

THE ART OF WAR OF THE INBOX

ADAPTING SUN TZU'S ART OF WAR
TO EMAIL MARKETING



B2B
BANDITS

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INTRO

Principles endure; formulas don't. If there is a formula, it's not creative.

- Bill Bernbach -

There's a war in the email inbox, and you're (probably) losing.

Are you feeling reactive - rather than proactive - when running your email marketing campaigns?

Did tactics that used to work miracles now fail publicly and miserably? Have your pivots to different strategies have a stupidly short shelf-life?

When marketing wisdom fails us, we need to look at other disciplines, such as war. I don't believe it is an accident that marketing efforts are called "campaigns," mirroring language used for millennia. Military science emphasizes the use of intelligence (head) over brute force (muscles) and teaches us how to win battles with the least amount of death effort.

In this 5-part book, I've distilled battle-tested principles that my team at B2B Bandits has learned the hard way over 13 years and 21,000 email campaigns and examined them through the lens of Sun Tzu's The Art of War.

If you thoughtful consider and apply them, you can start planning and executing your email campaigns like a savvy general instead of a reactive marketer. You won't find any plug-n-play templates, glittery objects, or empty promises. Instead, we'll equip you for email battle with hard-earned, violently practical advice.

The Inspiration

Sun Tzu was a military general, strategist, and philosopher who waged war in China over 2,000 years ago. His collected wisdom, *The Art of War*, outlined 13 principles refined in decades of advising leaders, diplomats, politicians, and generals toward victory.

Nearly all of Sun Tzu's principles apply to email marketing, except perhaps *Attack by Fire*, which has a heavy *Game of Thrones* vibe. ;^)

Now, charge into this book - keep your head up, eyes open, and weapon at the ready.

1. Stop Fighting Fair
2. Vary Your Tactics
3. Use Spies to Gain an Edge
4. Check Your Biases
5. Know Your Enemy

DISCLAIMER: When you dig into the principles, you'll likely prefer one principle and dismiss the others. Don't. The great strategists in war and marketing use 'battle-tested' principles to challenge their thinking and overcome potentially campaign-killing tendencies. In that spirit, I invite you to **challenge my thinking** about email, victory, and defeat.

"Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat."

- Sun Tzu -



THE ART OF WAR OF THE INBOX

PRINCIPLE #1 STOP FIGHTING FAIR

“According as circumstances are favorable, one should modify one's plans.”

- Sun Tzu -

Your email inbox has become a warzone. And when in times of war, wise generals - and marketers - should turn to Sun Tzu, the Chinese warrior-philosopher-strategist, for assistance. He documented his timeless advice in his now legendary guide, *The Art of War*.

The first principle we will extract and adapt from Sun Tzu is an idea woven through nearly every chapter of the *Art of War*. Stop. Fighting. Fair.

In email marketing, if you are playing on a level playing field with the same weapons as other companies, you should abandon the campaign or create an environment that is unfairly advantageous to you. If the circumstances do not become favorable, do not launch the campaign.

Why Do We Fight Fair

When you hear the word fair, you may immediately think about fair play. Like, don't hit below the belt in boxing, don't sucker punch someone at recess, or don't cheat when playing poker with your grandma. Our culture has taught us that the pursuit of fairness is a virtue. And this urge can help, especially when navigating social relationships and fitting into a community.

It makes sense to seek a fair exchange when dealing with allies. However, when dealing with your opponents in business, this same fairness can kill your campaigns - or business. 📌

Fighting fair = best practices

“It is much easier to be fired for being illogical than it is for being unimaginative. The fatal issue is that logic always gets you to exactly the same place as your competitors.”

- Rory Sutherland - 📌

Conventional wisdom and what works in the real world can be radically different. Playing it safe by adhering to conventional wisdom - or “best practices” - exposes you to the possibility that what worked for others won’t work for you. The moment a savvy opponent knows which best practice (or weapon) you’ll be deploying on a large campaign is when your opponent can make the fight “unfair” by pulling out a larger - or less kind - weapon onto the marketing battlefield.

Now, you can overcome this tendency to fairness by looking at these best practices as systems. When we look at system theory, we can break them down into four categories to help determine which may or may not help us win a campaign. They are ...

