

Branding

Brand name competition

by 1stLt Davis Parker

Let me give you two slogans. “Just Do It.” There is hardly a soul in the United States who would not recognize the slogan or the logo associated with it. It is simple, classic, and memorable. It captures everything Nike wants to communicate, and it fits on a bumper sticker. “Aim High.” Nine out of ten people would not recognize it.

In marketing, brands get one chance to make their pitch, often only a few seconds to leave an impression. They hope their message will be memorable and positive, leaving a subtle but concrete imprint in the customer’s memory. In psychology, this concept is called priming, a process which “influences subsequent thoughts or actions and increases the speed at which these subsequent thoughts or actions occur.”¹ By priming, brands can ensure they are not forgotten or ignored (like “Aim High”) but constantly evoked in the minds of their consumers (like “Just Do It”).

Recruiting works much the same. In a world of competing firms and ideas, recruiters often only get a split second to make their pitch and must cut through the white noise of competition with a clear, concise, and memorable message. There is no better brand, no better message than that of the Marine Corps. Since the raising of the American flag on Iwo Jima, the Marine Corps has occupied a hallowed place in the public conscience. The images and stories of Marines fighting in the Pacific, Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East have left little doubt of what the Marine Corps is and what it stands for. We are the few, the proud—whose indomitable spirit can only result in battles won. Yet, the Marine Corps brand is greater than a slogan; it is an idea and an image. It encapsulates discipline, determination, *esprit*, fidelity, honor, and so much more. It is part R. Lee Ermey and part 8th and

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I. It is the resolute promise of *Semper Fidelis* and the unmistakable silhouette of an Eagle, Globe, and Anchor. And it is precisely because the Marine Corps has been so zealous in guarding this brand that it has persisted for the last 200 years. It is not an accident that 47 percent of Americans view the Marine Corps as the most prestigious branch in the U.S. military, more than twice the amount of any other.² Harry S. Truman once quipped, “[The Marine Corps] has a propaganda machine that is almost equal to Stalin’s.” Some things never change.

In his article, “Can You Beat a Marine?: The Case for Decision Games in Marine Corps Recruiting,” Damien O’Connell argues that the Marine Corps should transition its recruiting

strategy to focus more on strategic, decision-based games like *Fortnight* and *Memoir ‘44*. With the ubiquity of video games in American households and the rising popularity of board games, O’Connell writes that it is in the Marine Corps’ best interest to embrace this new media of strategic thinking and leverage them as recruiting tools; that this shift in policy would align with the guidance of recent commandants, produce a larger recruit pool of more active, critical thinkers, and increase the Marine Corps’ public image.

While O’Connell makes numerous salient points and is right to argue that tactical decision games are useful training tools, he misses a much larger point. Recruiters work in a time-compressed environment where they often only have five minutes to convince potential recruits. Every minute not used to leverage the Marine Corps’ traditional brand strength is a minute lost. In economics, this is called an opportunity cost—the loss of other alternatives when one alternative is chosen. Moreover, by



The Marine Corps is zealous in guarding its honor and integrity. (Photo by LCpl Grace Kindred.)



It is not about eSports. (Photo by Cpl Brooke Woods.)

muddling our core message and deviating from what it is Marines do best, we can potentially set ourselves up for failure in years to come. I am unconvinced that seventeen-year-olds across the country will suddenly become interested in military service because a recruiter was playing *StarCraft II*, but I do think that shifting our focus away from the classic Marine Corps values will hurt recruiting efforts in the long term.

A recruiting pitch built upon eSports and board games will not likely effectively recruit the types of young men and women the Marine Corps needs to be successful. Do we need recruits who can think and make strategic decisions? Of course, but I am more interested in leading young men and women who are motivated by a challenge, physically and mentally tough, and embrace the warrior ethos because it is these Marines who will have to carry the weight and fight the battles needed to make our country safe. In my experience, Marines do not struggle because of an inability to understand squad tactics; they struggle because they lack inner character and the drive to succeed.

With that said, there is certainly a place for decision-based games in the recruiting process, and officer selection officers and recruiters should look for opportunities to incorporate tactics and

strategy into their pool events. They can follow each physical training event with a stressed decision-forcing case or tactical decision game. They can incorporate maneuver warfare concepts—like the critical vulnerability or center of gravity—into exercises. These are low-cost gains for recruiters, and at the margins they can lead to a more prepared and potentially larger pool of Marines. Yet these things cannot recruit in and of themselves. They are at their best complements of the Marine Corps' fundamental recruiting pitch: to work with, fight with, and be the best.

This begs the question: how *do* we recruit? The answer is two-fold. We focus on Marine Corps benefits and values—the head and the heart. The benefits of joining the Corps are both obvious and compatible across all branches: consistent pay, food, lodging, and healthcare, the G.I. Bill, and the lifelong reputational advantage of serving in the Armed Forces. For 18- to 22-year-olds unsure of what to do with their future, there are few organizations that better set them up for lifelong success. Where we differ from other Services, though, is in our values. Our values are often described by phrases like “honor, courage, and commitment,” but I think they exceed beyond that. They are the feelings the Marine Corps evokes. They represent who we are.

There are five branches in the U.S. military: the Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps. The Army has tanks, the Navy and Coast Guard have ships, and the Air Force has planes. But the Marine Corps, we have Marines. When I walked into a Marine officer selection officer's office, I did not do it because I thought they had the best tactics or fanciest gear. I chose the Marine Corps because I wanted to be a Marine. I wanted to be a part of a brotherhood bigger than myself. I wanted to train with the best. I wanted to lead the unit on the front lines that refused to quit, or surrender. These are Marine Corps values. This is what draws young men and women from across the country to Parris Island, San Diego, and Quantico. This is what makes us different, and we should be shouting it from the top of the Pentagon.

Society is changing. Young men and women are less inclined to serve than ever before, and every day more Americans fall out of shape and become unqualified for military service. Finding competent recruits is increasingly a challenge. Yet the Marine Corps should not make the mistake of lowering or changing its standards to meet quotas; doing so would undermine the foundation on which the institution is built. For it is the immutable, unchanging aspects of our character that are our strength both in combat and in recruiting. We are strong because we are different, and the day we forget that, we will become nothing more than Soldiers on ships—an obsolete branch that does not deserve the right to exist.

Oh, and by the way, “Aim High” is the Air Force's official slogan. Not quite *Semper Fidelis*.

Notes

1. Erica Harrison, “The Psychology of a Smart Slogan,” *Corporate Eye*, (February 2013), available at <http://www.corporate-eye.com>.
2. Dave Goldich and Art Swift. “Americans Say Army Most Important Branch to U.S. Defense,” *Gallup* (October 2018), available at <https://news.gallup.com>.

