War is a matter of vital importance to the state. It is a matter of life and death, the road to either survival or extinction. Hence, it must be studied.¹

Over the past several years, the language services industry has witnessed a dramatic increase not only in the demand for language services (translation, interpreting, and localization), but in the competitive landscape as well. According to a Common Sense Advisory report, the language services industry was worth $26.33 billion in 2010. It is estimated that the industry is growing at an annual rate of 13.15%, with more than 23,000 language services providers (LSPs) globally. In the next five years, the industry is estimated to be worth $38.14 billion.²

As just one example of how much competition in the industry has increased over the past decade, when the federal government’s General Services Administration (GSA) Schedule first included a language services category at the end of 1999, there were only 11 LSPs represented on the list. Now, a little more than a decade later, there are 117 language companies on the GSA Schedule, representing an increase more than ten-fold!³

With this increase in competition and the innovation of language technology and its applications, the industry has seen a significant reduction in the prices clients are being charged, and thus a decrease in both company profit margins and per unit rates for freelance translators. The industry is also seeing more aggressive sales and marketing tactics on the part of LSPs and freelance translators.

Developing a sales and marketing strategy for language services is not an easy task. Unlike retail or food items, the business of language is a “professional service,” and as a somewhat abstract commodity (at least to
many consumers, it requires some unique approaches and tactics to market the value of the service.

It is not such a difficult task for freelance translators to market their services to LSPs, but it can be a monumental challenge to LSPs, attempting not only to convince clients why they should choose a particular service or “brand,” but sometimes just to convince them why it is important to invest in language services at all. For example, with the limited-English-proficiency (LEP) population in the U.S. growing continually, almost any type of service imaginable could be a customer, from carpet cleaning to real estate. And let’s not forget to include companies hiring LEP employees that are required to provide employee manuals, insurance enrollment forms, and other important corporate information in another language. Believe it or not, many small businesses have not even thought about this issue. As professional linguists, it is our job to market the importance of our services to these potential clients.

In reflecting on this marketing challenge, and trying to come up with an innovative approach for the company whose program I manage, I recalled a discussion I once had on the application of the ancient Chinese military treatise, Sun Tzu’s The Art of War, to modern-day business, particularly in East Asia. In extending from there, I then realized how similar the context of today’s language services industry is to the period when The Art of War was first written, and how much business really is like warfare.

What Is The Art of War?
It is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss.4

The Art of War, according to tradition, was developed during the Spring and Autumn Period in China (approximately the 6th century BCE) by the famous military strategist Sun Tzu. During this time, China was not the large, unified country we know today, but rather a collection of smaller kingdoms (some much larger and more powerful than others), all battling to control more territory, resources, and treasure.

Sun Tzu, like numerous other military strategists at the time, was shopping his philosophies around to the various rulers and generals of the competing kingdoms. In short, he proposed a simple, direct, and practical approach to combat focused on military strategy and tactics as well as on leadership.

The Art of War consists of 13 chapters, each highlighting a vital aspect of warfare, such as “Laying Plans,” “Variation of Tacticts,” and “The Use of Spies.” Among his core philosophies, Sun Tzu advocated the importance of winning a battle without actually fighting. Sun Tzu also stressed the importance of deception and intelligence gathering activities, being able to adjust one’s strategy and tactics rapidly to conform with changes to the landscape, as well as focusing one’s strengths against the enemy’s weaknesses.

While they may seem dissimilar, there actually is a strong correlation between business and warfare. For example, business competition and wars are confrontational activities, with both businesses and armies striving for favorable positions by defeating their competitors while defending themselves. Companies and armies must be well organized and well managed, and both require strategies and tactics to succeed. The leadership of an army, like the leadership of a company, has an important influence on the shaping of its success. Both need high quality, committed people and thrive on information/intelligence gathering activities.

Applying Sun Tzu’s Philosophy to Business
The concept of applying Sun Tzu’s military strategies to the business world is not a new one, especially in such competitive environments as China and Japan. However, to my knowledge, his approach has not been discussed in the context of the translation industry specifically, which, as mentioned earlier, has become one of the most highly competitive business environments in the past few years. By analyzing some of The Art of War’s core principles, we can glean a few key ideas that can readily be applied to either LSPs or freelance translators in their “battle” to garner more business.

In his book, Sun Tzu and the Art of Business,5 Mark McNeilly talks about some “strategic principles for managers.” These include:

Capture your market without destroying it. One of the most disturbing trends within the past few years has been taking place in the area of transla-
Avoid your competitor’s strength and take advantage of their weaknesses. If your company is particularly strong in one area, such as medical document translation, it would not be a wise move for you to engage directly with a company that specializes in another field. Also, if your company is being outperformed (defeated) in one regional market, why not consider another? In the digital age, translation providers are no longer limited by geography.

Use foreknowledge and evasive tactics to maximize the power of business intelligence. It is vital to know what competitors are doing. How are they marketing and selling their services? What tools are they using? Are they outsourcing overseas to keep contractor costs down? What are their goals? What is their pricing structure? Find out the answers to these questions, but be careful not to divulge your own competitive advantage in the process.