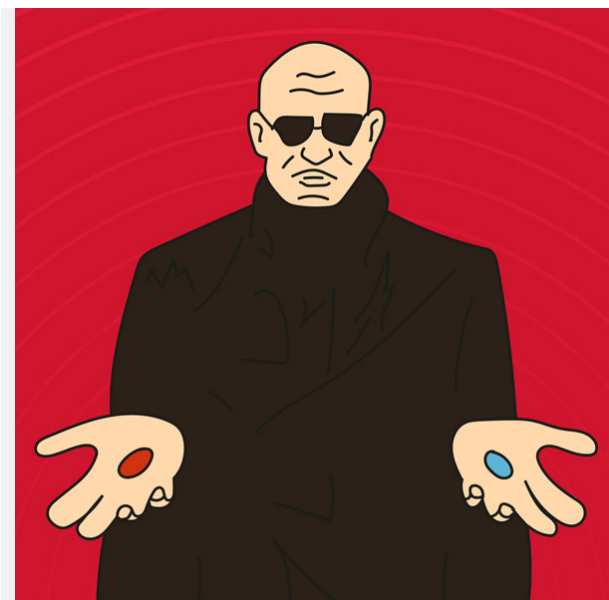


- **Simple systems are predictable best practices. (If this the situation is X, then always do Y, and consistently get a Z outcome)**
- **Complicated systems may have predictable outcomes but require execution by people with specialized, difficult to duplicate skills.**
- **Complex systems have emergent solutions - those which you can uncover through experimentation. Best guess a solution, design an experiment to pressure test it, run the experiment, rinse and repeat until you reach a favorable outcome.**

Email marketing is not a simple system. It's likely somewhere on the border between complicated and complex. As such, there are no best practices. In the best-case scenario, there are only good ones.

This ramble may sound like reinventing the wheel of email marketing is the only way to compete in the inbox. However, some simple reframing can help us navigate this chronic issue.

Playing Inside & Outside-The-Box



“Some rules can be bent, others broken”

- Morpheus.

What are the rules of email marketing? How do we know which ones can be bent - and which ones broken?

Ask yourself:

- What are the rules of this type of this email fight?
- And who sets them?
- Who enforces them?
- Which rules can be bent?
- Which can be broken?
- And with what consequences?
- And finally, who is my opponent in this fight - really?

In the email marketing war, two players hold the most influence: your prospect and your email provider. One can ignore you, allowing no space for a win. The other can filter or blacklist you, blocking access to the battlefield entirely.

Your enemy is rarely your business' direct competitor. Prospects and email providers wield the most power in most email battles. Focus your strategic energies on beating - or bypassing - them.

Create An Unfair Competitive Advantage

"Creativity may be the last unfair advantage we are legally allowed to have over the competition."

- Bill Bernbach -

Creativity may be one of the few legal competitive advantages you can regularly deploy in the email battle. You can ...

- ... Use humor when your prospects are serious.
- ... Distill a complex topic into an easily digestible graphic or video
- ... Show your full humanness, bad grammar and all

Be careful. Though the list is long, it is littered with stale fair fight practices that can fall flat with certain audiences or implode on certain email servers. And suppose you are in the rare situation of battling one of your competitors on the inbox battlefield. In that case, you may need to continually vary your tactics to stop them from anticipating and overcoming your overall strategies.

In our own business, the B2B Bandits, we've recently left the email battlefield entirely to create an unfair advantage.

Steal and adapt the useful bits. Don't mimic and hope.

Stop fighting fair.



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PRINCIPLE #2 VARY YOUR TACTICS

"In the midst of difficulties, we are always ready to seize an advantage; we may extricate ourselves from misfortune ... the general who thoroughly understands the advantages that accompany variation of tactics knows how to handle his troops."

- Sun Tzu -

**There are two methods of fighting the email inbox war:
As a marketer. Or as a general.**

What ends up happening in any marketing battlefield, email marketing included, is that you look for a tactic that works - a 'best practice' in today's parlance. Then you use that tactic over and over and over again until it's no longer effective. Then you go hunting for another best practice.

Rinse and repeat as needed.

The emerging popularity of a tactic is what brought it to your attention in the first place. Your use of a best practice will further increase its popularity, decreasing its effectiveness and eventually leading to its death.

You can break this cycle by adopting the Art of War principle of Varying Your Tactics.

Mixing It Up Is No Longer an Option.

If you want to stand out in the inbox and catch your customer's or prospect's attention. If you're going to get them to do something, share something, reply to something, or buy something. You have to mix it up.

Novelty grabs attention.

There's some nerdy science - information theory 📌 - behind this principle:

The two keywords to take away from this theory are signal & noise. Information theory states: that which is not surprising contains no information. And the very best sources of information have a very high signal-to-noise ratio.

If you look at your email inbox, you'll notice a lot of noise in the form of SPAM, cold emails, promotional emails, etc. That's the noise.

