

Brand Marketing in Today's Cluttered Political Marketplace

A candidate who sees himself or herself as a brand can cut through the communication clutter and achieve the message discipline essential to a successful campaign.

BY THEODORE E. JACKSON, JR.

For the past 25 years, I have had the opportunity to advise political candidates and their campaigns, including gubernatorial, congressional and local races. For 15 of those years, I also have owned a marketing company that specializes in licensing and brand extension. Through these distinct – yet similar – experiences, I have observed that there is a great deal that can be learned and applied from both perspectives that is equally beneficial to the political world and business world. In business, we've learned much about the power of marketing.

It is most important that a candidate first comprehend the marketing task he confronts if he is going to be successful in persuading voters to vote for him on election day. And, yes, *persuasion* is the threshold objective of any candidate. Yet, in my years of experience, I have never heard a political consultant or anyone in a campaign use the word "brand" to describe a candidate's task. A simple word, it brings mental clarity to the process. In fact, a better word might be that four-letter word that is abhorrent to politics: *sell*. When a candidate accepts and understands that his core objective is to sell, or persuade, voters to contribute, advocate and vote for him, he is much more effective.

Every day, the average American is exposed to an hour of TV commercials. The daily mail delivers dozens of demands that you do everything from apply for a credit card to save the planet. Reading the newspaper, you pick your way through the articles, making decisions about which type of news you're willing to invest in. Click any Web site, and you'll get a sales pitch. If you're feeling overwhelmed, you have good reason.

This is life in the 21st century. When faced with the overwhelming clutter of communication, we pick and choose what gets our brief attention. No matter what product, service or idea enters the marketplace, the public's first reaction is: I don't care. I'm busy, and I have too much to

think about already.

What does this cluttered marketplace have to do with a political candidate? Everything. A candidate is not just competing with her opponent. Her message is in competition with all the messages in the marketplace, and politics is just one. Her competition is *life*.

The only way to cut through this communication clutter is to adopt the strategy proven effective by successful businesses: Create a brand. And manage the message with discipline and impact.

When any candidate comes to my office seeking advice, the first thing I ask is, "What are you going to say?" No matter what the answer, my response is always the same and it echoes the typical voter response: "I don't care. I don't believe you. You all sound the same. I have no time for this." Then I ask again, "So, what are you going to *say*?"

We live in an age of communication choice. Competing ideas are coming at us at the speed of light, and candidates, like brands, must become more creative in delivering their messages. Consumers – yes, voters are consumers -- are forced to make quick decisions about everything. Out of necessity, people have become more intuitive. For a candidate, often there is only one chance to have impact.

As a result of this information crunch, people are becoming more independent in deciding whom to believe and what matters. Political endorsements mean less and less. Newspaper, union and public figure endorsements are met with skepticism. Voters are saying, "I will decide for myself." The revolt is on. In essence, they are saying, "If you want my loyalty or vote, then give me something compelling and real, and don't take me for granted."

In marketing, a brand is the identifying image and message that separate one product or service from another. Of course, candidates are not products or services, but they face a similar and daunting task.

Developing a brand

What is a candidate selling? Just as with any brand in the commercial world, a candidate must communicate something that voters can understand and identify with. What is the Pepsi Generation? It's about youth and fun, whatever your age. What is Starbucks selling? Certainly not coffee. It's about lifestyle. The point here is not to think of yourself as Starbucks or Pepsi, but to understand first the principles of branding and the absolute necessity of message discipline for a candidate.

Developing a brand as part of a campaign strategy is equal parts science and art. Most political conversations center on the scientific, or objective, part of strategy. What do the polls say? What message is most significant to which population segment? These are vital parts of any campaign, but too often the more subjective elements are ignored. The fact is, a large segment of the population responds almost exclusively to the emotional appeal of the candidate. Not issues, but personality, believability and an appealing story are what persuade these voters, especially in close elections. The population craves something out of the ordinary.

Creating a brand distinction is especially important for challengers and minority-party candidates. It's not enough to just be a better candidate or a hard worker. The fact is, if everything between two candidates is essentially equal -- issues, charisma, funds -- the incumbent or majority-party candidate will win. A candidate must project a clear and distinct image of being better or at least different. Mediocrity of message will not prevail.

