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‘Political Branding: the Tea Party and its use of participation branding’

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Abstract

The emergence of the Tea Party movement in 2009 witnessed the surfacing of a populist, anti-Obama libertarian mobilisation within the United States. The Tea Party, a movement which brought together a number of disparate groups, some new, some established, utilized participation branding where the consumer attributed the movement its own identity and brand. Its consumer facing approach, lack of one single leader and lack of a detailed party platform, in combination with its impact on the 2010 election races in America, earmarks it as a contemporary and unconventional brand phenomenon worthy of investigation.

Keyword(s): Participation branding
Tea Party
Consumer Tribe

Introduction

Political marketing is underpinned by a range of debates about how and why voters are drawn towards political movements and the role they play in the creation and dissemination of brand identity. This paper explores the emergence of a contemporary political movement, the Tea Party, which was established as a fissure of the Republican party in the United States, and poses questions about the dynamics of consumer led brand movements in modern politics (Vogel, 2010). In approaching the Tea Party we use Walvis' model of participation branding to consider the contributions a populist movement makes to current understandings of consumer led branding, within the framework of political marketing. The success of the Tea Party in establishing itself as a meaningful force in modern American politics is significant. Evidence suggests that individuals who were supported by the Tea Party in Republican primary races for the 2010 elections, and in the Congressional elections themselves, such as Rand Paul in Kentucky, benefitted from the Tea Party brand. The Tea Party is now a meaningful player in shaping partisan affiliation in America. The Economist claimed, 'Now it is by some accounts the most potent force in American Politics' (Economist, 2010). The absence of both a single identifiable leader and a cohesive professional marketing and consultancy program, when placed alongside the utilization of new and social media as a means to market the movement gives it a distinctive position in the emergence of new viral and consumer led branding within the political marketing process.

We consider firstly the current understanding of political parties as brands with features which earmark the integration of branding with marketing attributes. Thereafter we consider the political brand from the consumer oriented perspective. A

challenge in looking at this type of movement, which appears to confront orthodox party positions in a meaningful manner, is that it lacks some of the core facets commonly identified with the attributes of party membership structure and political marketing. We address how and why the Tea Party has demonstrated strength in marketing itself across the short-term and has been able to promote itself as a brand offering a viable influence upon a broader Republican party brand. The use of populist rhetoric, social media, talk radio and peer-peer communication, initially in what appeared to be an uncoordinated form, suggests there still exists the opportunity, in an age of advertising agencies, market research and political consultants, to brand political movements from the grassroots up and to exploit and use brand identities as initiated by the consumer.

Branding

Branding has seen a considerable shift in its application as an instrument of political importance and in its relevance to politics in recent years. Market saturation, media fragmentation and brand savvy consumers have instigated a move from providing image-based differences between brands, to the promise of lifestyle enhancing experiences with a mutual benefit for producer and consumer. According to Klein (2001, 30) the purpose of branding is to nudge the hosting culture into the background and make the brand the star, 'it is not to sponsor culture but to be the culture'. This correlates well with the emergence of the Tea Party as a movement which sought to harbour a disaffected Republican right and create a new brand, which gave a vent for the identity of those consumers who no longer felt appropriately recognised by Republican thought in the aftermath of the 2008 presidential election defeat. Similarly, alienation from Obama's Democrat brand of 'Hope' and 'Change'

brought disillusionment about the path the country was following and the possibility of the fulfilment of Obama's political mandate within a term of office.

Holt (2002) perceives the development of branding as establishing a legitimate value proposition to the consumer. Highlighting the significance of brand value, Aaker (1996, 68) suggests that generating a value proposition with functional or emotional benefits is key to establishing a relationship between the brand and the consumer. These benefits must then be communicated or sold to the consumer with evidence of their material, social or emotional worth. As identified by Levine et al. (2009) markets are conversations and brands need to be involved in these conversations with their stakeholders to enable them to understand and reflect the passions of their consumers, 'what drives them, what they are concerned about, their needs, wants and aspirations' (Duffy 2003, 17). With the Tea Party the producer was in large part the consumer, giving a duality of satisfaction about being influential in the emotional creation of a brand identity, and at the same time being the consumer of that very same product. There were tangible and immediate rewards related to production and engagement, with a brand that was not entirely linked to electoral success or timetables.

