

***Dangal* : Cinematic Representation of Competitive Marketing Strategy**

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Abstract

Directed by Nitesh Tiwari and starring Aamir Khan, *Dangal* is an Indian Hindi language biographical sports drama, which emerged as the first mainstream Hindi film to cross the ₹ 350 crores mark. The movie presents a lot of lessons pertaining to social values, human resources, and competitive marketing strategies, when different scenes are used as similes. This article discussed the scenes of the film from the perspective of competitive marketing strategies for challengers, taking cues from Adam Morgan's *Eating the Big Fish* and those pointed out by Philip Kotler. In doing so, this article provided an in-depth analysis of the film, which may be of immense value to management trainers and marketing educators in their attempt to explain difficult concepts of management and marketing in a lucid language comprehensible by a large audience.

Keywords : competitive marketing strategy, *Dangal*, hindi movie, challenger strategy, marketing

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Thanks to innovative business models, new communication tools, and savvy interconnected consumers, challenger brands are becoming the new norm. Challenger brands are neither the market leaders nor among the niche players. Fuelled by success, their ambition exceeds their conventional marketing resources. Although becoming a challenger is demanding and requires curving out an ambitious path, possibilities open to and explored by challengers are rich and inspiring.

The success of the highly popular recent Hindi movie *Dangal* (Tiwari, 2016) can be credited, to some extent, on its rich and motivating dramatization of struggle and strategies to overcome those by the protagonist Mahavir Singh Phogat and his two daughters. Messages and meanings are constructed within films, and audiences often actively sort, discard, and construct meaning in their interactions with films (Baird, 1996; Edgerton & Jackson, 1996). This article is an attempt to construe the meanings of different messages left behind by the movie *Dangal* from the perspective of competitive marketing strategies for the challenger.

Background

Directed by Nitesh Tiwari and starring Aamir Khan as the protagonist, Mahavir Singh Phogat, *Dangal* is a 2016 Indian Hindi language biographical sports drama film. Mahavir Singh Phogat is an amateur wrestler and senior Olympics coach, who was awarded the Dronacharya Award by the Government of India in 2016. He is the father

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and coach of Geeta Phogat, India's first gold medal winner in women's wrestling, who won in the 55 kg freestyle category at the 2010 Commonwealth Games, and Babita Kumari, a bronze medal winner at the 2012 World Wrestling Championship, and a gold medal winner in the 2014 Commonwealth Games. *Dangal* is the Hindi term meaning “a wrestling competition”.

Released worldwide on 23 December 2016, the movie was declared tax-free in four Indian states - Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, and Delhi to promote “*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*” (“Save the girl child, educate the girl child”), a Government of India's social campaign aiming to reduce selective abortion of females, to protect girls, and to educate them. However, living up to its title, the movie depicts the struggle at different phases, which challenges the existing social customs and rituals and breaks the conventional wisdom to emerge as the leader. These struggles and the strategies adopted to overcome them can be depicted as similes for the dynamic marketing world, where a proper mindset coupled with appropriate strategies can make ground for winning the battle.

Competitive Strategy

In the challenging landscape of marketing, companies often adopt new strategies by either proactively launching a new assault to gain more market - share or in response to the attacks formed by other players or business conditions. Different market conditions call for different strategies. Thus, strategies adopted by the leader differ from those chosen by the challengers or the followers. Of particular interest is the strategy of the challengers, who have to continuously struggle with limited resources (compared to the leader) and strive to become the leader.

Eight Credos for Challenger Brands

In the book, *Eating the Big Fish: How Challenger Brands can Compete Against Brand Leaders*, Morgan (2009) advocated on gaining mind share through thought leadership, as challenger brands strive to compete with the leaders. He outlined eight key beliefs which should guide the actions of the challenger brand. Forming these beliefs and following them is important as is also illustrated by the dialogue in the movie that, before one starts wrestling, one has to mentally prepare for the fight.

(1) First Credo - Intelligent Naivety : Mahavir Singh Phogat almost lost the long - cherished hope of his child winning a national gold medal after his wife gave birth to four daughters. However, his hope was rekindled when suddenly he found that his two elder daughters have the qualities of being wrestlers. Coming from a male-dominated society, the protagonist suddenly realized that gender cannot deter anyone from winning the coveted gold medal; it is the attitude that matters.

The same is true for the challenger brands. Successful challengers create a new criterion for choice as they motivate consumers to think afresh from a different perspective. By focusing on possibilities, they explore the gap left by the established leader. This is also highlighted in the film wherein the organizers of wrestling competitions initially show reluctance to let female wrestlers fight, but later on understand the benefit of doing so and welcome the daughters of Mahavir Singh to fight.

