve Component officers “with civilian experience in information technology and management, communications, marketing, organizational behavior or other IO-related fields are a valuable army resource.”⁵ While U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Pamphlet 525-69, *Concept for Information Operations*, recommends all officers receive “awareness training in IO” in officer training schools, it does not address the additional resources needed for IO training and emphasizes technology and computer skills rather than the complex skills of expert marketers—message development and tailored delivery.⁶

At the strategic level, the Army has established the 1st Information Operations Command (IOC) (Land [L]) to support combatant commands in an array of IO specialties, including operations security, PSYOP, electronic warfare, military deception, civil affairs, and public affairs.⁷ While casting its net over the entire span of information superiority, the 1st IOC (L) has neglected to integrate key specialties that would result in successful “mission-tailored, thoroughly developed, IO plans.”⁸ Officers wishing to specialize in information operations are afforded opportunities for advanced schooling, but only in information systems and computer science. These areas provide technical skills necessary to link IO to the broader information superiority effort, but they are not particularly helpful in developing effective IO campaigns aimed at diverse populations. No mention of marketing skills or education can be found in the material describing the value of IO or its officers.⁹

Information operations are marketing communications. A review of marketing textbooks reveals the four key aspects of marketing are product, price, promotion, and place.¹⁰ As conceived by the Army, IO starts and stops with a shallow promotion plan (talking points for soldiers and leaders, and public relations and advertising venues) directed at a particular place (the neighborhood or civil leader). The plan fails to consider what “product” is being “sold,” and at what “price to the consumer.” Others have also noted the importance of considering the relative cost of supporting U.S. operations.¹¹ A good way to clarify the nature of the Army’s “product” is to think of the U.S. mission as a “brand” that will bring certain benefits to the target audience if the audience chooses to buy it.

The U.S. Mission as a Brand with a Cost

In marketing terminology, a brand is the summary of all perceptions about products, employees, the organization, and so on that marketing creates. According to Professor Terry Paul, “A strong brand is more the result of good marketing, rather than the cause of good marketing.”¹² A brand makes a promise to consumers, and companies must be obsessive about fulfilling such promises. The United States already has a strong brand name among people all over the world (who have strong perceptions about it, good and bad). The U.S. military must understand those perceptions and work to capitalize on its brand’s strengths while marginalizing its weaknesses. In civilian marketing circles, this is viewed as “leveraging a brand.”¹³

Leveraging the U.S. brand in a military operation can take many forms. We could extend the brand in the form of U.S.-sponsored organizations such as security forces or civil engineering firms that have their own identity but are consistently supportive of the promises of the U.S. mission. When doing this, though, we must keep in mind that just as corporate reputations can be damaged by their associates’ actions, so too can the U.S. mission be jeopardized by affiliates that act in ways inconsistent with American promises.

When possible, U.S. forces should partner with civilian or government organizations that have already established their own credibility within the region, including nonlocal governments that have a better reputation than the United States does. And finally, the United States could license its brand to other organizations that support U.S. operations or ideals; for example, a storeowner who allows minorities to shop in his store could be a licensee and receive a Coalition Forces (CF) storefront ad and a government supply contract for his cooperation.

In marketing, product price is an important consideration. The price associated with a particular brand indicates how the brand compares with competing brands in quality and status.¹⁴ A skilled marketer is aware of the competing products a consumer might choose to support. While the U.S. brand might offer many benefits, its cost might be too high. In Iraq, for example, the cost of supporting the U.S. brand through its extensions, partners, and licensees is potentially death. Information operations, like marketing, must find a way to sell a product with such a high cost. An effective plan might include messages that point out the costs versus the benefits of supporting each product, that compare the relative cost of the U.S. brand

to other brands (for instance, the terrorist brand), and that appeal to the consumers' desire for a prestigious product. In order to succeed in marketing the high-cost U.S. brand, one must understand the customer's perceptions and goals.

