

Mastering the Art of Brand Building: A Look at the Race for President

by Dan Logan

To anyone interested in branding, messaging and persuading a broad, diverse audience to believe in a service offering, this winter's Presidential primaries have been a fascinating thing to watch.

For months now, we have all been on the receiving end of some of the savviest, most flexible marketing operations ever: the Presidential campaigns. They have to be savvy, because, whether Democrat or Republican, anyone running for president faces a formidable task: to convince millions of voters that they are the right person for the most important job in the world. To make that happen, they need to craft a message, a brand, and it must be a brand that can reach people in Boston and in Boise, in Southern California and in the South, across the spectrums of age and race and economics. And yet it must be different enough from the competing brands that voters will choose it, over something else.

There's a lot to learn from watching how they do this, and we can apply some of the lessons of a presidential campaign to the challenge of reaching our own customers and creating our own brands. A few things to watch closely are how they target market, how they adapt their message to changing events, how they use different media to reach customers in different ways, and how they differentiate themselves from a field of similar competitors.

Obviously, the electorate is not a monolith. And neither are your customers. Every voter, every consumer, has a slightly different set of concerns, and it's essential to recognize what those are and speak to them if you hope to make a connection. Politicians are masters at reading public opinion and responding to it. So when the Republicans campaigned in Michigan, with its auto industry woes, we heard a lot from them about saving blue-collar jobs. And when the Democrats were in South Carolina, with its long history of civil rights struggle, they talked about racial inequality. Of course they still talk about other broad issues, like health care or Iraq, but in almost every different setting they find a piece of their message that will resonate with the audience, and highlight it.

We also see the importance of flexibility over the course of a long campaign as events in the world change the context in which we view the candidates and they must adapt their message to the times. When Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in Pakistan, for instance, concern about foreign affairs surged to the top of voters' minds, and we asked the candidates how they'd navigate a turbulent world. But that soon faded, replaced by fears of a recession. All of a sudden, the presidential hopefuls had to dust off their economic plans, and in some cases build one from scratch. Just as voters look for different qualities in a president in different times, our customers look for different things from us in different times, and we must be able to show them we can provide.

Both of these qualities – target marketing and flexibility – can of course be taken too far, and will ultimately weaken your brand if you develop a reputation for simply telling people what they want to hear. In politics, this gets you labeled a “flip-flopper,” and there are few more devastating



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criticisms. In business, it's a good way to lose the trust of your customers. But to gain that trust in the first place, it's often important to show them that you have a broad skill set, and that you can address the concerns of a broad clientele.

You also must reach that broad clientele, another area politics may be ahead of business. The act of communicating with voters has advanced by leaps in recent years, becoming much more interactive, which lets voters find candidates on their own time, and can deepen their sense of investment in the one they like. Campaigns still pour money into traditional broadcast advertising and direct mail. They still hold rallies to fire up their supporters and they still scratch for every free-media mention they can get. But they're also busy building communities of support online, and trying to translate that into real-world votes. This has meant blogs, "meet-ups," and all manner of websites. It increasingly involves social networking – every major candidate today has Facebook and MySpace pages – which lets a candidate's "friends" get easy news updates and advertise their support for a particular candidate on their homepage, a simple act that can deepen a voter's sense of involvement with the campaign, and thus the candidate.

But perhaps the most important lesson to be learned is how candidates try to differentiate themselves from their competition. This is especially true in the primaries, where policy differences between some contenders may be razor-thin. So they tend to focus on a broader idea, a more abstract quality that appeals to a voter's hopes and emotions. They find a theme like "change," "experience," "competency," or "straight talk," and build all the other elements of their marketing around this theme. This is their brand, and they're asking you to believe that they can deliver it. If your product is just like that of your competitors, how do you set yourself apart?

Obviously, there are limitations to the parallels between marketing a presidential campaign and marketing financial services or healthcare. Perhaps the biggest is that a vote for president is a one-time transaction – a choice we must live with for four years – while the relationship between a service provider and its customer is ongoing. That makes the service provider much more accountable than the politician: promises made in a marketing campaign must be kept, or the customer will just take his business elsewhere.

But ultimately when we vote, as when we choose to do business with someone, we're picking a brand. And there are few people better at building a brand than a good candidate for President.