

Looking Back: The Evolution of Political Marketing in U.S. Presidential Campaigns

Maria Khan, mak4v@mtmail.mtsu.edu

Cheryl Ward, Cheryl.ward@mtsu.edu

Abstract

As the U.S. presidential election approaches, political marketing strategies are at an all-time high. The election of President Barak Obama showed that political marketing is critical to success in a presidential campaign. President Obama's successor will be determined based on how effectively he or she engages the American public in an effort to win votes. Much of the candidates' success in winning votes depends on how well their campaign is run and the impact of their political marketing strategy. This paper explores the evolution of political marketing strategy and looks back at some key marketing elements of earlier presidential campaigns.

As early as the 19th century, politicians inserted ads into newspapers to garner voter awareness (Lees-Marshment 2001). As technology modernized, so did marketing strategies (Eisenschitz 2010). The innovation of radio led to radio ads; the creation of television led to TV ads. In 1952, Dwight Eisenhower was the first presidential candidate to rely primarily on TV to further his campaign (Newman 2002).

The first mass media campaign was implemented in 1960 in the John F. Kennedy vs. Richard Nixon election. Until this point, mass media was used only by companies competing for consumer goods. According to Bruce Newman, "this was the beginning of the modernization of marketing in political context" (Newman 2002, p. 3). Political strategists began following in the footsteps of Wall Street (Scammell 1999). As branding and positioning became more important in marketing consumer products, politicians quickly learned to 'brand' themselves. Reagan was one of the first to actively brand use this strategy, ensuring that every time he was seen on stage during his 1980 campaign, he stood in front of an American flag (Newman, 2002).

The 1988 election between George Bush, Sr. and Michael Dukakis was a landmark campaign; it was the first to initiate the use of negative campaigning. Bush made negative statements about Dukakis using a strategy known as "positioning yourself via re-positioning your competition" (Butler 1994, p. 17). The statements were made in an attempt to make himself look better by pointing out his opponent's flaws instead of focusing on himself. Bill Clinton's campaign was known for his "war room" headquarters, a high tech nerve room that integrated data into strategy

development. From a marketing viewpoint, the goal of this war room was to transform Bill Clinton into a service that the Democratic party could “sell” (Newman 2002).

Obama’s successful campaign came from developing a narrative; the equivalent of “positioning” a product. Voters need to understand what each candidate stands for and associate them with a “brand” in their mind; Obama positioned himself as “change”. He did this so well that it even worked outside the United States. One study found that when 1000 students in Saudi Arabia were asked what word they first thought of when they heard the word “change,” 73% of them said Obama (Newman 2012, p. 35).

Today, companies utilize analytics, consumer perception and marketing strategies to get a candidate from point A to point B. Politicians must have a mix of strategies to appeal to all demographics (Wring 1999). It’s important to integrate both digital and traditional forms of political marketing in order to increase voter conversion and/or retention. Traditional touchpoints such as direct mail, phone banking, and canvassing are still essential tools for reaching specific demographics, especially the senior population which typically has high voter turnout. E-mail marketing and social media channels continue to grow in importance. E-mails are used primarily as a channel to generate funds for expenses. However, politicians must be careful not to overuse to the point of annoying prospective donors. Social media is an important tool for reaching younger demographics. Campaigns also use the analytical capabilities of social media platforms to understand how voters are interacting with the candidates (Newman 2012). Finally, the importance of media and public relations in politics is perhaps the most important tool in political marketing strategy (Baines 2002). Having your candidate consistently in the news increases their brand recognition amongst voters. Candidates strive to balance media exposure in a way in which they appear relatable to voters (Saturday Night Live appearances) but also maintain their professionalism (National debates CNN Fox News). Given that today’s political world, and its leaders, is continuously analyzed, politicians must successfully “brand” themselves if they hope to win the votes of the American public. And the office to which they aspire.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This could easily be used to generate student discussion involving the political environment, the election process, and the role of marketing strategy in branding politicians.

Author Information:

Maria Khan is a Business Solutions Architect at Ennovio Group and a marketing instructor at Middle Tennessee State University.

Cheryl Ward is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Middle Tennessee State University.

TRACK: Non-Profit