In their investigation of brand personality, de Chernatony and McDonald (2007) demonstrate that consumers look to brands not only for what they can do, but also, as intimated by consumer tribe theory, to help say something about themselves to their peer groups. This is supported by Clifton (2009, 45) who asserts that brands 'are the promise of something', which can alter interpretations of the social and political position of the consumer.

Political branding

The process of branding lends itself to the political arena and the branding of political parties and movements. Scammell (2007) considered how the utilization of brands and brand identity provides a conceptual framework to establish links between the functional and emotional attributes of political parties, enabling clarity with the positioning and communication of policy. Smith and French (2009) also support the theory of political parties as brands, having identified the means by which a political brand forms in consumers' memories and how, in order to be successful, the political brands must achieve meaningful connection, a sense of community and authenticity, whilst maintaining core brand values that are of relevance and use to voter-consumers.

Hughes and Dann (2009) adapted the American Marketing Association's definition of marketing for use in a political marketing context, suggesting marketers could assess their offerings against the needs of the voter-consumer and should communicate and deliver value to the stakeholder communities. In a period of economic disrepair this clearly has added resonance and correlates well with the Tea Party's concentration on material value, particularly fiscal issues, alongside a collective ideological and emotional identification, which underpins the Tea Party brand. This concept is reinforced by O'Cass (2009) who emphasizes the importance of incorporating what constitutes value for the voter in the brand and how a priority for political marketers might entail a focus on how value can be created for the voter-citizen, instigating a voter-centric view of marketing. Cova and Cova (2002) discuss the emphasis on 'linking value' to reinforce bonds with consumers. This consumer facing approach to value is one of the core foundations of branding and is supported by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), Duffy and Hooper (2003), Walvis (2010) and de

Chernatony and McDonald (2007, 144) who identify the attributes of 'love and passion, self-concept connection, interdependence, commitment, intimacy, partner quality and nostalgic attachment' as necessary for a good brand relationship. These attributes for branding are reflected in the current thinking behind consumer tribes and can be accommodated within the political arena to highlight the potential for participation branding, and in this instance the creation of branding and political marketing with respect to the Tea Party.

Consumer tribes

Atkin (2004, 64) suggests that brands are becoming legitimate centres of community, supporting ideologies and providing venues for social interactivity. 'Mediated by modern forms of communication, brand communities have become a modern belonging phenomena, appropriate to contemporary demands'. Consumer tribe theory suggests that the most successful brands provide a foundation to community, they give consumers a voice and provide a sense of belonging which supports their identity. 'The building blocks of human social life are not to be found in abstract categories applied to the analysis of social life, but in the multiplicity of social groupings that we all participate in' (Cova et al. 2002, 5). This is supported by Maffesoli (1996, 139) who suggests that the constitution of micro-groups or tribes arises as a result of a feeling of belonging, as a function of a specific ethic and within a framework of a communications network. Wipperfurth (2005, 143) classes the process of getting accepted into a brand tribe as being 'brandwashed' and alludes to the tribal aspects of cult brands as an 'us and them' mentality, creating a passionate solidarity among members.

The Tea Party: branding a grassroots political movement

Given the presence of many anti-establishment movements within the United States, including militia groups, minor party movements, libertarians and the politically disaffected, the sudden prominence of the Tea Party brand is of significance in an appreciation of how brand marketing works and how it contributes to the selling of a political product. The Tea Party has taken an innovative approach to political marketing and reflect the thinking of marketing theorists such as Maffesoli (1996), Muniz & O'Guinn (2001), Wipperfurth (2006), Cova et al (2007) and Walvis (2010). From a range of perspectives these political marketing analysts consider a community formation of like-minded individuals connecting with the product and each other and creating value as a key to true brand loyalty. From a political perspective this equates to voter loyalty and from the Tea Party perspective, has led to the rapid formation of a formidable political force.

In the absence of a strong Republican party brand during and after the 2008 presidential election, an opportunity existed to fill the ideological void left after the departure of Bush from office. Obama's economic bailout and healthcare legislation, Democrat control of the instruments of the federal government, and uncertainty about whether Democratic gains in Congress in 2008 could be undone in 2010 ensured those drawn to create and participate in the Tea party movement were faced with pronounced challenges. A period of political uncertainty, material and financial liabilities, and the lack of a leader who might draw a disparate Republican Party together to challenge Obama prompted a grassroots mobilization. In part therefore, the emergence of a Tea Party brand around which disparate groups might congregate, arose in part because of Obama's victory, Republican uncertainty, and the ability to

communicate an emotional resurrection of the values of the historic Tea Party revolt of 1773.