(2) Second Credo - Build a Lighthouse Identity : The two central characters of the film - Gita and Babita - are put through rigorous training by their father Mahavir Singh, with the sole aim to emerge as the champions in women's wrestling, not only at the national level, but also at the international level. Mahavir Singh was portrayed to be ruthless to achieve success with this focus and thus removed every obstacle that came in the way, be it cutting short the coveted beautiful hair of his daughters or making his daughters wear short pants to facilitate them with running or deciding to let them fight with male wrestlers.

Challenger brands need to build a separate unique identity of their own to stand out from the competition by their intensity and confidence. These brands need to state their predominant marketing purpose clearly, with an intense and vivid projection. They have to build their identity on an inarguable truth, which makes them noticeable and help to create an emotional relationship with the consumers.

(3) Third Credo - Take Thought Leadership of the Category : In the male dominated society of India, where girls in most of the lower class and middle-class families are generally nurtured to learn cooking and helping with household chores as a part of preparation to get them married at an early age, Mahavir Singh taught his daughters wrestling. Although the girls initially resisted accepting the change, gradually they understood their own value. The society which would jeer the girls for wearing weird clothes, notwithstanding the social norms, and for the peculiar hair style, gradually started appreciating them. Resistance at every level slowly turned into opportunities to flourish further.

Challenger brands should strive to emerge as the “Thought Leader” in the consumers' minds. Thought leaders must educate consumers to break conventions by portraying them differently, through use of different mediums, by showcasing unique product attributes going beyond the technical performance, and maintaining a strong relationship with collaborators, in order to create a new plane for relationship. They need to portray different meanings of the existing relationships and provide consumers with a fresh perspective.

(4) Fourth Credo - Create Symbols of Re-evaluation : When Mahavir Singh fails to get government funds for purchasing wrestling mats to train his daughters, he finds out an alternative by using normal bed mattresses instead. Similar incident happened earlier also when he rapidly built a separate “*akhada*” (practice ground for wrestlers) to train Gita and Babita. This exemplifies, besides dedication and focus, the eagerness to act promptly to break conventional wisdom, through dramatic acts. These acts portray him as an icon of change.

Challenger brands should create a dramatic symbol of re-evaluation. This calls for a real effort to overcome difficulty in achieving initial critical momentum. For doing so, challengers often take the dominant complacency head on. These symbols may be created and introduced as a part of the long term marketing plan of the company.

(5) Fifth Credo - Sacrifice : Remember the time when Mahavir Singh frowned upon the long hair of the elder daughter Gita Kumari, after she returned home from the National Sports Academy. Both Gita and Babita were forced to sacrifice their hair at the beginning of their training in order to maintain focus. So, this departure from the earlier practice annoyed the protagonist, who even sacrificed his own job to ensure that the daughters got proper training before important events.

Likewise, challenger brands do not only need to prioritize their target acts, but also sacrifice the unwanted ones fully. This needs a lot of brainstorming to decide the acts or organizations on which to focus. Challengers, who are almost always short on resources compared to the leader, may achieve optimal usage of resources by following this credo.

(6) Sixth Credo - Overcommit : When the coach of the national team pushed Gita to compete in the 51 kg category instead of the 55 kg category, the upset wrestler consults her father Mahavir Singh. He insists on Gita to compete in the 55 kg category and decides to relocate himself to Patiala, where the National Sports Academy is located, to personally supervise Gita's training. With limited finances, he takes a home near to the academy and instructs his daughters to meet him early in the morning before the training starts at the academy.

This is the kind of over-commitment that challengers need to undertake. It requires prior anticipation and identification of hurdles, and creation of strategies to overcome them. This also need an understanding why other strategies will fail to achieve the desired impact. Over-commitment helps the challenger brands to push through inertia and resistance that inevitably waits on the way.

(7) Seventh Credo - Enter Popular Culture : When Mahavir Singh decides to introduce chicken in the meals of his daughters, he requests the poultry shop owner to supply him chicken at a very nominal rate. He justifies the reduced rate by showing heightened future demand of chicken from the shop as his daughters become famous wrestlers. This becomes true later on, and the poultry shop owner is found to happily pose for a photo with the life-size image cut out of Gita Kumari when she emerges as a champion at different levels of competition. Other consumers also flock to the shop to buy chicken from there. Gita Kumari starts being noticed by common people and rapidly emerges as part of popular folklore.

Challenger brands also need to create a myth around them to encourage consumers to proactively communicate their virtues through social systems. The customers will make the brands a part of their social culture when they discover some new value worth sharing, feel enthused, identify themselves with some aspirational characteristics of the brand, or anticipate social currency by being part of it. This strategy works best when the message is clear and witty, and it represents championing of something. Thus, it sets the agenda for conversation.

(8) Eighth Credo - Become Idea Centered : When Gita Kumari becomes the national champion, the entire family starts thinking that the ambition of Mahavir Singh has been achieved, and they can settle down. However, Mahavir Singh declares that the goal is not to win a gold medal for the individual, but to win for the country. Thereby, he elevates the aim and sets a new target.

