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Dear Review Committee,

SSG Brian Darling is a Paralegal Noncommissioned Officer, currently assigned to the Office of the Staff Judge Advocate, New Jersey Army National Guard. SSG Darling has recently completed the requirements for a Master's Degree in Public Service Leadership and has a Master's Degree in Liberal Studies. SSG Darling is a recent graduate of the 27D40 Senior Leader Course at The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School. SSG Darling is also a former recruiting and retention Noncommissioned Officer; when this quarter's topic was announced, he decided to address the Army's marketing campaign from the perspective of a recruiter and a Noncommissioned Officer. SSG Darling hopes to inspire the readers of this essay to get out, tell the Army's story, and to contribute to the recruitment of quality Soldiers.

"Selling the Drama": Army Marketing Strategies and the Future of  
Word-of-Mouth Marketing

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## **"Selling the Drama": Army Marketing Strategies and the Future of Word-of-Mouth Marketing**

The United States Army predates the nation it serves, and at least since its inception, policy makers have been attempting to define the relationship between America's Army and the civilian populace who support its mission. The Army has had to sell itself since the 18th Century; first, it had to convince Congress that it was a match for the battle-hardened veterans of the British Army; it then had to convince the American people that it could win the revolution with enough time, resources, and support. Since the Vietnam War, the Army has been composed entirely of volunteers; as an organization, it has had to market itself directly to military-aged males while at the same time appealing to an applicant's friends, family, and influencers - teachers, civic leaders, and role models. The Army has previously adopted successful marketing campaigns: in decades past, "be all that you can be" resonated with the public; the copywriter who developed the theme and advertising strategy, "one of the most successful in advertising history" was recently awarded the Army's Outstanding Civilian Service Medal for his efforts<sup>1</sup>. As the Army transitioned to an all-volunteer force, this theme was appropriate; it was as much a call to individual

achievement as it was a higher calling to service. In recent years, the Army's marketing has struggled. The intent of the "Army of one" campaign was confusing, and never caught on with its target audience; rather than an invitation to service as a part of a team, the message seemed to focus solely on individual achievement, which was contradictory to Army Values and Ethic. The "Army strong" message was better, but the campaign did not resonate well, either, and was replaced after it was found that civilians didn't "buy in" to the idea<sup>2</sup>. The Army's current marketing theme, focusing on "the Army team," is in keeping with the values, ethic, and culture that are integral parts of the Army brand<sup>3</sup>. The purpose of this essay is to compare and contrast Army marketing strategies of the past and present, and to attempt to discern why some marketing campaigns were successful while others were not.

The first Army marketing campaign that comes to mind is from the World War I and II era "I want you!" poster. This iconic image was a direct appeal to the individual observing the poster; Uncle Sam, the physical embodiment of the spirit of the United States, points at the observer, his eyes intently fixed on the potential applicant, conveying the seriousness of the country's need for Soldiers. The image of Uncle Sam, stern and unwavering despite threats to the American Way of life from overseas,

demanding that a service-aged male stand up and do his part, was a successful marketing strategy, not just for those who would become Soldiers, but to those who would invest in the war effort in other ways - by purchasing war bonds or by working to manufacture wares used by the Soldiers in the field.

In the period immediately following the Vietnam War, the Army had to address the benefit service offered to potential applicants, to include job training and civilian education, in order to become competitive with potential civilian employers. It also had to present the esprit de corps, the camaraderie, and the feeling of job satisfaction that could potentially result from military service. Finally, the Army needed an idea that could convey a connection to great leaders of the past, and to their achievements in founding and preserving the nation it served. The resultant slogan, "Be all that you can be," and the advertising campaign that surrounded this slogan for almost two decades, introduced many potential applicants to the idea that the Army could be a stepping stone to higher education (using the Montgomery GI Bill and the Army College Fund), to marketable job skills (electronics repair, aviation, logistics), or to a career in and of itself; all of these benefits were shown to involve applicants in a long history of American heroes like Washington, Roosevelt, Patton, and MacArthur, who served their

nation and led their Soldiers in time of war<sup>4</sup>. Many of the applicants of this period also had a relative who had served in World War I or II, in Korea, or in the Vietnam War, so the Army was also able to market to an individual's sense of family. While appealing to the applicant from all of these different positions of inclusion, "Be all that you can be" also appealed to an applicant's sense of pride and personal achievement.

Another successful campaign involved the Army National Guard; the marketing surrounding the simple slogan "You Can" inspired interest in the Guard's dual mission for decades. The elegance and simplicity of the slogan lent themselves to any number of possibilities: Would you like to have career training applicable to the civilian sector? You can. Would you like to complete your civilian education while serving your country? You can. Would you like to serve your local community in times of emergency? You can. Many of the individual states supplement the benefits offered by the GI Bill and Federal Tuition Assistance, making it even easier to attract an applicant to service based on their interest in continuing education. When the National Guard presents itself as an organization that can empower an applicant, it becomes attractive not only to the applicant, but to influencers as well: guidance counselors, principals, faith leaders, and legislators can all support

students who seek to improve themselves by learning a trade or developing themselves through continuing education - at a minimum burden to the public coffers - while at the same time returning the investment by serving the community.

