

HOW TO ELECT A PRESIDENT -- OR GET A CLIENT

What the Obama campaign can teach us about marketing

If, as a marketer, you've ever been involved in a political campaign, then you know that a political campaign is simply another form of marketing.

An analysis of the first Clinton campaign for the presidency, with James Carville's core message of "*It's the economy, stupid,*" made that point very clearly. It was a classic case of *positioning*. But even that battle was merely a prelude to the campaign that elected Barack Obama – which was, as well, an inspiring use of positioning. The campaign's message, based on a carefully devised position, was supported by a number of highly focused elements. More of positioning further on.

Both campaigns were won by little known candidates against better known opponents. Both candidates were unlikely – for their youth and limited experience, and, in Obama's case with a racial consideration and narrow elective experience. Both candidates had formidable opponents -- Clinton had a well-known and experienced George H. W. Bush, and Obama faced a popular war hero in John McCain. Both Clinton and Obama won with superior marketing and organizational skills.

While there are obvious differences between a presidential election and a program to sell professional services – fund raising and door-to-door canvassing for votes, for example -- there are sufficient parallels between the two to allow for a profitable comparison. If we fully understand the successful political process, we have the blueprint for the successful marketing campaign. The Obama campaign, with its discipline and focused positioning, fund raising, and organizational skills, is an example of a nearly perfect lesson for professional services marketers.

At the same time, the success of both the political and professional services marketing campaign relies not merely on the mechanics of marketing, but on the strategy. No political campaign, nor any marketing campaign, is successful solely on the basis of a mere conglomeration of activities. The mechanics – the tools of marketing – succeed only when used in strategic concert with one another.

A political campaign has six basic elements, all of which have parallels (if not always copies) in a successful marketing campaign...

1. *The candidate*, who, it is presumed, has qualifications and some cache that warrants the candidacy.
2. *The electorate*, which, while generally diverse, has some reason for considering one candidate over another, based on concerns and the perception that one candidate is better able to address those concerns.
3. *The message*, which addresses the concerns of the electorate, in a way that offers a solution to those concerns.
4. *The organization*, which disseminates the message, raises funds, and gets out the vote.
5. *The research*, predominantly polling, which helps determine the concerns of the electorate, and monitors the efficacy of the strategy – often daily during the campaign.
6. *The strategy and execution* of the plan of the campaign, from its beginning to election

day

In marketing, we have...

1. *The firm*, which, like the candidate, is the product to be sold
2. *The prospective client*, which like the electorate, is faced with specific needs, desires, wishes, and opportunities.
3. *The message*, which is the information about the firm and its services, specifically addresses the concerns of the target audience, and is the selling message to the prospect.
4. *The organization*, which is the marketing structure that brings the message to the audience and executes the marketing program..
5. *The research*, which supplies the information needed to appropriately shape the selling message and strategy to meet the needs of the prospective clientele.
6. *The strategy*, which is the structured plan to inform, persuade, and convert the prospect to a client. It brings together all of the elements to produce a client.

Obviously, a political campaign is more complex in the design and execution of these factors. It has a broader target market than does a marketing campaign for a law or accounting firm. In a political campaign, there are a great many people involved, both as targets and, ultimately, as part of a marketing organization. A political campaign seeks to persuade people to harness their broad spectrum of hopes and wishes to the promises of the candidate – to fall into line behind a candidate. A professional services campaign deals with individuals or corporations facing specific needs and problems. Most often, their problems fall within the boundaries of the law, their legal or financial needs, or problems and opportunities requiring specific expertise in the law or accounting. While the voter is offered a few choices from among a few candidates, the prospective client's needs may be fulfilled by any number of qualified professionals and professional firms, which means that the prospective client must choose from among any number of firms.

A political campaign deals with the personality, credibility, and charisma of the candidate. A marketing campaign for a professional services firm deals with a firm with specific credentials. The candidate has many more facets and nuances, from a marketing point of view, than the professional firm. The need to attract voters, and to move them to the polling booth, requires a vast and well coordinated effort. The jargon calls it “boots on the ground” – the number of people actually out on the streets soliciting votes and getting people to polling places.

The candidate must have, or appear to have, sufficient substance and qualities to offer solutions to the prospective voters. The professional firm must have qualities and skills that offer potential to assist a client and serve the clients needs.

The political candidate must have a personality that projects competence, integrity, intelligence, credibility, and experience. So too must a firm project these qualities, based upon skills and experience.

It's in four areas that the successful political campaign best informs the professional services marketing campaign...

