Political Communication
American Political Science Association, s.23

Online newsletter of the ICA Political Communication Division and the American Political Science Association

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EXCERPT FROM ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE
January 2009

Communicating politics - big budget branding, micro-management of issues, change as strategic positioning

As head of a consulting firm whose focus includes brand integrity and leadership strategies, I am drawn to the challenge of establishing a competitively differentiated leadership message, or in the case of the 2008 campaign, a mantra, and how to successfully extend it as a core concept out to every touch point in the brand experience.

In the domain of strategic marketing, "touch points" are the literal incremental encounters or *episodes of engagement* that a customer has with any aspect of a brand's anatomy across its lifecycle - whether it be the physical product and its gratification of emotional need, the messaging, positioning, packaging, the point-of-purchase interchange or the financial transaction, engagement of the advertising communication, or any other number of interactions.

Touch points vary as widely as the product itself, its market context, and the array of customers that engage a 'relationship' with the product. When a brand's anatomy is scrupulously constructed, touch points seamlessly integrate on a continuum to create a fruitful relationship lifecycle of mutual gains: The brand company realizes its business objectives (sales volume, market share, product portfolio proliferation, per unit profitability, share price, etc.) while the consumer acquires fulfillment of identified needs that include both literal and sub-conscious benefits from the brand.

The president-elect's campaign strategy was by far one of the most brilliant executions of brand infiltration we have seen in a generation of American presidential politics - most comparable to the late Michael Deaver's "Shining City on a Hill" and "Morning in America" stagecraft for Ronald Reagan's 1980 and '84 bids. That period was a similar era of sea change in political direction and leadership. Only then, the tools were far more primitive.

The biggest lesson to learn from President-Elect Obama's competently-managed campaign is in what they avoided: The most common, often fatal, mistake brand infiltration strategies make is the *inconsistency* between the brand promise and marketplace behavior. In modern politics, such a gap between promise and behavior, talk versus walk, can produce irreversible failure: It can seed doubt, invite distrust, erode credibility, compromise leadership equity (critical for governing), and almost always result in pervasive cynicism. The outgoing administration is demonstrably proof of that.

The president-elect, unlike his opponent, was steady at the helm (some argue too steady). His quest for the presidency worked because his brand strategy was an accurate embodiment of voter aspirations aligned for this moment in time - that was *holistically* executed. Every touch point in the Obama brand consistently manifested the promise. Competency was underscored by measured, thoughtful responses to unexpected events as well as flawless execution of day-to-day tactics: the financial meltdown and the Jeremiah Wright blow up are cases in point. Obama's direct and risky speech on race at Philadelphia's Constitution Museum was a choice in integrity over expediency, courage over calculation. Whatever your personal view is of the controversy, the strategy was consistent with his brand promise and the outcome worked to further shore up the confidence and credibility in his brand.

The president-elect's fundraising was accomplished by essentially delivering on what McCain-Feingold could not: Obama built a grassroots network of small, individual donors in critical mass, trumping the historic big-money influence of powerful special interests to return the country's destiny to the citizenry. His fundraising strategy aligned with his brand promise to create a level playing field and govern all the people. The DNC and Obama strategy to abandon the blue versus red state approach of recent campaigns and seek unity through a fifty-state strategy successfully converted traditionally Republican-dominated electorates into Democratic wins; another demonstration of touch point consistency. The change mantra was executed at every possible iteration on a continuum, from denouncing the demonizing of opponents, divesting politics from ideology, and refusing to jump into the trenches of polarizing singular wedge issues to resisting opportunism with the onset of the Wall Street meltdown, and exercising self-confidence in selecting a formidable former rival as his running mate.

Unfortunately for John McCain, most of the rules of effective brand infiltration were broken and worked to expose his shortcomings, despite his distinguished qualifications as a candidate, in an election cycle in which those very shortcomings were exactly what voters were repudiating in the incumbent.

Too much of the McCain campaign relied on out-dated assumptions about brand strategy - that "branding" is all about logos, fancy packaging, tag lines, and alluring "promises" that blend together to create some illusionary ideal. McCain's message of change as a maverick couldn't stick, as it was essentially a re-purposing of his opponent's mantra and not one uniquely original to him. (McCain's brand persona is top-heavy on 'establishment' and not enough on his admirable maverick accomplishments.) McCain could not possibly seize the "change" leadership mantle because nothing in his brand anatomy reinforced *authentic* change *behavior*. Managed by many of President Bush's former campaign operatives, the McCain quest for the presidency relied on the old tried-and-true tricks of the game and failed to acknowledge that the game had dramatically been altered by a succession of historic events. His brand apparatus was not equipped to *mobilize* enough voters into his camp.

"The Reagan-Thatcher revolution of low taxes, deregulation, and tight money isn't relevant to the problems of under-regulated financial products, huge deficits, and a deepening recession," notes Fareed Zakaria, foreign affairs analyst and host of *"Fareed Zakaria: GPS"* on CNN (November 14, 2008; CNN.com). "Voters have seemed to sense that there is a new world out there and that the solutions presented by McCain in his campaign didn't address the change. Most Americans now recognize that the real world is a complicated place and cannot be transformed by magic or military power."

In a November 14th article in the Washing Post, *"Free the GOP"*, Former EPA Administrator, New Jersey Governor, and Co-Chair of the Republican Leadership Council Christine Todd Whitman along with freelance speechwriter Robert M. Bostock, her co-author for the book, *"It's My Party Too,"* write: "In the wake of the Democrats' landslide victory, and despite all evidence to the contrary, many in the GOP are arguing that John McCain was defeated because the social fundamentalists wouldn't support him. They seem to be suffering from a political strain of Stockholm syndrome. They are identifying with the interests of their political captors and ignoring the views of the larger electorate. This has cost the Republican Party the votes of millions of people who don't find a willingness to acquiesce to hostage-takers a positive trait in potential leaders. Unless the Republican Party ends its self-imposed captivity to social fundamentalists, it will spend a long time in the political wilderness. On November 4th, the American people very clearly rejected the politics of demonization and division. It's long past time for the GOP to do the same."

Consumers are far more sophisticated than advertising 'gurus' ever give them credit for. The same is true of voters; they have always been able to decipher exploitation or opportunism in the absence of courageous and authentic leadership. It's the campaign strategists that seem to insist otherwise. Like it or not, the Democrats and Obama proved this true as their 2008 victories were decisive and widespread. Perhaps we are entering an encouraging new era of conscious leadership. Without exception, we all have a vested interest in its success.

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