Policy makers have been discussing the increasing divide between the military and the citizenry of the United States for some time. Secretary of the Army Eric Fanning is sensitive to the issues surrounding the Army Brand. The Army Brand itself is loosely defined as consisting "of symbols, names, insignia, and logos" which "serve as the unifying image of the Army and enhances that image with the public"<sup>5</sup>. The Army's marketing strategy is addressed in Army Regulation 601-208, "The Army Brand and Marketing Program". This publication places the responsibility for the program on the shoulders of the Assistant Secretary of the Army (Manpower and Reserve Affairs); this official is "responsible for the Enterprise Army Brand, marketing management, trademark licensing, and the Enterprise Strategic Brand Marketing and Communication Plan"<sup>6</sup>. The program has numerous specific objectives, to include supporting the recruiting effort by "achieving volume, quality, and geographic goals for enlistment" and "emphasizing educational opportunities that would allow graduates to meet professional and personal aspirations"<sup>7</sup>. It is worth noting that the objectives place



emphasis on quantity over quality; the highlighting of the number of applicants over the number of trainable, retainable applicants is an issue with the current strategy. In addition to high school graduates, the marketing strategy seeks to attract "qualified professional personnel to join, as uniformed or Government Civilians, the Army Medical Department" and advertising "opportunities for highly qualified law students and practicing attorneys to become members of the Judge Advocate General's Corps"<sup>8</sup>. Retention is addressed as an afterthought; however, it is noteworthy that the marketing campaign does include a focus on the retention of otherwise qualified personnel as Department of the Army Civilians. The concentration on the number of applicants is an issue; by focusing on quantity over quality, the opportunity to properly communicate the Army ethic to applicants is lost. This results in incomplete indoctrination and high turnover; "Army recruitment tactics focus on amassing broad numbers to meet fiscal year missions, versus actually connecting with potential recruits through personal stories from currently serving Soldiers and veterans"<sup>9</sup>.

A number of these issues were recently addressed in an Army Press Online Journal article, "Improving Army Recruitment by Word-of-Mouth Marketing". The article addressed some handicaps

the Army has as an organization; "Unlike its sister services, the Army cannot rely on technology or equipment to sell its capabilities to its stakeholders"<sup>10</sup>. The author, Captain Kevin Sandell, a public affairs officer, suggests that direct communication with Soldiers can be more productive than typical recruiting efforts; "Soldiers describing their passion for their job, their opportunities and how military service has benefitted them, could work towards recruiting the Millennial Generation"<sup>11</sup>. Word-of-mouth recruiting can be very effective, especially considering the recent focus on the Army ethic and on professionalization. In addition to the opportunities for education, the Army has renewed its efforts to certify Soldiers in their military occupational specialties; this certification extends as far as civilian credentialing in some of the more technical fields. Credentialing can be paired with another program, the Partnership for Youth Success (PaYS), which "offers eligible Active and USAR Soldiers and ROTC cadets with the opportunity to interview for a job with a PaYS corporate partner"<sup>12</sup>.

The Secretary of the Army, Eric Fanning, emphasized the importance of these word-of-mouth connections, and of the ability of the Soldiers of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve to make those connections; "If you walk down the street

and see a person in uniform, chances are, they're in the National Guard or Reserve. They're in every community and are a potent source for telling the Army story"<sup>13</sup>. This word-of-mouth strategy is being incorporated into wider campaigns. As the overseas contingency operations of the past decade have reduced in size and scope, the media coverage of the Army has reduced as well; in order to increase media exposure, the Army instituted the "Meet your Army" campaign. As a means of fostering communication between the civilian community and the military, "the Army has been working to connect with different audiences across the nation through a variety of venues, including the press and social media"<sup>14</sup>. It is important to maintain this level of visibility, not just for the recruiting effort, but in order to keep the public invested in the Army's mission. The American people need to be reminded that they enable the Army: through their trust and confidence, through encouraging young people to serve, and through their tax dollars.

Fanning has recently stated that the Army often has a difficult time marketing itself to the American people; the Army has appealed to its Soldiers to tell their stories to the nation it serves. The Army has the mission of fighting and winning our nation's wars, whether on land or in cyberspace. Training to accomplish these missions includes education and training in

valuable job skills and leader development. The Army offers the untested youth the opportunity to sharpen the skills they learn in their primary and secondary education, applying them as part of a team. The Noncommissioned Officer is in a position to convey this message to the American people, to accomplish this mission of telling the Army story. The role of the Noncommissioned Officer in the marketing of the army has been and will continue to be that of recruiter. The recruiter is often the applicant's first interaction with a Soldier, regardless of the Soldier's component; recruiters must be a tangible representation of all those things the Army mission and vision represent. The recruiter must subscribe to the Army ethic and live by the Army values; a recruiter must stand by the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer and the Soldier's Creed and must keep the oath made upon enlistment. Recruiting and retention NCOs must not be primarily concerned with the number of recruits they bring into the Army's formations, but rather, must concern themselves with bringing in quality applicants that have the potential to abide by the values and ethic the recruiters themselves represent. Trained, educated, and ethical recruiters will attract trainable, educable, and ethical applicant.