A political campaign will develop its own personality. It can either be directed and managed or it can just happen. Either way, it is a certain fact that a campaign personality will emerge and on Election Day voters will respond.

Branding is about communicating a message that is rooted in emotion. Every successful brand has some kind of emotional appeal. Emotion is the human element that gets our attention. Most of what we encounter every day is routine, predictable and, worst of all, boring. Remember: A candidate is asking a lot when he asks people to vote for him. He must give them a reason -- a reason grounded in some emotional appeal. This unique emotional component is the foundation of the candidate's brand.

The first step is a matter of soul-searching. Well before the campaign gets under way, a candidate should inventory his assets. This inventory should include every positive thing he's ever done that

may seem compelling, everything good anyone has ever said about him, every unique experience in his life -- anything that sets him apart from the rest of the world. What is his story? What makes him different, and why should people listen to and, most of all, vote for him? He must lose the modesty, get rid of the inhibitions. If he doesn't think he's the best person for the job, he shouldn't be running in the first place.

Successful businesses have messages that are consistent with who they are and what they do best. Similarly, a candidate shouldn't be something she isn't. Political consultants all too often fail to consider the personality and skills, or lack of them, when advising a candidate. If a candidate is not believable, she is dead. Voters will see right through her.

Every person is unique. The candidate's task is to prove it. If he can't communicate

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that, chances are he will go largely unnoticed beyond his political base. In our busy and chaotic world, it's not enough to just go through the motions of a campaign, mailing flyers and shaking hands. In order to have impact, a candidate must stand out.

A candidate's emotional appeal -- his or her unique story and personality -- must be a thread that runs through the whole campaign. There must be some level of emotional appeal in every move. Credibility on issues is rooted in a human element. This emotional component will be different in each campaign, because each candidate is different.

A candidate must think about the words. Words matter. She mustn't leave to chance who she will be on Election Day. She must develop a clear mental image and let that drive everything she does. If she pays attention to the voters' reaction, she will know if her message is working. When she is speaking, is the room quiet? Are heads nodding? Can she feel people making a human connection?

The Last 24 to 48 Hours

Let's consider the candidate's audience. Of the people in this country eligible to vote, about 60 percent of them are registered. On a general Election Day, often less than 40 percent of those will

go to the polls. Within that 40 percent, a certain number will always vote Democrat and a certain number will always vote Republican, no matter what. So, incredibly, candidates fight over that thin slice in the middle -- those who often make a decision based on intangibles such as how likable, believable and unique the candidate is.

Candidates must remember that the battle is for the middle voters, the voters that are most unpredictable. In close elections, they are the wild card.

The perceived differences between the major parties on the issues has blurred over time. Candidates are running toward the middle. As a result, the all-important swing voter often sees little difference between candidates on the issues. Each candidate has a plan to cut taxes, save Social Security, make government more efficient and reform welfare. How do people sort it out when party is not important? It all becomes a low hum of white noise that voters have learned to ignore. They want more, and they want it quickly.

Respected Republican media consultant Bob Goodman was pitching a political race in Kentucky in the early 1980s. At that meeting, Goodman said, "What should concern candidates at all levels is the increasing number, the significant number, of people who are deciding who to vote for in the last 24 to 48 hours before an election." That was 20 years ago. That message is even more compelling today. The threshold for the public's attention rises every day, and as a result, we all are required to make quick judgements regarding the value and relevancy of each message we encounter. Do you want my attention? It better be good. I don't have time for anything less.

A business will evaluate every new ad or approach by asking, "Is it on brand?" In other words, is it consistent with the image this brand projects? Every step of a campaign -- from printed materials, to Web site, to daily encounters with potential supporters and the press -- matters. Every single thing a candidate does or says is either on brand or off brand. Excellence in a campaign is in the details.

Some candidates operate stream-of-consciousness campaigns. Whatever fire needs put out, whatever the opposition is saying, whatever issues the candidate chooses today -- these are what determine the direction of the campaign. Often, there's no clear direction, and the communication message is a matter of chance. A candidate who sees himself as a brand can cut through the communication clutter and achieve the message discipline essential to a successful campaign. ■