Understanding the "Customer"

An information operation can be viewed as selling a mission (such as the U.S. presence in Iraq) to the local population. Just as a sound marketing strategy must first comprehend the target market, or customers, successful IO must begin with understanding the people it is attempting to affect. For the military, civilians and business leaders are analogous to household consumers and business buyers. The household consumer is typically concerned with only his household and is significantly more emotional in his decisionmaking. The business buyer or civil leader represents an organization and consults with experts and associates. Both buyers balance the benefits of cooperating with multiple entities. In pursuing their goals, leaders and locales might consort with both the United States and its enemies. However, they will do business with neither if it is not advantageous to them.

A significant shortfall in military operations continues to be insufficient knowledge about the local populace and how to influence it. Combat units and intelligence sections in the 1st Armored Division and 3d Infantry Division deployed to Iraq with country studies printed before 1991, for Operation Desert Storm.¹⁵ These studies included only general population information. Well-developed information about tribes, such as their motivation, leaders, interrelationships or even general locations, simply did not exist.

Successful marketing campaigns begin with thorough research to identify consumer trends. Just as military intelligence spends much of its time assessing the many facets of threat organizations, we must make a greater effort to collect usable market data about the IO target population. At a minimum, this includes identifying market segments and their leaders, their goals, motivations, expectations, and daily rituals. While it would be time- and manpower-intensive, conducting surveys and cooperating with successful marketers in the region could make the difference between advertising successes and colossal backfires. Assessment of the consumer must also continue over time to track changes in the market.

Successful marketing campaigns draw on emotions, and strong brands have good stories.

Psychological studies have shown people to have much better recall of details when they receive information in a story format.¹⁶ The story provides a framework for learning and is easily transferable. Even in Western societies people rely more on their own personal networks of family and friends than on traditional media for acquiring information about ideals and purchases. In the United States, the average person shares a bad experience with at least 25 other people. This phenomenon is amplified in Muslim societies, which rely even more on story-telling traditions.¹⁷ Unfortunately, stories and emotional appeals that apply to consumers in the United States are often obscure, confusing, or have the reverse effect in other cultures. Finding the right story and the right people to deliver it to is critical.

Touch Points and Consistency

Everything an organization does conveys a message, and to varying degrees, the message content depends on the source and the recipient. Thus, salesmen must prioritize their efforts so they communicate the right message to the right person. Key points where an organization interacts with its customers are known as touch points.¹⁸ By analyzing the needs of the local population, we can identify intrinsic touch points (interaction with patrols) and civilian-initiated touch points (public service complaints). While IO should maximize the effectiveness of planned, military-created touch points (ads, news releases, public announcements), only consistent communication and proper soldier behavior will positively influence spontaneous touch points. The latter are particularly important, because in the eye of the public, they often define deployments.

Just as sound strategic thinking applied consistently from design to communications to sales is essential for strong branding, so consistency, sensitivity, and creativity are the keys to gaining and maintaining credibility in military operations. Consistency generates positive relationships; a unified outward image reflects an organization's internal stability. Consistency must be maintained at both tactical and strategic levels. At the tactical level, messages directed at the same target audience should have the same style and tone. For example, in two communications, one targeting potential insurgent recruits and one active guerrillas, both should discourage resistance. The potential recruits might be shown a message of hope and prosperity, while the active guerrillas receive a message about the futility of resistance, but both messages should

still have a similar personality, positioning, and identification. They would be tactically tailored but strategically alike.

Information operations are not trivial undertakings for an army operating across a large area populated by a diverse people. Even when higher echelons have personnel who can draft a strategically consistent plan, the separation between them and the marketplace where subordinate units work often results in ineffective or out-of-synch messages. For example, a battalion in Kosovo was unexpectedly flooded with local nationals demanding construction aid that had been promised on television, but the battalion had not been funded or equipped to conduct the construction. Moreover, it first heard of the plan from the locals.¹⁹ The higher echelon's failure to coordinate with the unit on the ground decreased the effectiveness of the IO campaign and reduced the legitimacy of the coalition effort.

