

Excerpt from

Insidious Competition

The Battle for Meaning and the Corporate Image

by Richard Telofski

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Introduction

Just What Is Insidious Competition?

“Workers of the world unite.”

Many people believe that the line you see above is the opening line of *The Communist Manifesto*. This line is actually not the opening line of that classic work, but it is the opening line of this excerpt, *Insidious Competition – The Battle for Meaning and the Corporate Image*. Don't become confused. This isn't an excerpt about communism. I'm not a communist; far from it. And I write that opening line not as a call to action. But I do write that line as a statement of fact. “Workers of the world unite,” which is a present tense statement of fact representing what is happening in the online world today. Perhaps a better way of making my point is to convert that statement into the present imperfect (passive) tense.

“Workers of the world are uniting.”

By “workers,” I mean all of us; the people who work every day to put bread on their table. That's pretty much everyone. And I'm pretty sure that includes you.

And by “uniting” I mean “uniting online.” People are uniting online to talk about almost every topic imaginable. Those workers, those people, those “everyones” are uniting on the social web, a virtual arena on the Internet that has progressively been carved out as a “hang-out” for social interaction since the Internet went commercial in the mid-1990s. Blogs, social networks, mini-blogs, etc. became mainstream around 2005 and, as we'll discuss later on in this excerpt, people have been flocking to those sites to discuss every imaginable topic under the sun. And within some of those topics, somebody, somewhere across the globe on an inexorable 24/7 schedule is discussing your company, its image, and what it means to them.

When people discuss your company, some of them somewhere are talking truthfully and some of them are speaking falsely. Some of them have legitimate comments and complaints and some of them like to talk trash just because they can. Some of them have an agenda and some of those agendas are hidden while other agendas are not. Some of them don't have an agenda but just want other people to react to what they say and some just want to vent and throw garbage on your company's good name.

During the past several years in my “travels” across the social web, I've seen this kind of behavior pick up speed. More people are doing it each day. And as more people do it each day, they are building upon a collective work about your company or other companies. They read the trash talk left by others on various social sites and then they add to it. They pile on. Each subsequent person puts another brick in the wall that hides and obscures what your real company image is. As more people enter the social web and become familiar with how to use social media

tools, what you want your company's corporate image to mean gradually fades in the collective consciousness. Outside of your control, your corporate image subtly changes day by day. Your corporate image drifts in the minds of the public. Your corporate image becomes redefined.

Because of this new problem, a problem which you and I will discuss in detail from here through the back cover, you need to shift your thinking a bit. You need to shift your thinking in terms of what "competition" is.

The people who contribute to this image drifting, to this brand redefinition, are actually "competitors." Yes, they are competitors. They are "atypical" or "non-traditional" competitors.

I want you to think of them this way.

Your direct competitors, the companies in your industry who sell products or services similar to those which your company sells, reposition what your company image means. They do that each day. In promoting their own product or services, your direct competitors, either directly or indirectly, communicate to people what your company does or does not do, in terms that favor them and not you. In the mind of the collective marketplace, your direct competitors are active in forming the image of what your company means. Those competitors, in effect, attack your image. And, in its marketing and corporate communications programs, your company does its best to counteract those attacks made by your direct competitors. Correct, yes?

So, how is what your direct competitors do any different from what these "workers of the world," these non-traditional competitors, do when they attack your company image from within social media?

Do you think that people using social media don't have as much power as your direct competitor? And therefore, those people in social media should not be a cause of concern? If so, you're wrong and we'll discuss this issue.

Do you think that what people say in social media just isn't trusted or regarded as important by those who read social media? And therefore, those social media conversations should not be a cause of concern? If so, you're wrong again and we'll discuss that issue, as well.

Do you think that social media is not a significant communications environment? And therefore, social media should not be a cause of concern? If so, yes, you're wrong again and we'll discuss why later on.

Do you think that social media communicators are not as clever in their communications strategy as are your direct competitors? And therefore, those social media communicators should not be a cause of concern? By now, you should know the answer to this one, too.

Compared to what your company does to fight the image attacks mounted by your direct competitors, does your company do as much to counteract the image attacks that non-traditional competitors create against your company in social media?

If not, then you must read the rest of this excerpt.

You must read the rest of this excerpt because now in the era of social media your company image is, or can become, the victim of *insidious competition*.