The job description of the recruiting and retention NCO specifically states that the recruiter will be a first-line

marketer; distributing and displaying recruiting material and cultivating community centers of influence. However, word-of-mouth marketing strategies dictate that all Noncommissioned Officers are recruiters, regardless of billet; they are tangible symbols of the Army brand and therefore must be prepared to relay their positive Army experience, verbally or in writing. An NCO has professional experience, training, and education that can easily be conveyed to and related to by the citizens of the United States. The NCO has attained their status by adherence to the Army Values, the Army Ethic, the Warrior Ethos, and the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer; conveying why it is important to adhere to these abstract principals is as important as abiding by them. The NCOs of the Army National Guard and the Army Reserve are in particularly prime positions to market the Army, because they are parts of their community. They can and should take the time to relay the Army's mission and vision to their fellow citizens, if not only to attempt to recruit younger citizens into the ranks, then to inform others of what the Army does.

The Army's marketing is least successful when its slogans are plastered on racecars or its Soldiers are paraded out onto sports fields at taxpayer expense. The Soldiers may be highly visible under these circumstances, but the perception of

impropriety inevitably becomes an issue. These types of marketing devices detract from the Army's marketing campaign. There are further issues when the Army attempts to subcontract its marketing mission to private firms. It might seem like an attractive prospect to offer a Soldier a cash incentive for referring qualified applicants to a recruiter. However, the appearance of impropriety again becomes an issue; as the public begins to question the ethics of such marketing endeavors, their attention is directed away from the positive aspects of service in the Army or in the Reserve Components, detracting from the mission of inspiring the interest of qualified applicants.

The Army has been in the business of marketing itself to the American people since before the United States was an established nation. Even as the Army was formed from the various colonial militias, American policy makers struggled to define the relationship between the Army and the nation it served; the Army had to prove that it could stand in battle against a more experienced professional fighting force, and had to demonstrate to the fledgling government that it could defend the nation it would represent. Part of this struggle has been how the Army has presented itself to that nation; this presentation is the Army's brand. The Army has had successful marketing campaigns in the past - first marketing itself to

military-aged males but now to all service-aged Americans - while simultaneously presenting an attractive employment and educational opportunity to an applicant's influencers. In conclusion, this essay has attempted to compare and contrast some of the Army's marketing efforts of the past and present. The Army's marketing is most successful when it emphasizes the one-team concept, appealing not only to an individual's sense of self-interest, but to an applicant's desire to incorporate the Army Values and the Army Ethic into their lives, becoming an essential part of the Army team. The Soldier is part of a larger group focused on accomplishing mutual goals through the common endeavors of its membership. The members of the Army team share purpose expressed in the Army Ethic and in the creeds and oaths by which they stand.

Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Bobick, Julia. "Former N.W. Ayer Copywriter receives Army Medal for 'Be All You Can Be'." *United States Army Recruiting Command Press Release* 29 January 2003: 1.
- <sup>2</sup> Lilley, Kevin. "Service ditches 'Army Strong' for new branding strategy." *Army Times* 30 April 2015.  
<<https://www.armytimes.com/story/military/2015/04/30/army-strong-advertising-recruiting/26586513/>>
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Bobick.
- <sup>5</sup> *Army Regulation (AR) 601-208. The Army Brand and Marketing Program*. Washington: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2013. <<http://www.apd.army.mil/pdf/files/r601-208>>.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Sandell, Kevin. "Improving Army Recruitment by Word-of-Mouth Marketing." *Army Press Online Journal* (2016 ).
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> AR 601-208.
- <sup>13</sup> Vergun, David. "Army needs to connect with American people, says Fanning." *Army News Service* 28 June 2016.  
[https://www.army.mil/article/170585/army\\_needs\\_to\\_connect\\_with\\_american\\_people\\_says\\_fanning](https://www.army.mil/article/170585/army_needs_to_connect_with_american_people_says_fanning)
- <sup>14</sup> Leipold, J D. "'Meet Your Army' to put Soldiers, service, back in spotlight." *Army News Service* 11 December 2015.  
<[https://www.army.mil/article/159830/\\_Meet\\_Your\\_Army\\_\\_to\\_put\\_Soldiers\\_\\_service\\_\\_back\\_in\\_spotlight](https://www.army.mil/article/159830/_Meet_Your_Army__to_put_Soldiers__service__back_in_spotlight)>.