



**::view from the cheap seats::**

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## **Surrounding Yourself With Breakthrough Nonsense**

*Are you communicating with customers or violating their space?*

That's it. I've declared *jihad* on certain marketing terms and phrases.

Sounds ludicrous to you? Well, if you're battling for wallet share or implementing guerrilla tactics to reach your target, then I can declare jihad.

We're all combatants now, or so you'd think if you were to spend a day in the ad industry. I once went to a client meeting where the Marketing Director talked about how to improve her company's "one-to-one" customer communications, and make her brand more "customer-focused." So this pleasant-looking woman in her mid-forties said, "I want to surround our customers with messaging. I want to break through to reach them."

It was right there and then that I knew she'd never be successful communicating with anyone in a one-to-one capacity. She wanted to "surround" and "break through."

We have other terms for those concepts in our society: "assault" and "trespassing."

Simply put, you can't use the language of war or criminal behavior and expect people to like you. And you can't spew that nonsense in meetings if you want to be taken seriously, or have your agency or your client's brand to be thought of in a positive light.

I know, military expressions are pervasive in our lives. I'm not sure if it originated with Sun-Tzu, or World War II veterans returning home to become The Men In The Grey Flannel Suits, but somewhere along the line the language of war became the language of business and marketing.

You hear it every day in your ad agency or company, I bet: "It's all hands on deck. We need to add some creative firepower. That is, if we want to execute some really killer ads. Got it? Alright everyone, lock and load!"

Am I overreacting? Is it okay to embrace war language? After all, they're just figures of speech, right? Wrong. It's too easy to use war as a metaphor for business. It gives everything a false sense of urgency; it implies that in every business decision there are outright victors and losers.

There's a great cartoon by a fellow named Hugh MacLeod and it has a very simple caption: "***If you talked to people the way advertising talked to people, they'd punch you in the face.***" He's absolutely right. So why do we legitimize such language in advertising? More insidiously, why do we use that language in PowerPoint presentations, RFPs, and creative briefs? Why do we allow our clients to say it with a straight face?

Even in this age of digital and video, words still mean things. It doesn't matter if you think, the way so many people are now conditioned to believe, no one would read a two-sentence headline or three sentences of body copy. Wanna buy a house? You don't sign a picture of the house. You sign a lengthy, binding legal contract, of which most every word is carefully crafted.

Yet in everyday life, in meetings, emails and everywhere else, we're perfectly content to throw around needless hyperbole masquerading as forceful language. It makes simple matters seem more important than they are. And it lessens the impact of really dangerous situations. I'll give you an example.

Right now, we have 200,000 soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many are spending their days finding and rooting out enemy combatants and insurgents. Sometimes, they have to go door to door, house to house. So what are they really doing at those houses when they're forced to? Surrounding. And breaking through.

I promise you, our soldiers aren't door-to-door salesman. What they're doing is really fighting for their lives. What you're doing is just advertising. There's a difference.

We have the ability to be uplifting—in the words we use and the work we do. We have an obligation to help our clients communicate better with customers. So when we start saying things in more credible ways, we'll have a much more positive effect on our business and the world.

I hope you agree with me. But I'm not looking to emerge victorious in this crusade. I just want to change some minds.