From Webster's New World Dictionary:

insidious (ins'idēəs) adj. proceeding in a gradual or subtle way, but with harmful effects - insidiousness n.

Also from Webster's New World Dictionary:

competition (kämpə'tiʃən) n. the opposition -competitive adj.

Thanks to social media, there is a significant opposition to your company's corporate image; opposition that is conducted cleverly, gradually, subtly, and with harmful effects that progress over time. And if you don't take at least as much action against it as you do against your traditional opposition, your company's ability to succeed may be impaired.

This action, this "war" against insidious competition won't be easy. Fighting for the meaning of your corporate image here in the information age involves dealing with threats that are more diffuse and ambiguous than traditional threats.¹ Indeed, these types of ambiguous attacks may be the most difficult information age attacks to protect against. Bruce Schneier, a well-known crypto-analyst and computer security expert, in an Internet newsletter talked about this very type of attack back in October 2000.

Bruce said then that there are three types of network, or information age, attacks. The oldest was the type of attack that targeted computer hardware infrastructure, the wires, the computer, the electronics. The second oldest was the type that targeted the software that drives that computer infrastructure. Attacks of this sort are the domain of what we have come to know as the computer "hacker." In this excerpt, you and I are not concerned with either of these types of attacks. But pertinent to our discussion here in *Insidious Competition*, Bruce said that the third type of attack, a "semantic attack," was targeted at the way humans "assign meaning to content." He referred to how people tend to believe what they read and perform very little due diligence in ferreting out the truth about the written material which they consume. While alluding to the human link in the computer network as the weakest point in the whole system and referring to the dissemination of questionable information and people's tendency to believe it, Bruce pointed out that now due to the rapid dissemination of that information via computer networks the problem of a "semantic attack" is more serious than ever before. He said that it is a problem which is more critical than the "hacking" attacks of hardware and software.² Hardware and software attacks have discrete targets and can therefore be directly defended. However, the target of the "semantic attack" is much more ethereal and ephemeral. And, unlike the computer hacker who must possess specific skills to mount his attack against hardware or software, the "semantic" target may be attacked by anyone on the globe who has access to the Internet. This

characteristic makes the “semantic attack” the most difficult type of information age attack to repulse or defend against.

This, the arena of the semantic attack, is where I believe business will fight an important battle in the coming decades. Because of the pervasiveness, ease of creation and access to “information” on the social web, business will fight for what its corporate image means. This “*Battle for Meaning and the Corporate Image*” against an insidious opponent will be just as important, or perhaps more important, than the wars you fight against your direct and more traditional competitors. It’s always the foe that you don’t see that is the most deadly.

You can’t turn the other cheek on this one. You can’t appease this new type of attacker, this non-traditional competitor, and just hope that they go away. They won’t. You can’t allow their ideas and accusations about your company reputation to go unchallenged because ideas and accusations that are allowed to exist become “true.” And they live forever on the Internet.

Here in *Insidious Competition* we will discuss many ideas, concepts, facts, and theories that will help us define just what insidious competition really is. This will be a lot of work. But we need to undertake this work because this opponent is new. This insidious opponent has been created by the new communications environment, social media, which grows more powerful every day. No competitor like this has existed before. And because a competitor of this nature has not existed before today, has not been recognized until today, nothing has been written previously about what or who this non-traditional competitor is, or how it operates, or why it is a threat, or how to counter the type of threat that comes from this new competitor. There is no prior model to build upon, so we must create one in this excerpt. We will build this new model because it is vital to the development of our ability to fight this new type of foe, the insidious competitor.

Here is a description of the journey we will take to build this model.

In Section One of *Insidious Competition* we will discuss “The Elements of Social Media Danger.” There in Chapter One, entitled “Social Media Has the Power, Baby,” we will discuss in detail how social media sets up an environment that has the power to enable your new foe. We’ll learn about the Six Uncontrollable Factors in a Business Environment and how Social Media has become the Seventh. Then in Chapter Two, entitled “There’s a Crowd in Them There Social Media,” we’ll discuss tribes and communities and crowds. Much has been written about social media communities. Well, you and I will see how those communities really aren’t communities after all, but how those communities are really much more like crowds. And where you have crowds, you have crowd behaviors. This is where the wheels start to come off and The Battle for Meaning begins in earnest.