Use speed and preparation to overcome the competition swiftly. It is vital for small businesses, which make up a significant portion of LSPs, to use their natural traits—such as the flexibility and ability to change strategic course—to recognize and adjust early to trends in the industry before the competition. This means being tapped into the industry as a whole and thinking “outside the box.”

Use alliances and strategic control points in the industry to “shape” opponents and make them conform to your will. A company needs to find other companies and/or service providers with which it can form a symbiotic relationship, whether it is another LSP specializing in a different vertical niche, or one that offers a service that can be employed. One example would be a teaming arrangement between a document translation provider and a telephonic interpreting provider that would like to offer collateral services to their existing client base.

Develop your character as a leader to maximize the employee potential. The importance of having a loyal and motivated staff cannot be over stated, especially in a service industry that relies on its people. Working to become a better leader/manager is a critical part of achieving this objective.

Here are some additional tips that can be applied to an integrated management (and sales and marketing) strategy, based on some of Sun Tzu’s core principles:

Moral influence of leader(s): Managers should endeavor to formulate a common corporate goal to be shared by all employees. Employees will then be more likely to consider company affairs as their own and be willing to make personal sacrifices when needed. This can be done in the simplest manner by providing an annual strategic briefing to staff members, where you let them know where the company is headed and how everyone can contribute to achieve the company’s goals.

Ability of the general(s)/leadership: Leaders should possess wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage, and strictness. They should be able to make risky decisions without being hasty or reckless, and should have the capability to delegate while at the same time knowing how to tolerate employees’ unavoidable mistakes.

Climate and terrain: To be competitive, a company has to capitalize on the various changes in the economic and business environment and formulate its strategies accordingly. Furthermore, to cope with ever-changing situations, a company should maintain a high degree of mobility and flexibility. For example, when prices begin to drop, is the company’s resource management program able either to negotiate with current resources or locate and integrate new, less expensive resources quickly in order to allow the company to bid more competitively in a timely manner?

Strengths and intelligence: A company should concentrate its strength on the most needed area and take advantage of a competitor’s weakness. A company can underplay its competitive advantages in order to confuse the competition’s perception of its strengths. Intelligence of one’s competitors is a key component of any successful business strategy.

Respect for the Competition
While Sun Tzu spoke of military tactics and strategy, dealing with the
critical issues of war, life and death, and survival and extinction, he left discussions on ethics and morals to others, such as Confucius, Mencius, and Chuang-Tzu. That is not to say that ethical practices are not relevant to warfare, and by extension, business. In fact, it was Confucius who stated, “What you do not wish for yourself, do not do unto others.” Therefore, even when employing an aggressive business strategy, it is important to respect not only one’s employees but one’s competitors as well. In the end, how any of these strategies are carried out, and in what regard, is a decision each company and company owner must consider, for the good of the business and the industry as a whole.

The translation, interpreting, and localization industry has undoubtedly become more aggressive in terms of competition over the past several years. But, with the demand for these types of services continuing to grow exponentially, there is still plenty of the proverbial “pie” to go around. To get one’s share may necessitate rethinking traditional sales and marketing, as well as leadership strategies. Looking to the tried and proven methods of one of history’s greatest military strategists may be the way to go.

Notes


3. Translation and interpreting services are listed by the U.S. General Services Administration (Language Services – Schedule 738 II) at www.gsa.gov/portal/content/104610.


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**2011 Honors and Awards Now Open**

ATA presents annual and biennial awards to encourage, reward, and publicize outstanding work done by both seasoned professionals and students of our craft. For complete entry information and deadlines, visit: [www.atanet.org/membership/honorsandawards.php](http://www.atanet.org/membership/honorsandawards.php).

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In 2011, ATA will award a grant-in-aid to a student for a literary or sci-tech translation or translation-related project. The project, which may be derived from any facet of translation studies, should result in a project with postgrant applicability, such as a publication, a conference presentation, or teaching materials. Computerized materials are ineligible, as are dissertations and theses. Translations must be from a foreign language INTO ENGLISH. Previously untranslated works are preferred.

The award, to be presented at ATA’s 52nd Annual Conference in Boston, Massachusetts (October 26-29, 2011), is open to any graduate or undergraduate student, or group of students, attending an accredited college or university in the U.S. Preference will be given to students who have been or are currently enrolled in translator training programs. Students who have already published translations are ineligible. No individual student may submit more than one entry.

Applicants must complete an entry form and submit a project description not to exceed 500 words. Detailed instructions and application forms are available at [www.atanet.org/membership/honorsandawards_student_form.php](http://www.atanet.org/membership/honorsandawards_student_form.php). The Student Translation Award consists of $500, a certificate of recognition, and up to $500 toward expenses for attending ATA’s 52nd Annual Conference (October 26-29, 2011). One or more certificates may also be awarded to runners-up.

Please send nominations to: Student Translation Award, Muriel Jérôme-O’Keeffe, President, American Foundation for Translation and Interpretation, Inc. c/o American Translators Association, 225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 590, Alexandria, VA 22314 or e-mail them to: ato@atanet.org.