The challenge of achieving consistency makes some decentralized IO planning and execution necessary and requires higher skills at lower echelons. Adjacent units developing separate messages and operating procedures can confuse local citizens, who view all soldiers as the same "U.S. brand." IO planners must consider the effects of their messages on many different consumers and ensure a message at one level or in one area conflicts as little as possible with messages at other levels in other areas. Sending contradictory messages or making promises that cannot be kept undermines credibility.²⁰ Such was the case when the international media promised Iraqis security and stability that local forces were not able to provide. Iraqis' bad experience with looting, shootings, and kidnappings was reinforced by anti-U.S. marketing messages emphasizing the illegitimacy of the CF campaign. The result was a lack of trust in Coalition messages. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal has also been skillfully exploited by opponents of the United States in many ways. One example was dressing hostages in orange jumpsuits to mimic U.S. treatment of detainees.

Media Planning and Execution

The Army has long employed mass media (radio, print, and limited television) in support of operations, but like commercial marketers, the Army should begin to move away from mass media to niche media. With technology, messages can be tailored and made interactive, which should

reduce the risk of delivering conflicting messages to consumers. Information operations should use new forms of communication. A prevailing misperception is that Third World societies are ignorant of or have no access to multiple media sources. In fact, they have come to distrust mass media outlets because of their control by the state. Interactive internet sites and free CDs or DVDs can carry messages to identifiable targets and allow two-way communication between the organization and the target.

An IO campaign must begin with understanding the target market. Most parts of the world perceive the United States as headstrong, pro-big business, dangerous to local cultures, and pro-Israel.²¹ This reputation is not an insurmountable hurdle, but it must be taken into account. Recent history provides many examples of successful companies that had poor public images but still grew and succeeded (for example, Halliburton, R.J. Reynolds, and Wal-Mart).

Many believe the West can solve all problems with ease and efficiency. Such an expectation can undermine U.S. legitimacy. Trust rapidly deteriorates when the public does not see action and results. Iraqis see the failure to quickly solve local problems as proof America does not intend to solve them rather than evidence of their difficulty. What this reality demands is a quality IO or marketing communication plan that is integrated, introspective, interactive, and imaginative—a plan more expansive and complex than current military staffs can generate or supervise.

Insurgents Capitalize on IMC

To illustrate how successful integrated marketing communications (IMC) can be developed with much more thought than resources, consider the recent IO campaign waged by insurgents in Iraq. In July 2004, National Public Radio (NPR) reported on the use of DVDs and CDs by insurgent groups to increase public support, recruiting, and funding: "Intended to appeal directly to average Iraqis, insurgents are bypassing the mainstream media and using compelling forms of direct marketing. Videos depicting insurgents on the attack, wounded Iraqis (apparently collateral damage from U.S. aggression), and hooded Abu Ghraib prisoners is overlaid with patriotic and religiously motivating music and chants. Earlier versions of these products were very crude, but in recent months, the production quality has increased to that of a professional, broadcast

level. Integrating combat cameramen into their operations, they demonstrate experienced use of cameras and listening devices. While a more experienced military observer would notice crude tactics and skill demonstrated (firing wildly, poor weapons maintenance, and small unit tactics) on the part of the armed insurgents, these are not readily apparent to the target market, which has been termed the 'Jihad Market.' Money and recruits from within Iraq and abroad follow performance and success, and here it is apparent that success in the information campaign is much more important than real tactical combat success.²²

Since the beginning of the occupation in Iraq, the United States has attempted to run its own IO campaign using traditional media (flyers and U.S.-funded television and radio networks). Unfortunately, the NPR report also illustrated the breadth of mistrust Iraqis have for traditional media outlets: "Because the truth has been denied to Iraqis for so long, they are now searching the internet for truth. A taxi driver stated that he stays away from ["news"] websites that are sponsored by foreign governments, the news media, or insurgent groups. He states that it is simply 'hard to find [a] reliable

source of news."²³

With such skepticism running rampant in the Middle East, a large window of opportunity is open for a powerful marketing campaign using alternative media. It could have a tremendous effect.

