

Marketing Lessons from the Presidential Election

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The 2008 Presidential election has drifted into the past, yet there are interesting lessons to learn from it. Regardless of which side you were on, the marketing behind the 2008 historic election offers key lessons that can be applied to how we think about our consumers and customers. While these are top-line thoughts, they highlight priorities that marketers can apply to reach increasingly over-taxed and media savvy consumers, who are demanding consistency, quality and value from our brands.

1. **Be consistent with your branding.** Did you hear the news commentators continually question whether each candidate was “on message”? Obama staked out the Change theme early, and McCain later started using it with his own twist (Change You Can Believe In). The American public wants to be sure what a Presidential candidate really stands for, and the American consumer wants to be really clear on what they get with your brand. It is also important to think about both the positive and potentially negative implications of key messages. Think about the message that comes with the term “maverick”. It was used to emphasize “not part of the status quo” and to help promote the “change” positioning, but to many the image of a “maverick” wasn’t consistent with the presidential role — so every image has a possible “flip side”. Consistency is important and consumers want to be sure that they are getting what they pay for and that the product will deliver on the promises made.
2. **Understand that looking the part is not enough to target a demographic group.** If this were the case, the Republicans would have had a sure fire win with women voting for Sarah Palin. She looks like the target group, so they will buy it, right? Not necessarily — successfully targeting a demographic group is about digging deeper and understanding the issues (or in the case of products, the needs) that are key to your target. Products that deliver the benefit and fulfill the need are more likely to succeed. If you have a product that only seems to be playing the part, but is under delivering, your customer *will* see through it.
3. **Figure out how to incorporate social marketing into your mix.** While previous political campaigns have dabbled with the Internet, 2008 marked the tipping point for the influence of social marketing. While it is over-simplified to say that Barack Obama was elected because of it, social media provides an unprecedented way for products to connect one to one and through trusted endorsers with their target audience. Don't be afraid of viral/word of mouth — seed “buzz worthy elements” such as Obama's will.i.am YouTube video and encourage consumers to interact with, and hopefully endorse your brand. These types of ads are more effective than television ads because viewers typically receive them from a friend and choose to watch them, versus having their favorite television show interrupted. Estimates place the YouTube viewing at 14.5 million hours, which would be worth \$47 million in television advertising.
4. **Make your product into something bigger. Go for the higher level benefit.** Obama merchandise captured the mood and passion of the country around Change and around Hope — emotions that inspire action and drive behavior. “YES WE CAN” became the chant and the belief for his supporters. McCain took a page from Reagan

and sprinkled every statement generously with “my friends”, attempting to appeal to people’s personal side. In tough economic times, it is more important than ever to leverage your brand’s emotional connection to the consumer and be clear about both the tangible and the higher level benefits you deliver.

5. **Geographic targeting and customer segmentation are not simple anymore.** In the Presidential election, Indiana voted blue, and in our changing demographics we find regardless of household income consumers are shopping in the channels that provide the most value. We must continue to re-assess what we think we know about our customers and develop new thinking about where and how to reach them. Targeted messaging continues to be powerful, but needs to be evaluated in the context of an ever more diverse and sophisticated audience.

The reality is, both on the political front and the marketing front, times have changed. For companies, the status quo is no longer enough to capture the attention and the share of the marketplace. Investing the time to understand what works and why will have huge implications on the marketing success of your company.