But what signals do you look for when you scan your inbox for something relevant and valuable?

Our minds will consider two opposing things: is it familiar? And is it new?

On the one hand, you look for familiar names of co-workers, clients, or email newsletters you subscribe to. Those might get read.

On the other hand, you look for new messages that contrast the noise amidst an inbox. Those might get read.

This human urge to find the signal amongst the noise, the new among the familiar, the surprising amongst the predictable.

What happens to a predictable animal?

What happens to a predictable football team?

What happens to a predictable message?

It May Work Because It's Different.

The reason most of the marketing fails is that it blends in.

Famous ad man Dave Trott 🐦_ says that of the *billions* spent annually on advertising & marketing in the U.K - 4% is remembered positively, 7% negatively, and 89% is neither noticed nor remembered.

The problem is not the 7% remembered negatively - it is the 89% of advertising & marketing that is ignored.

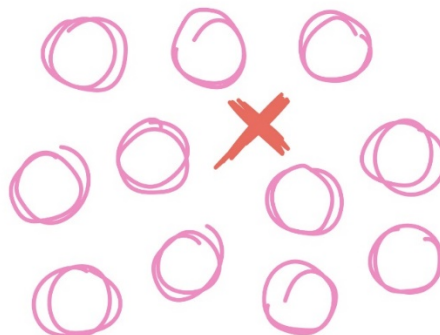
To help illustrate why here's my fancy drawing (kidding):

The reason X catches your attention is likely your analogy instinct 🐦 which helped prehistoric humans stay alive by forcing us to identify anything out of place as potentially dangerous (or helpful).

The key concept here is instinct.

Instinct is something we do automatically - without conscious thinking. The people who receive business emails will ignore/delete the message without a first or second thought.

Ask yourself: "What emails is my prospect used to seeing? What is NOT going to surprise them?"



Which one of the shapes caught your eye first?

Stop Hammering the Same Tactic

Let's briefly go through a typical best practice email sequence to illustrate this.

Email 1

Just some pitch

Follow-Up Email 2

"Hey, did you get my last email?"

Follow-Up Email 1

"Hey, just following up on my last email."

Follow-Up Email 3

"Did you get a chance to read my email yet?"

Follow-Up Email 4

"Oh man, I must've ruffled your feathers. I'm so sorry. Here's my pitch again ... and that coupon code you never asked for ... and that scheduling link ... again."

This may seem like an extreme case, but I see countless B2B marketers falling into this trap of hammering the same tactic over and over again in their emails. And it's killing their campaigns.

Varying your tactics should not be considered a 'nice to have' but a critical component of your campaign strategies.

How To Vary Your Tactics



In his film, FIRST STRIKE, Jackie Chan fought off the goons with a ladder.

Let's go through a few tactical variations you should consider deploying in your email campaigns.

1) Set a pattern, then interrupt it

Pattern interrupts can take countless forms. Here are a few of my favorites:

Campaign Pattern Interrupts

- **TONE:** Send four educational emails, then break the pattern with a humorous promotional email.
- **LENGTH:** Send a 250-word promotional email, then a 250-word educational email, then a 250-word promotional email, and break the pattern with a 1,500-word heartfelt story.
- **PACING:** Send a weekly email for five consecutive weeks, then send nothing for three weeks, then start sending monthly.
- **STYLE:** Send text-only emails for the first month, break the pattern with a graphical HTML email, and switch back to text-only emails.

DO NOT USE IF ... you don't have the time/deliverability/relationship to set the pattern. No less than three emails would need to be noticed for any prospect or client to detect a pattern.

2) Change the gender of the sender

If your prospects/customers are accustomed to seeing an email from a male, switch to a female, and vice versa. And if they are used to hearing from a company, switch to your office dog.

DO NOT USE IF ... you do not have someone matching that name or gender (or species) on your team. Fabricating a person can backfire when campaigns gain traction.

3) Break out of the inbox

Consider breaking out of the email channel entirely. Instead of pushing your typical monthly 'nurture' newsletter, break the pattern with a snail-mailed printed newsletter.

Or you can message them via their social media channel of choice.

Or you can just pick up your phone, call them and say yo!

DO NOT USE IF ... the new channel or medium is likely to be interpreted by your prospects as an invasion of privacy, e.g., texting when they have never given you their cell number, let alone permission to send to it.

Here are a few walk-away questions for you to ponder:

What new tactics can you deploy when running campaigns?

Will the change attract or repel your prospects?

How can you test it?

What would it look like to do the exact opposite of your biggest competitor?

And how would you vary it over time?