Still in Section One, from there we go on to Chapter Three, to discuss what I have coined as “The Five Factors of Insidious Competition.” You can’t be an insidious competition warrior without knowing about and understanding how crowd behaviors foster the Five Factors that drive your insidious competitor, driving them on the inside and empowering them on the outside. Chapter Three asks us to do some heady thinking, but we won’t slow down our mental processes

after Chapter Three. Quite the contrary. In Chapter Four, with the long title of “The Battle for Meaning, Reality Repackaged . . . and Liability Be Damned,” we get even heavier and we will talk about the nature of reality, which is the essential element underlying The Battle for Meaning.

We will talk there about how reality is created and what happens when reality creators lose a sense of responsibility because there is no liability attached to how their reality is packaged. Now, having discussed the first half of this excerpt’s subtitle, *The Battle for Meaning*, we’ll head into Chapter Five which is entitled “The Ephemeral Image,” where we’ll discuss the second half of this excerpt’s subtitle, *The Corporate Image*. We’ll talk about how vital to your company its corporate image is and how that image can be the first victim in The Battle for Meaning, making the second victim your company’s revenues, and the third victim possibly your own livelihood.

Rounding out Section One and our discussion of The Elements of Social Media Danger will be an even more intensive discussion of how reality is created and, in particular, how people come to know what they know. In Chapter Six, entitled “Solipsism & Epistemology or The System of Knowing,” we’ll delve deeply into how people learn. We’ll discover there that what people learn, or what they know, is how they see reality. And we’ll learn there the basics of the critical process of how insidious competitors diddle with the meaning of your company’s corporate image. You can’t be an effective insidious competitor warrior without knowing how the foe constructs an attack. Chapter Six will help you obtain this skill.

Once we understand the process of how the insidious competitor diddles with meaning, we then move on to Section Two entitled “The Principles of Propaganda and their Application.” Now by knowing the critical process of meaning, we will see in Chapter Seven, entitled “The Principles of Propaganda,” how the insidious competitor applies the process of meaning within the principles of propaganda. We will see in this chapter how insidious competitors apply those principles, both consciously and unconsciously, from within the environment of social media. And we will also see here how some principles of propaganda support the environment of social media itself. Chapter Seven will also show you how insidious competition organizes itself. All of this is important intelligence in being able to understand and combat this new, 21st century business foe.

We’ll then move on to Chapter Eight, “The Four Tools of the Insidious Competitor.” In this discussion, you and I will uncover the actual mechanisms through which the insidious competitor leverages the principles of propaganda, and by which meaning is diddled.

We don’t stop there.

Next in Section Three, “Attack Classes and Types of Insidious Competitors,” we’ll move from the foundational theory and toward the more pragmatic. There in Chapter Nine, entitled “Dangerous Days Are Trending Nearer,” we remind ourselves about the nature of the threat we are facing and then go on to discuss in Chapter Ten, entitled “Classifications of Competitive Attacks,” the six classes of attacks that can be perpetrated by an insidious competitor. We discussed “semantic attacks” briefly above, and in Chapter Ten we will discuss semantic attacks

in much more detail and come to learn that information age attacks have many more dimensions. A good understanding of attack classes is essential to being able to later form an effective counter-strategy.

Then we will begin our multi-chapter discussion about the specific classes of insidious competitors out there on the social web. First up is Chapter Eleven, entitled “The Reality Benders.” This insidious competitor is characterized by those foes in social media who disseminate misleading or one-sided information. Within this competitor class we will find three types of insidious competitors. They are Tagging Terrorists, Mommy Bloggers, and NGOs/Activists. In that discussion we’ll talk specifically about why each type is a threat, what tools each type uses, their organization and attack classes, and we will also see some specific examples.

Next in Chapter Twelve, entitled “The Nasties,” we’ll discuss a class of insidious competitor quite different from the Reality Benders. Whereas the Reality Benders propagate one-sided information, The Nasties disseminate false information from false sources. In other words, *they lie*. Thus, the name “Nasties.” We will see one type of insidious competitor in this class. That type is Foreign Governments & Their Agents. We will discuss why they are a threat and talk about their organizational form, their attack class, and their tools.