The movement was defined by what it opposed; deficits, high taxation and a passionate dislike of Obama's bailouts and healthcare reform, which it branded 'Obamacare'. It was not a conventional political party. It consisted of a varied range of groups of different size, wealth, and capacity to influence politics yet bonded together under an ideology and an identifiable brand. It took its name from the Boston Tea Party of 1773, but also has a sub-brand avenue which takes 'Tea' as an abbreviation for 'Taxed Enough Already'. The catalyst which sparked its creation was a remark on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange by a news reporter, Rick Santelli, about his frustration at subsidizing 'the losers' mortgages', and an aspiration 'to reward the people who carry the water, rather than drink the water.'¹ He suggested an internet referendum and the creation of a web site. 'OfficialChicagoTeaParty.com' was created to garner support. Its appearance created the onset of a multitude of similar movements across the country, bringing comparisons with the onset of the American Revolutionary movement (McGrath, 2010).

Controversy surrounds the movement, its importance, its impact, and its meaning in contemporary American politics. Yet it has become an important element in contemporary political discussion, replete with marketing tools, a membership drive, a broad mission statement and a clear influence on the fate of Republican party candidates during the 2010 congressional elections. It operates as an unaccountable force in politics, loosely organised, not putting up candidates of its own and acting in a form which suggests a duality of purpose, as an interest group designed to influence the Republican party brand, and as a brand in its own right. This has led to criticism

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APAD7537RN0>

about its overall marketing aims and long-term ambition. John Tantillo argues that the brand is not sufficiently underpinned by marketing to ensure that it has any guaranteed longevity. He states, ‘...if the Tea Party movement cannot convert its fervor into a marketing strategy with centralized discipline and structure then the movement is doomed...things are always easier when you keep marketing and branding in mind’ (Tantillo, 2010). This remains a potential weakness of the brand in comparison to established political parties in their own right. The longevity of the Republican and Democratic brands in the United States, having seen off interest groups, third party movements and candidate centred movements suggests that the historical record sends powerful lessons about the ability of emergent brands to co-exist in the political sphere. Nevertheless the movement appears to have gained significant short-term momentum, irrespective of its unconventional nature. The New York Times observed that the movement represented a ‘sprawling rebellion, but running through it is a narrative of impending tyranny. This narrative permeates Tea Party websites, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and YouTube videos’ (Barstow, 2010).

Tribe Communication On-line

Maffesoli (1996) in his work on tribes, highlights the importance of technological developments in the reinforcement of the feeling of tribal belonging. The growth of the internet as a means of marketing communication has provided political movements with the opportunity to establish a meaningful discourse with the voter-consumer, and in this instance between the consumer and the identification of the brand. Shirky (2009, 102) sees all web pages as ‘latent communities’ which have the potential to develop into active ‘communities of practice’. Cova and Cova (2002, 616) reflect this thinking, bringing to light the need to develop a communal approach,

establishing mutually beneficial compromises between market and society and highlighting the internet as a powerful tool to facilitate the emotional experience of tribe members.

Similarly the use of the internet to create a consumer oriented market was fundamental to the creation, branding and authenticity of the Tea Party. After Santelli voiced his frustration at the financial bailout on television, others who were alienated by financial reforms created the roots of an internet movement which would gain its own momentum and act as the primary vehicle through which the brand would be manufactured and marketed. Keli Carender had created, through her online blog, the foundations for protests against government intervention, but had chosen a brand name, Porkulus Protest, which did not capture the feeling of the malcontents appropriately (McGrath, 2010). Following Santelli's 'rant', the web presence and dissemination of understanding about the movement spread rapidly, with many of the major Tea Party groups entertaining web space as the primary focus for organization, meetings, protest schedules and the sharing of their political messages. At the face-to-face meetings of Tea Party members time was ascribed to teaching 'fired-up newbies practical skills, such as using Facebook and Twitter to spread the word' (Hopkins, Mahanta and Poulson, 2010). While major campaigns at state and presidential level had sought to use the web to facilitate and access voters through other means alongside the mainstream conventional media, the Tea Party, in its hostility to establishment forces saw the web and the Fox network as the primary means through which to access its voting bloc as outsiders to the political mainstream. This however ensured that the marketable base of the movement was narrow, and confirms its position as a product oriented political movement – able to change emphasis on the political agenda only within distinct ideological constraints, but not in a position to re-

brand itself or move easily across the political spectrum to attract new recruits from the political centre.