Understanding marketing is critical to understanding the strengths and limitations of U.S. Army information operations. More important, the art and success of IO as a marketing application comes from skilled, impassioned practitioners. The Army should acquire skilled marketing professionals by contracting with U.S. companies, by co-opting the best local national counterparts, or by providing marketing training for military IO practitioners.

While information operations have parallels to the business-world practices of marketing, promotion, and sales, the military has much more at stake than quarterly earnings. The IO mission is so crucial and complex it deserves the most skilled marketers the United States has to offer. Selling the United States in current and future deployments is of paramount importance. Without proper planning and resourcing of the IO mission, much effort, and many lives, will be wasted on diminished successes, or even failures. **MR**

NOTES

1. FM 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 14 June 2001), chap. 11, sec. 1.

2. *Ibid.*, chap. 11, sec. 49.

3. A recent work on PSYOP in the Pacific Theater is Alison Gilmore's *You Can't Fight Tanks With Bayonets: Psychological Warfare Against the Japanese Army in the Southwest Pacific* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Allan M. Winkler discusses American use of propaganda at the strategic level in *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

4. The observation about field artillery officers in IO planning reflects the authors' personal experience with officers assigned to IO positions in training and deployments to Kosovo and Iraq. See also Marc Romanych and Kenneth Krumm, "Tactical Information Operations in Kosovo," *Military Review* (September-October 2004): 56-61.

5. Department of the Army (DA) Pamphlet (Pam) 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Development and Career Management* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1 October 1998), 226-29. Currently under revision.

6. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pam 525-69, *Concept for Information Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1 Aug 1995).

7. The 1st Information Operations Command (IO CMD) website can be found at <www.1stiocmd.army.mil>. This particular reference can be located at <www.1stiocmd.army.mil/aboutLWA.html>.

8. *Ibid.*

9. DA Pam 600-3 and the 1st IO CMD website do not mention marketing skills or training as elements of IO training, although DA Pam 600-3 does refer to Reserve Component IO officers with marketing skills as "a valuable asset."

10. Tom Duncan, *Principles of Advertising and IMC*, Second edition (New York:

McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2004), 7.

11. Norman Emery, "Information Operations in Iraq," *Military Review* (September-October 2004), 11-14. Emery refers to an "Insurgent Payoff Function" that provides a simplified relationship between the cost and value of supporting a particular course of action. While oversimplifying the nonlinear interactions of the two, it does attempt to illustrate the need to evaluate, and thus communicate, the utility of supporting U.S. operations among the population.

12. Terry Paul, *Promotional Strategy*, class and lecture notes, The Ohio State University, Summer 2004.

13. Duncan, 94-96.

14. *Ibid.*, 111.

15. The example is based on personal experience of the authors in 1st Armored Division, and CPT Steve Barry in the 3rd Infantry Division.

16. Nancy Pennington and Reid Hastie, "Explaining the Evidence: Tests of the Story Model for Juror Decision Making," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 62, No. 2, 1992, 189-206.

17. Paul.

18. Duncan, 117-125.

19. The example is based on the authors' personal experiences in the 1st Armored Division.

20. George E. Anderson, "Winning the Nationbuilding War," *Military Review* (September-October 2004): 48. The authors witnessed similar experiences in the Balkans and Iraq.

21. Duncan, 54-55.

22. National Public Radio News, *All Things Considered*, 12 July 2004.

23. *Ibid.*

Captain Stoney Trent, U.S. Army, is an instructor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA). He received a B.S. from the University of Notre Dame and an M.S. from Ohio State University. He has served in various command and staff positions in the continental United States (CONUS), Germany, Kosovo, and Iraq.

Captain James L. Doty III, U.S. Army, is an instructor in the Department of History at USMA. He received a B.S. from USMA and an M.S. from Ohio State University. He has served in various command and staff positions in CONUS, Germany, and Kosovo.