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PRINCIPLE #3 USE SPIES TO GAIN AN EDGE

“Thus, what enables the wise sovereign and the good general to strike and conquer, and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is foreknowledge.”

- Sun Tzu -

Acquiring information others do not - or cannot - reach is a source of immense power.

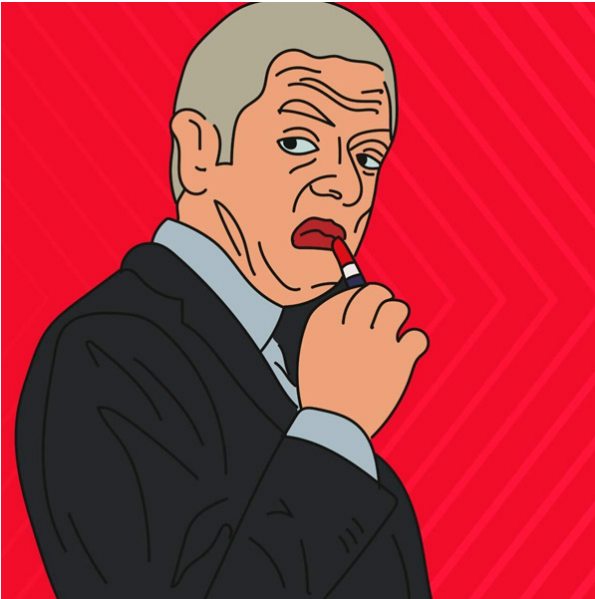
In war, to gain an ‘information edge,’ you would deploy spies on your enemy. Applying this tactic to the modern inbox is worthy of exploration. One way to illustrate this principle is by using an inversion mental model. 🍷

What’s the opposite of using spies?

You rely on information accessible to everyone else, especially others vying for your prospects’ attention. The key word is ‘accessible’ because the internet has leveled much of the digital playing field for everyone. Access has become egalitarian.

There are very few secrets left that could sway the outcome of an inbox battle. Yet, they do exist, and I’ll try to help you find them by repurposing Sun Tzu’s principle of Using Spies.

Bad Intel



First, let's start with a few examples of how outdated, recycled intel can lose you the battle of the inbox.

1) Scraped Lists

Scraping websites for email addresses is immensely popular, and for a good reason - it can work well. However, where you will likely go wrong is how you target the scrapes.

For example, if you are an enterprise SaaS company and want to sell straight to CIOs, you could go to LinkedIn Sales Navigator and filter for:

Job title: Chief Information Officer

Headcount: 11-200 employees

Location: California

You can be certain that every one of your prospects with scrapeable emails on that target search has already been carpet bombed by your competitors and anyone else trying to sell to the C-Suite in California. It will become a battle of mediocre versus mediocre.

2) Off-the-Shelf Databases

Off-the-shelf databases and data enrichment tools like ZoomInfo, Clearbit, Seamless, and Ocean.io can be helpful and speed up your sales engines. And your competitors use them too. You may need to keep augmenting your campaigns with paid databases to stay in the fight, but you cannot expect

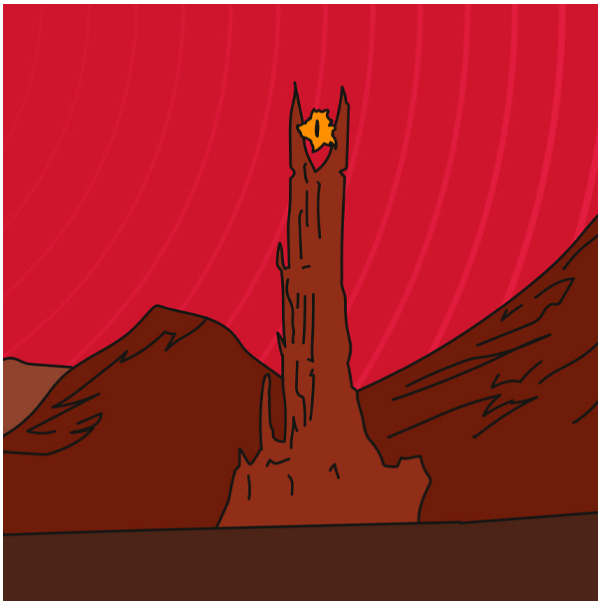
to create an unfair competitive advantage using the same weapons as your opponents.

3) Conference Attendees

It's no big secret that conference attendee data fuel many proprietary lists and public databases.

And it's also common for attendees to register for events using a 'spam trap' email address since they know their contact information will be bought and sold over and over again to God knows who.