After an intense discussion about The Nasties, we’ll talk about something a little more “friendly.” In Chapter Thirteen, entitled “The Friendlies,” we’ll discuss four types of this class of insidious competitor, which are Customers/Clients/Consumers, Employees, Activist Stockholders, and Labor Unions. We’ll talk about why each of these types is a threat, the tools that each type uses, their attack class, and their organizational form. Some examples of The Friendlies are given in that chapter. Why do I call them “friendly?” Well, it’s because each type is associated closely with your company, but yet has an agenda different from that of your company. Are they really “friendly?” I suppose that’s a relative word. You’ll know more after you read Chapter Thirteen.

Chapter Fourteen, entitled “The Digital Pirates,” follows. These are the people who “borrow” your corporate intellectual property and forget to give it back. In Chapter Fourteen, we will discuss only one type of insidious competitor in this class. That type is known as the Culture Jammer, and in our discussion we will talk about why they pose a threat, their tools, their attack class, and their organization. We will see some very interesting examples here, as well.

Moving on to Section Four, “Strategies & Tactics Against Insidious Competition,” we’ll lead off with Chapter Fifteen, “General Strategies & Tactics Against Insidious Competition,” and discuss just that, general strategies and tactics. In this chapter we will discuss both proactive and reactive strategies and tactics. And we will review previously discussed concepts, such as the Five Factors of Insidious Competition, the Principles of Propaganda, and Solipsism & Epistemology, as parameters under which these general proactive or reactive strategies can be considered.

As we leave Chapter Fifteen we will begin to learn how to apply our general strategies and tactics specifically against each class and type of insidious competitor, taking each one in turn. We'll lead off with Chapter Sixteen, entitled "Suggested Strategies & Tactics Against the Reality Benders," where we see examples of how the strategies and tactics might be applied against each of the three types of insidious competitor in this class. In the discussion we'll consider specifics such as the type of tools each uses, as well as their attack classes and organizational form.

Then comes the shortest chapter in *Insidious Competition*. In Chapter Seventeen, "Suggested Strategies & Tactics Against the Nasties," we'll have a bit of a different discussion. Why different? Well, you just have to wait until you get there.

Following in Chapter Eighteen, "Suggested Strategies & Tactics Against the Friendlies," we'll discuss some examples of strategies and tactics that might be applied against the four types of insidious competitors in this class, and in doing so, we'll talk about how each type's attack class, organizational form, and tool usage may enter into the strategic/tactical selection.

Then, Chapter Nineteen, entitled "Suggested Strategies & Tactics Against the Digital Pirates," wraps up our section on strategies and tactics. In Chapter Nineteen, we'll talk about how strategies and tactics might be applied to the one type of insidious competitor found in this class as we consider this competitor's unique characteristics.

Finally, the Epilogue brings us to the wrap-up and to your departure point from our exploration of insidious competition to your own battle for meaning and your corporate image.

* * *

As I've said previously, I believe this fight, this Battle for Meaning and how it impacts your Corporate Image is an important one. And as you read both the facts and the theories contained within *Insidious Competition* you will learn more and more why I believe this and, more importantly, *why you should, too*.

The Battle for Meaning is one that is about fighting lies and misrepresentations. For you as a person working for a company that has fallen victim to these lies and misrepresentations, this excerpt's intent is *not* to help you create lies or misrepresentations in return. This excerpt's purpose is *not* to assist you and your company in creating and implementing strategies and tactics that are illegal, immoral, unethical, or shady. So charlatans, please look elsewhere. You will not find your answers within these pages.

And, if your company has performed improper behaviors only to find itself "insidiously competed with," well, then your company needs to "fess up." Because by not doing so, the insidious competition will only grow and may reach a point at which abatement is impossible.

But if you work for a company that is among the majority of companies which are honest and law-abiding, then this excerpt will be of interest to you. This excerpt is intended to assist companies of good character and integrity in battling those who have wronged it.

Now, please continue with your reading of *Insidious Competition*. I will be honored if you do so. I hope you enjoy your reading as much as I enjoyed the writing.

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Note 1: Arquilla, p 111.

Note 2: Schneier 2000.

Sources:

Arquilla, John, David Ronfeldt, and Michele Zanini. "Networks, Netwar, and Information-Age Terrorism." p 107 - 129. In *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding the New Security Environment*, edited by Howard, Russell D., and Reid L. Sawyer. Dubuque, Iowa: Mc Graw Hill Contemporary Learning Series, 2006.

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