Aaker (2000, 264) asserts that when a brand develops a relationship with the consumer, they are more likely to 'speak to others about the brand, discussing merits and defending shortcomings'. This approach only works if there is an understanding of brand identity and purpose and associated support of the brand and its values. The goal for brands is to develop what has been described as a 'cult following', creating consumers so loyal and integral to the brand's meaning and expression that they become almost evangelical in their thinking. The Tea Party witnessed the collectivising of alienation by disparate groups on the right wing of the political spectrum, developing a loyal following akin to their own 'tribe'. With a movement as diverse as the Tea Party, in terms of its national organization, issues of self-identification came into play, with an expansive understanding of the Tea Party's aims and objectives evident in 2009-2010, as witnessed by the range of groups which aligned themselves under its ideological banner.

Market Positioning and Longevity

Atkin (2004, xix) describes a cult brand as 'a brand for which a group of customers exhibit a great devotion or dedication. Its ideology is distinctive and it has a well-defined and committed community. It enjoys exclusive devotion and its members often become voluntary advocates'. In theory, it would appear that adopting this approach would enable political movements to engage with current and potential supporters, involving them in both the creation and exercising of the brand experience. This form of consumer empowerment would enable political movements to validate brand activity through increased levels of engagement, alleviating any doubts over the

movements authenticity and integrity. This interpretation is supported by Bekin et al. (2007) who suggest that consumer voters operate within a communal context where they feel part of an imagined community of like minded people, even if their actions are individually organised.

There are difficulties branding a product-oriented political party such as the Tea Party, as the behaviour of the members needs to be controlled and guided to reflect the core principles of the party. However, a market-oriented approach faces a bigger problem due to a focus on voter satisfaction. This can lead to an unclear ideology, a lack of vision and in the case of the Clinton Presidency in the 1990s, a vacuum of policies (Lees-Marshment, 2009). Potential problems can then arise as successful branding requires the communication of a clear belief system, a set of values that provide the voter-consumer with an integral understanding of who the party are, which is often lacking in a market-oriented party as they are striving to meet voter needs rather than communicating established party ideals. Despite its lack of leadership, the Tea Party has a distinct focus, using marketing to identify voters and persuade them their beliefs are right, thus providing its followers with a clear ideological locus, typical of a product-oriented party.

In the absence of any one political leader to encapsulate the brand this bedrock of dedicated activists becomes all the more important. The emergence of the movement was an imagined grassroots rebellion, replete with historical precedence, elements of nostalgia and a loose coalition of highly motivated individuals. In part its brand became its identity as an anti-establishment force, railing against conventional political practice and the concept of the need for leadership, yet able to market itself effectively against more conventional political party machinery and marketing techniques. It must be acknowledged however, that with short-term populist gains,

often experienced by consumer led brand exercises, there may be a lack of a long-term focus which can be detrimental to future stability. The lack of a concentrated and sustained market strategy can lead to a lack of direction, fragmentation and the erosion of group links. This dilemma with such a consumer facing approach is one that must be acknowledged to sustain the longevity of the brand strategy, and in part provides credence to Obama's view of the Tea Party as a short-term minor distraction.

Participation branding

Whilst traditional marketing typically utilises above-the-line methods for brand communication, a concept devised by Tjaco Walvis in *Branding with Brains* (2010) suggests that adopting a two way conversation instigates a relationship with the consumer that can lead to a stronger brand identity, an approach that appears to embrace both the consumer tribes philosophy and the emergent Tea Party movement. His research has neuro-scientific underpinnings, demonstrating that participatory branding facilitates the process by which new brain cells are created and retained, improving the chance of a brand being remembered and meaningful. He asserts that consumer interaction is necessary for branding to be truly successful, the mobilising of mass groups being essential when attempting to give a popular identity to a brand. To instigate consumers' participation in branding platforms you need to develop relationships, have consumers engaging in the brand whilst having meaningful exchanges. This consumer involvement can lead to the development of brand advocates, a form of influencer marketing. This is supported by Michel (1996) who developed the term 'prosumer'. He suggests consumers are not passive receptors and by enabling them, involving them in the brand, they are likely to show higher levels of satisfaction and ultimately, brand loyalty.