The Myth of No Secrets



When people assume that all the significant discoveries & inventions are behind us (or “there is nothing new under the sun”), they have fallen prey to the Myth of No Secrets. 📌

This belief weakens your ability to win a fight inside the inbox. In some cases, people may cynically avoid acquiring secrets because they are afraid someone will steal their new ‘secret weapon’ the second they wield it publicly.

The best way to overcome the pull of this logical fallacy is to frame your business spy craft as an experiment instead of a tactic. Let the reality of the results or lack thereof guide your efforts, not loss aversion.

Spy Craft and the Inbox

1) Cross-promotion campaigns

If non-competitors out there sell to the same people/target market you are, they likely already have an opt-in list that’s not accessible to any scraping tool. They also likely have insights & perspectives on your customers that you don’t have - just like a spy or double agent.

Develop a human-to-human relationship with them. Find someone who can arrange a warm intro for you. Create a win-win proposition that these “influencers” simply cannot refuse.

One of our favorite win-wins is a Cross Promotion, or in layman's terms, a back-scratch campaign. If you have 10,000 email subscribers of homeowners, and the non-competitor has 10,000 email subscribers of homeowners, then you can promote their product to your list and vice versa. This approach capitalizes on social proof and exposes your product or service to a fresh audience in a way you cannot do yourself.

2) Bribe Gatekeepers

In the B2B world, we often want to go straight after the top dog in the organization – the founder, CEO, or Partner.

The truly influential business leaders typically have 'gatekeepers' checking their inboxes for them to filter out all of the noise & bullshit. Suppose you befriend the gatekeeper first and gain some favors through light bribery (flowers, chocolate, donuts, genuine compliments). In that case, you can ask them to float your request past the inbox blockade, and maybe even skip the inbox entirely, and go straight to the leaders' calendar.

Our co-founder, Nate Wright, is a former US Air Force officer who used this in actual wartime environments. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, he was a First Lieutenant and the gatekeeper to a Colonel. Every day dozens of people would try to get their agenda or request floated to the boss' desk. One guy would swing by nearly every day with no demands, just a hello, and a small Twix candy bar. Weeks later, he easily wedged his way onto the colonel's calendar due to investing in some 'legal bribery.'



This tactic may sound manipulative, but sometimes you have to bend some rules to close deals.

3) Befriend Data Brokers

There's a whole ecosystem of niche data brokers. They have exclusive access to tools, lists, and information not accessible publicly or via paid database subscription. Unfortunately, many of these influential allies in your battle in the inbox don't label themselves as data brokers. Some are career salespeople that work in stealth for several companies, arranging warm

introductions and meetings for a sizable referral fee. Others are conference organizers. And others may be professional business matchmakers.

It couldn't hurt to invest some real money in data brokers as long as they are not allied with your enemies. In all cases, you should make friends with them and commit to staying in touch.

Gaining their favor and getting a niche email list could provide a measurable competitive advantage to your business. The most powerful weapon data brokers could equip you with is timely market intelligence.

Is your competitor preparing to launch a price-matching campaign to steal your customers?

Did a competing consultant just retire, leaving their current clients without an easy alternative?

Digging For Secrets

The best place to look for secrets is where your competitors aren't looking, or when they've stopped paying attention. Start building your network of spies and forging relationships with the enemy of your enemy. Your organic, human relationships will always be the most difficult weapon for your competitors to steal.

When you are waging war on the inbox battlefield, use spies.

Here are a few more questions to ask yourself:

- *Where have others stopped looking for email lists?*
- *What additional business intelligence sources can help me craft and time my campaigns more accurately?*
- *How can I secretly - and affordably - tap those sources?*
- *Who is worth bribing for intel and access to someone's inbox - or calendar?*



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PRINCIPLE #4 CHECK YOUR BIASES

I read books, study human biases, and even have a copy of “Psychology of Human Misjudgement” by Charlie Munger propping up my monitor. Yet still, I continue to make wildly irrational decisions, including accidentally sabotaging some of my clients’ email campaigns.

I’m a biased and ignorant bandit.

These rationality-killing urges are evolutionary and can be traced back to before written history. A few thousand years ago, a warrior-philosopher in China was one of the first humans to document the inherent dangers of allowing biases to infect our decisions.

“He who exercises no forethought but makes light of his opponents is sure to be captured by them.”

- Sun Tzu -

A modern marketing translation would go like this: Check yourself before you wreck your ... campaign. Let’s unpack how you can adapt Sun Tzu’s advice in the Art of War to modern email marketing.

A Quick Lesson on Human Nature

“The first principle is that you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool.”