In the same way, challenger brands need to change themselves by generating new ideas in order to stay relevant among the consumers. Successful challengers can never be static, and they need to constantly reinvent themselves to keep them ahead of the market. It is necessary to surprise the consumers with fresh stimulating ideas to stay ahead of the competition. This refreshes the experiential relationship fed by marketing and communication ideas that stimulates the consumers' imagination.

Types of Competitive Strategy

In the movie, the national coach tells his students that even rhinos use strength, but it is the tiger which uses both strength and technique. Similar lines are also told by Mahavir Singh earlier when he says that one has to put a lot of effort to win medals. These dialogues underline the importance of choosing the best option to fight successfully as the competitor. Kotler and Armstrong (2012) identified five different kinds of general attack strategies for the challenger. Any aspect of the marketing program, like quality or price of the product, variety of offering or the distribution system, can act as the basis for the attack. A challenger can pick up one specific strategy or combine different strategies to improve its position over the time.

(1) Frontal Attack : During the training session with the cousins, Gita is told by her father to match the strength of the competitor. When the leader is pushing on one side, the challenger has to strengthen that part. This is the fundamental principle behind frontal attack. In a modified frontal attack, the challenger may directly base its strategy on one of the marketing aspects, with the hope that the leader does not react and consumers believe in the quality of the offering.

(2) Flank Attack : While analyzing the mistakes which cost Gita her international matches, Mahavir Singh told her not to let go of the chance when the opponent is not up to it. This is how flank attacks are launched, whereby gaps are identified and attempted to be filled. This strategy is more attractive to challengers with limited resources and is more likely to result in success.

(3) Encirclement Attack : There are numerous instances in the movie which show one of the competitors pinning down the other wrestler by pressing her elbow on the back and folding the competitor's legs from the knee

downward. The wrestler thus pinned down has almost no other option, but to surrender. This is the beauty of encirclement attack, by which a wider slice of the territory is attempted to be captured by launching a grand offensive on several fronts.

(4) Bypass Attack : As Gita failed in her initial attempts to win an international medal, the national coach suggests her to compete in the 51 kg category, rather than her usual 55 kg category. He suggested this fearing that the higher weight category would be too tough for her and thus chose an easier option. This is similar to bypass attack, through which the challenger attacks the enemy in the easier market through diversifying into unrelated product categories, in new geographic locations, or by introducing new technologies.

(5) Guerrilla Attack : Remember the dialogue of Mahavir Singh before the final match of the Commonwealth Games ? He advised Gita to wait for that precise moment when the competitor falters by losing her patience. This summarizes the strategy for guerrilla attack, consisting of small and intermittent attacks using both conventional and unconventional methods. This kind of attack is generally backed by stronger attack to beat the opponent.

Managerial Implications

Management trainers often use videos to ensure that the management lessons are comprehensible by a large population and appreciated by them. This article works as an aid to those management trainers and marketing educators. Professors in management schools may also find this kind of analysis interesting, when they explain concepts of competitive marketing strategy in the class-room.

A sincere attempt has been made to ensure that the lessons from the film are matched with various competitive marketing strategies for challengers. By referring to Adam Morgan's *Eating the Big Fish*, this article provokes the managers to be mentally prepared for the tough challenges they may wish to undertake in order to win the market. The second part of the article, on the other hand, elaborates on more technical points, as is suggested by Kotler and Armstrong (2012). Thus, this article is an attempt to motivate business managers to emerge as a winner through an orchestrated effort of both the heart and the head! Thus, this article necessarily builds on the statement that leadership competency is considered as a trait of a leader than a process in the organizational context (Taware, Kumari, Akhilesh, & Nagendra, 2017). Managers may adopt different strategies by comparing their business scenario with the various scenes of the film. This article provides one more example to illustrate that even entertaining movies can also be used for effective dissemination of useful message.

Conclusion

The movie *Dangal* vividly portrays struggles which are to be overcome by the challenger in order to emerge as the winner. It emphasizes on the need of proper mindset as well as strategy to win the battle against the conventional social custom. This article draws on the similarities of these strategies with those adopted by challenger brands, by focusing on the competitive strategies available to them, as usage of such similes will make learning competitive marketing strategies enjoyable and indelible for students during a classroom discussion.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

The present study is based on only one regional Hindi movie and two scholarly writings. Although the film has been scrutinized in minute details, the insights expressed in this article have not been validated by others. Moreover, the entire article purposefully focuses only on competitive marketing strategies for challengers.

However, the film could have been analyzed from other perspectives like psychology, human-resource, etc.

Future researchers may undertake an investigation from a wider angle to analyze diverse management lessons in such popular movies. It may be interesting to find competing ideologies, embedded in movies, being compared. As more such studies are conducted, management trainers and marketing educators will have access to a wider selection of such educational movies to help them effectively and efficiently disseminate management education.

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