Walvis (2010:153) defines five common drivers of participation, which aid in an understanding of the significance of the Tea Party's creation as a grass roots populist movement:

1. The desire to have things our own way
2. To express status and confirm our identity
3. To enjoy the experience and be entertained
4. The desire to connect, to be a part of a 'community'
5. The desire to contribute

Despite the potential consumers have for willing participation, a strategy for involvement must ensure there is an open dialogue among those who might be drawn to identify with a movement and the experience is relevant and rewarding, either emotionally or functionally. The Tea Party position is particularly instructive in this instance, presenting both a consolidation of existing theory of group membership alongside challenges to existing assumptions. The drivers of participation work effectively in understanding how and, in part, why the Tea Party was formed and what its brand means. With the perceived implosion of the Republican party in 2008 there was an emotive expression of identity among those on the disaffected right, an identity crisis that could be overcome by mobilizing from below rather than looking to a candidate to lead from above. In understanding why people joined the Tea Party movement, there was an identification between individuals who claimed to have undergone a 'profound private transformation' and were 'bracing for tyranny' (Barstow, 2010). The mass meetings, internet forums and social use of the internet

created an involved experience where the producers of the movement were also its prime consumers, and with the shock election win of Scott Brown in Massachusetts, the contribution that mobilization could bring gave tangible and immediate initial rewards (Powell, 2010).

The Tea Party movement, branding and consumer tribes

Participation, and the motivation to participate and engage in the creation of a brand is evidently a key element in the legitimacy and credibility of brand identity. Walvis (2010, 174) suggests that there are 7 elements which underpin an effective participation strategy and assist in the branding of a consumer tribe – what these are and how they integrate with the emergence of the Tea Party movement is addressed below.

Customer goals. Addressing the basic needs of the customers to engage them: a populist reaction against Obama in the face of financial bailout plans

Proposition. A statement of overall advantage that people gain from brand participation: personal financial control and the resurrection of historic American values

Time. Specify a time frame: the 2010 congressional elections and a longer term aim to oust establishment figures supportive of state/federal intervention

Costs. The consumer investment in terms of time, effort or money: donations/ attending meetings, blogs, on-line forums

Rewards. Must provide intermediate rewards: participation drivers such as social and political association with an ongoing movement that acts as an anti-Obama beacon

Catalyst. Arouse a customer's curiosity: communicate the downfalls of the opposition and promise an alternative. The creation of a movement spurred by those who claim to have previously had little activist involvement in politics or to have been adversely affected by Obama's economic and health policies

Scoreboard. Measure progress. No. of members/ no. of web hits/ no. of people at meetings/ media tracking: amount of editorial coverage, ability to influence the 2010 election races and observable mobilization of consumers through public meetings and web participation

Walvis' measures assists in giving a direction to the means through which political movements can develop brand strength and consumer participation. The exchange of value between the political movement is observable, granting, particularly in this type of example, the Tea Party movement an internal dynamic which fuels the brand and self-reinforces its importance in politics.

The conventional approach to political branding focuses on the goal of winning elections and ultimately gaining control of government. In the process there is often tension between communicating the party ideology and abandoning policies to demonstrate a broader appeal (Lees-Marshment 2009). Marketing to the masses may cause problems when trying to communicate specific policies and can lead to a lack of understanding about the party position. In the case of the UK 2010 General

Election, the parties often resorted to strategic attacks on the opposition via the media and above-the-line marketing vehicles rather than marketing their beliefs and policies. This led to confusion in the mind of the voters, were they voting for the party with the best policies or for the party with the most efficient marketing machine. The simplicity of the product-oriented consumer facing Tea Party lends strength to its authenticity as a tribe movement with a consumer led clarity of ideological position and intent.

Selling the Movement

A core aspect of political marketing is the communication of the values of the brand and how those values are in turn received by the consumer. O'Shaughnessy suggests that the free media are important in the marketing of political ideas, and that it is the 'new communications media that have energised political pace' and accelerated the ability of the political producer to get material into the public domain (O'Shaughnessy 2001, 1050-51). The creation of a number of political movements and the generation of political ideas are often attributable to media interpretation and involvement. Increasingly, in order to avoid the scrutiny and glare of the mass media industry and perceptions of slant and bias, the internet and new media are being employed to disseminate and market ideas unadulterated by external factors. The Tea Party has utilised these in conjunction with the support of conventional conservative leaning television networks to sell its product.