- Richard Feynman -

Why are we biased, and what are cognitive biases?

Cognitive biases, by definition, are:

Tendencies to think in specific ways that can lead to systematic deviations from a standard of rationality or good judgments.

All humans believe they trend toward the rational. But our brain and body chemistry's evolutionary speed has not kept up with the 'dangers' of modernity. Originally wired to save your life or help you procreate; cognitive biases can quietly drown your campaigns - and business - if left unchecked.

Awareness is curative. We cannot rewire our brains to quiet the inner caveman. However, we can install a security system for spotting bias-driven decisions.

Quick Tour of The Most “Lethal” Biases

If I were to run you through all the different biases that may be ruining your email campaigns, profits, or even life, we'd need a book, not a blog post. Rolf Dobelli, who wrote the *Art of Thinking Clearly*, has cataloged over 120 of them! 📌

In wartime, the most common biases would fall under the broad “overconfidence” umbrella. Take Napoleon as an example, who, on the morning of the Battle of Waterloo, smugly assured his generals:



"I tell you, Wellington is a bad general, the English are bad soldiers, and we will settle this matter by lunchtime."

- Napoleon Bonaparte -

That arrogance resulted in one of recorded history's most publicly embarrassing and tragic mistakes.

Of course, the modern inbox is not a 19th-century battleground, so the stakes are not the same, but fortunately (or not), the human biases haven't changed a bit.

I've distilled this list down to four biases that will wreak the most havoc on your email campaigns.

1) Survivorship Bias

In technical terms:

The logical error of concentrating on the people or things that 'survived' some process and inadvertently overlooking those that did not work because of their lack of visibility.

In plain English, it means that you survived a particular scenario and now think you will always survive it in the future.

In email marketing, an example could be uploading a "borrowed" list to Mailchimp or Klaviyo. Your account's fine. Maybe the campaign goes well, and you decide to borrow another list, ten times as big, to get 10x the ROI. Because it worked the first time, it just has to work this time.

But what happens is you get kicked out of your account and burn your domain which comes with a minimum 30-day "email prison" sentence.

The previous win may have been due to the smaller size of the "stealing" ... or maybe just dumb luck.

One way we dampen the impact of this enemy of good campaigns is to add a few questions to our pre-launch checklist that goes something like this:

- Look back at my previous successful email campaigns.**
- When did you get away with a bad strategy?*
- When did you have a solid plan, but a single bad result made you dismiss it?*
- Are either of these factors at play in your current approach?*

2) Projection Bias

There are various definitions of this bias, but at its core, it makes us predict a future outcome based on our present emotional state.

In your head, it probably goes something like this: I loooooove this new service we're launching. My clients are most definitely gonna love it too. I should probably double my headcount because the demand will be so high.

Optimism is necessary for successful entrepreneurship, but you should dial it back a smidge. Don't project your emotional state on your potential customer. Inject some rationality into the mix, and make a rational-optimist soup.

Here are three things we do to defend against projection bias:

- Ask your clients or prospective clients what they really think about your new something - and treat their answer as truth, even if it doesn't make any goddamn sense.
- Find a hard-truth teller, e.g., your *wife, mother-in-law, or sister*. Not trying to be sexist, but there's just too much damn science proving that women will verbally deliver hard truth more consistently. Ask them about your emotional state and the decision you are about to make.
- Study your past failures and see if you can spot when and where projection bias may have gutted a campaign.

3) Endowment Bias + 4) The Sunk-Cost Fallacy

These two usually come in pairs - and they are a dangerous duo.

Endowment biases make you overvalue what you already possess. For example, because you spent 14 years perfecting this analyst algorithm, you feel that your knowledge and time justify a much higher price tag.

On the other side, the sunk-cost fallacy is a sneaky way to rationalize a bad decision because of previous investment. Maybe you have spent ten grand on a failing ad campaign. You continue it because you think, "If I stick with it, maybe I can recover the cost," or "If I end the campaign now, I'll lose the ten grand I already spent."

Put these two villains in the same room - a.k.a. your brain - and disarming them can be nearly impossible.

Your services are worth what people are willing to pay. Period.

You cannot recover your sunk costs in a failed campaign without investing more time and money. Period.

In email marketing, this typically plays out when announcing a new thing or slinging a new offer and putting extra time and money behind it. Here's how we try to battle this. We ask ourselves:

- *What else do my clients/prospects consider valuable?*
- *What's the gap between what I charge and the value I bring?*
- *Are you willing to increase your loss on a failed campaign in the hopes of breaking even?*

So How Do We Overcome Our Biases?

