

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, Presidential primaries can be a fascinating thing to watch.

We have all been on the receiving end of some of the savviest, most flexible marketing operations: 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 United States. 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 as we approach 2012 and the next election are how they target markets, how they adapt their message to changing events, how they use media to reach customers in different ways, and how they differentiate themselves from a field of similar competitors.

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 want to make a connection. Politicians are masters at reading public opinion and responding to it. In 2008, 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 broader issues, like health care and social security, but in almost every different setting they find a piece of their message that will resonate with each 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. 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.



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

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 the vote for a 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 its business elsewhere.

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.

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[Originally published in 2008 and adapted for 2012 readers]