The Tea Party movement corresponds to the product oriented party theory, where the political product is rooted in an ideological position and generally will not move to try to alter or accommodate other consumers. Rather, it seeks to attract

consumers to its position on account of the merits of the ideological argument or platform (Reeves, de Chernatony and Carrigan 2006, 423). This product placement within the political market is important in aiding in an analysis of the nature of the dissemination of the Tea Party brand. The brand itself, as posited earlier was largely created by its consumers, to replicate and embody their political angst. In this context it was unadulterated and perceived as a genuine reflection of the emotions of its creators. Bolt argues, 'To be authentic, brands must be disinterested; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties within an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value' (Bolt 2002, 83). There is added value here too. O'Cass asserts that consumer satisfaction should be increased if the voter has a sense of being part of a politically responsive institution (O'Cass 1996, 39). Pulling these issues together it is clear that the Tea Party movement entailed in its creation, in its authenticity and in its value to its consumers as the embodiment of an unadulterated product that would satisfy political discontent in the wake of Obama's election. It could be marketed to this end and in contrast to Obama's position of providing inspirational leadership from above, it portrayed itself as a populist movement mobilized from the grassroots.

The selling of the Tea Party movement relied on new media outlets, internet dispersal of its mandate and mainstream reporting of the Tea Party as a political force in 2010. Garry Younge claimed that 'This movement's leadership is in the media' (Younge, 2010). The main player appeared to be the Fox network, in particular its fiery presenter Glenn Beck. Beck's platform and ambition was to replicate the feelings entertained in America in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 atrocities, titling his objective the 9/12 project. In conjunction with Beck the position of Sarah

Palin, as a periodic commentator on Fox, allowed a seasoned political figure to influence commentary on ongoing social and political issues. Palin, having resigned her position as Governor of Alaska, and Beck, having no constituency beyond Fox viewers to account to, were perfectly positioned to act as unanointed spokespersons to capture discontent. Having positions within Fox allowed for an easy celebration of the Tea Party mandate with a conventional communication of its attributes, utilization of social media and legitimization of the brand.

Conclusion

Marketing as a discipline is evolving with an emphasis on the co-creation and co-existence of value, relationships and connectivity (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). As a result, political parties are recognising the need to reflect and adapt to these changes, adopting new approaches and technologies into their marketing strategies. Although there has been a growth of marketing models in political contexts, there is still arguably a gap between the consumer-facing approach commercial organisations take as they encourage consumers to actively engage with them, and the marketing policies of political parties in most democracies, which are experiencing declining party membership (Mair & van Biezen, 2001).

While brand management is an important facet for political parties in the modern age, replete with political consultants and advertising agencies, consumer motivated brand creation offers an alternative contemporaneous example when evaluating political branding within the realm of political marketing (Smith and French 2009, 210-11). The role of the consumer, at the heart of the brand process, allows an enhanced appreciation of the brand as an explanation of the generation and emotional value of a movement, as opposed to simply the label of a movement. It

improves an understanding of brand identity and those who generate it, and the application of theory to the creation of the Tea Party gives a greater insight into modern American politics (Needham 2006, 179). In many respects the Tea Party brand defies convention. It is a movement which gains support in opinion polls, and this in turn gives authenticity and legitimacy to the value of the brand for those who are instrumental in its creation. It has marketed itself as a political force in a period when party brands across the political spectrum lack contemporary resonance and are perceived as entrenched. In the absence of a sophisticated or centralised political marketing strategy the strength of the consumer created and led brand, with active participation, is significant in understanding the movement's success and resonance. It has created a niche market based on grass roots identification, reflecting a brand identity subject to individual interpretation and involvement. Each consumer has had, and through the web continues to have, the opportunity to contribute to the growth and development of that brand as a participator in a consumer tribe.

The future impact of the Tea Party remains unclear. Whether it can maintain a viable presence in a period when the economic downturn is abated is a core point in understanding its long-term viability as a political movement. In terms of marketing it has produced a brand which has enticed participants from a range of areas to identify strongly on common grounds. In the event of a changed environment whether the disparate groups will return to their initial consumer positions occupied before the Tea Party emerged will test the true emotional value of the brand. Nevertheless the success enjoyed by the Tea Party is instructive in shaping a new form of political brand, one which is devoid of a centralized strategy, one without an individual political leader, and one which in the absence of both is particularly difficult to nullify.

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