There are several 'tactics' that you can deploy to battle all of your biases. Here are two that we work hard to ritualize at B2B Bandits:

Believe the Data

Data is critical, but it needs to be *statistically significant* to be useful for choosing a campaign. This [statistical significance calculator](#) by Neil Patel might prove a valuable tool in your arsenal.

When running a/b tests, look more closely at *unexpected* failure & success. Even if it doesn't seem rational, treat it as fact and act accordingly. That gap between your assumptions and reality is where your biases lurk. See if you can label the bias that drove the assumption.

Believe Subscriber 'Behavior'

Your clients' and subscribers' behavior will always tell the truth. Beware polls and vanity metrics and look at what they are spending and how they act (or not).

Open rates are far less critical than booked appointments and Google Analytics "Time on Site" & "Pages Per Visit" stats. Also, be careful with

making choices after a campaign is ignored. You cannot know with any level of certainty why you are being ignored.

Ground Yourself in Reality

"Truth--more precisely, an accurate understanding of reality--is the essential foundation for producing good outcomes."

- Ray Dalio - 🌟

Whether we study Marcus Aurelius, who wrote at length about piercing through immediate perceptions in his Meditations, or follow an indisputably successful business thinker like Ray Dalio, one thing is clear: our mind will eventually mislead us. Take up arms in the battle of you vs. your brain by following Sun Tzu and not underestimating how powerful your biases are.

We cannot eliminate our biases, but we can continue checking ourselves - and our campaigns - before making high-impact decisions.



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PRINCIPLE #5 - KNOW YOUR ENEMY

“The opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.”

– Sun Tzu –

When you hear the words' enemy or competitor, your brain will probably jump to the company that is outranking yours on G2, Clutch, Upwork, and TrustPilot. Or the crew that's outspending yours on LinkedIn ads. Or the fake guru you hate for wooing away your best clients.

When you plan your email campaigns, you likely look at their email copy, sequence, design, and offer and compare them to yours.

If you are more sophisticated, you probably steal or recycle a few ideas and tactics from them, intentionally or subconsciously.

You only think about businesses ahead of yours in the category of your choice - your direct competitors. Here's where email marketing strays a bit from wartime strategies. In war, your enemy is clear; it's the big evil tribe across the field.

In business, whether it's B2B or e-commerce, your competitors might not be your actual competitors.

“It's fuzzy. It's woozy; it's whizzy. It's fugazi,” as Matthew McConaughey would say.

You think you got the villain. You think you know your enemy. Sun Tzu knew this deadly assumption would lead to losing the campaign or the war. He dedicated much of The Art of War to the study of enemies.

The Myth of Competition

“Corporate strategy is rooted in military strategy and thus overly focused on competing.”

@CategoryPirates 📌

When you treat the business game as a cutthroat competition and assume that your competitor is your enemy, you may have fallen for a giant ideology trick pounded into your skull since kindergarten.

The myth of competition.

In his book *Zero to One* 📌, Peter Thiel points out how war metaphors have invaded everyday business language. For example, we use headhunters to build up a sales force that will enable us to take a captive market and make a killing. Thiel further concludes that:

It's competition, not business, that is like war: allegedly necessary, supposedly valiant, but ultimately destructive.

Before I unravel the last four tomes of advice in this book, let's unpack Thiel's assertion, starting with the definition of competition. From Wikipedia,

Competition is a rivalry where two or more parties strive for a common goal that cannot be shared: where one's gain is the other's loss.

In other words, competition is a Zero-Sum Game. I win. You lose. There's no win-win scenario.

We are not slicing the same pie into smaller and smaller pieces. It's a constant process of baking and cutting. You are growing the market and your share of it in tandem.

As such, the more niche market you are in, the more likely you should look outside the box as to who your competitor truly is.

So, if your enemy is not your direct competitor, who - or what - is it?

The Zero-Sum Battle for Attention

You are what you pay attention to.

We are all limited by time & energy. We all have 24 hours in a day, limiting the number of things we can pay attention to - at least consciously. Your goal is to earn an open, reply, click, appointment, order, purchase, forward, share, or other reaction from your prospect/customer.

Action requires attention, and attention is a limited resource.

Modern humans are exposed to 5,000 - 10,000 advertisements per day✳. And we are only talking about ads here. In reality, hundreds of other attention-thieves prey on you and your client prospects.



Imagine if we switch the word 'enemy,' which is the war-time equivalent of 'opponent', or 'competitor', for a term that better encapsulates this concept.

When examined in this way, we might conclude that our true enemy is anyone competing for the attention of our specific clients and prospects.

The Opposition Unmasked

Imagine if we switch the word enemy with opposing force. What would make your list?

1) Other Senders

What you are competing against in the inbox is not just your competitors' emails but all the emails your target audience receives, including: transactional emails, receipts, newsletters, and calendar confirmations.

Rather than getting bogged down by outmaneuvering your competitors' messaging, think of the distinct categories of emails your target customer receives regularly and explore ways to exploit that knowledge.

2) Other channels

Returning to the battle for attention, think of all the other channels/mediums/places where your customers and prospects get bombarded with advertisements. LinkedIn and Facebook feeds, billboards, text messages, mobile banners, cold calls, snail mail, posters, etc.

Think about your typical client and dissect their daily routines and activities.

Ask yourself: *Which mediums get most of their attention? How noisy are those mediums? Will my pitch do better there?*

3) You

Your most powerful enemy is you.

Your inertia. Your complacency. Your inner myopia. Your biases. Your emotions. Your desire for conformity and acceptance and recognition. Your feelings.

A quick story from fellow bandit Nate Wright:

"After 20,000 marketing campaigns and nearly 14 years of grinding, I have racked up a lot of fails. When I examine them, I struggle to nail down the weak point that triggered the failure.

Was it deliverability? Did I send something without running it through the mail-tester first? Should I have done a litmus check on it? Should I

have rotated out a different design? Was the offer wrong? Was my list hygiene off? Was it bad data? Or bad luck? Or bad timing?

I've obsessed on all of this. The humbling conclusion - my own emotional state triggered nearly every one of those failures. Overconfidence. Fear. Ego. Anger. Sadness. Hope. Cynicism. All of my baggage, good and bad."

Thus, to make effective decisions, keep your emotions in check above everything else. Or at least beware of how they affect your choices.

However, sometimes making what others would label an emotional decision on a campaign can help you win the inbox war.

When To Pick a Fight

Standing against something can generate more influence than standing for something. Look at politics.

Charlie Munger has addressed this paradoxical disliking-hating tendency head-on:

"As most apes & monkeys, we are born with dislike and hate - as a result, the long history of man contains almost continuous war. In the present day, the clever political arrangements of a man "channel" this tendency into non-lethal patterns, including elections." 🍌

Nothing brings people together like having a common enemy. If you tell your people there's a threat, your people will rally behind you. Robert Greene listed "Declare War on Your Enemies: Polarity" as the first principle in his book, *The 33 Strategies of War*.

Look at evolution. Threats helped us survive. Those who paid attention or even over-reacted survived and passed on their genes. We fear snakes, spiders & heights, however irrational it may seem in the modern world.

You need a villain in your messaging.

Create a villain, unite people, and separate yourself from competitors. The villain can be an enemy/competitor/group/set of ideas.

Many business leaders fear villainization as a marketing tactic because of peer pressure. What will my peers think of me? Will I be labeled as an enemy among my friends now?

In your campaigns, you may have to 'go gangster' and choose emotional and social discomfort to survive the attacks of direct competitors or break out of a stale market.

All humans feel the evolutionary urge to belong to a group. By creating an enemy for your chosen group and emailing them about it, you can confidently exclude everyone else and spur them into action. ✨

Go To War

When pondering your enemy on the battlefield of the modern inbox, you will encounter situations that will require a warlike response.

- 1. Break the rules to give your business an unfair advantage.**
- 2. Step out of your normal templated approach.**
- 3. Steel your business against internal saboteurs.**
- 4. Recruit business spies.**
- 5. And pick a fight with a monster opponent - or battle your old self.**

If you want to win in the inbox, you need to go to war. END.

The Bandits Behind the Book

The “white-collar crime” of producing this e-book and the entire Art of War of The Inbox series, was attempted by the following four bandits:



Writer & Producer

Konrad “Yerba Mate Addict”



Editor-in-Chief

Nate “The Beard” Wright



Creative & Design

Bloom Digital



Audio Producer

Billy “The Ripper” Gold

If you wish to obtain more information regarding any of these suspects, visit their (digital) [**crime den**](#).

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What now?

Stalk us on LinkedIn, where you'll find daily bullet-sized insights, updates on the gang and ~~plagiarized-wisdom~~ quotes from our favorite thinkers.

Email us with your thoughts, topic for next series or to challenge our thinking about email, victory, and defeat at **humans@b2bbandits.com**.

If you feel enlightened by the text you've just read, yet eager for a deeper dive under the hood of your biz strategy and marketing, then book a free, uncensored call with Nate **[here](#)**.

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