1. *Research*. Political campaigns are sensitive to attitudes that can change daily. For marketing, research, when done well, can fathom a market's needs, concerns, opportunities, and more specifically, a firm's reputation and the market's perception of the firm and its capabilities. This allows a message to be crafted that addresses the needs of the professional's prospective clientele. While many factors may enter into a market's perception of a firm, and alter it, there is a greater opportunity to tune that perception than

- there is for a political candidate. Still, the market's perception of a firm is not to be underrated. The unknown or little known firm has a much harder job in selling itself than does the better known firm.
2. *The firm (candidate)*. The political candidate demands trust in many more areas than does the professional firm. Nevertheless, just as the political candidate must persuade a constituency of a great many capabilities and characteristics, so too must the professional firm project understanding of a prospect's industry and business, and the particular nature of its legal or accounting needs and the ability to serve them. Being a good and competent firm, and not projecting that fact in terms of the needs of the prospective clientele, will gain few clients. The days when competence alone built a practice are long since gone, in the new competitive environment.
 3. *The message*. The message, which informs, persuades, convinces, and conveys all of the factors that ultimately win or lose the vote – of the client. When the message is amorphous, confused, or not relevant to the needs of its audience, there is little likelihood that the candidate – or the firm – will win. The cardinal error, for both the candidate and the firm, is selling what you want to sell, and not what the target audience wants to buy. This mistake, as well as many others, is what defeated Senator McCain.
 4. *The strategy*, which is the plan that defines the market – for both the vote and the service – fathoms its needs, wants and opportunities, and determines the tools that best convey to the target the ability to serves those needs.

While all of the elements of a campaign contribute to success or failure in both an election and a marketing campaign, it is from the message – how it was determined, how it was shaped, how it was used and conveyed by the Obama campaign – that we learn how best to do it in marketing professional services. And while it's true that in an election campaign the winner is usually the candidate with best organization to raise funds, rally voters, and get them to the polls, it is the message that generates the excitement and trust that ultimately wins the campaign. It is the message that builds trust, and builds the foundation for a working relationship. In professional services marketing, the strategy and organization to move the message directly to the target (in other words, selling and other practice development tools), is what then ultimately brings the prospective client into the fold. So it is with politics, so it is with professional services marketing.

That message – how it is crafted and delivered -- is called *positioning*.

Positioning is often misconstrued as an arbitrary determination of how an organization wants to be perceived. That approach isn't positioning -- it's wishful thinking. The effective position must be determined in terms of what the target audience wants and needs, and not alone what the candidate or selling organization wants to sell.

Positioning is, first of all, a process. It begins by understanding and defining consumer expectations. This is best determined by research, as it was so aptly in the Obama campaign. At the time of the election, remember, the primary concern of the electorate was the economy, and who could best solve the nation's economic problems.

Then the candidate – or firm – must figure out how to meet those concerns. Positions must be flexible, and responsive to the changing needs of the target audience. At the beginning of the campaign – the fight for the candidacy – the major problem was ending the war in Iraq. At issue, as well, was the perceived need for changing the nature of the administration -- which all candidates on both sides made much of. (this fact canceled the ability to change as a major factor in candidate delineation.) Obama distinguished his campaign with the slogan, "Yes we can!", which enhanced his credibility as a candidate. After the primary battles, which Obama won, the perceived major problem was the economy,

which had begun to explode and was at the beginning of a serious downturn. While Senator McCain was telling the electorate that the economy was in good shape, he was offering diffused messages, and focusing on personal attacks. Obama, on the other hand, built a position on recognizing the economic situation, focusing on it by offering specific and rational proposals (which McCain did not), and building confidence ("Yes we can!") that he could help resolve it.

In other words, Obama's campaign asked, *"What fact or value can we communicate to the market that would address those expectations and concerns about the economy?"*

Given the defined position, which was determined not by his campaign's notion of how they wanted to be perceived, but by directly understanding what was most important at that time to the electorate – the target audience. All positions other than the economy were relegated to the back burner. Every message, every speech, every piece of literature, was drawn from that singular position. It was used to raise funds and to activate the staff and volunteers. And that position, helped raise the money – a record amount – to energize the electorate, and to win the election.

There are many lessons to be drawn by professional services marketers from a successful election campaign – perhaps none more cogent than from the Obama campaign. And while there are differences between an election and a professional services marketing campaign, it is the parallels that inform both.

It is significant, as well, that in a political campaign, the loser -- regardless of his or her positives and negatives -- lacks discipline, strategy, and a cohesive and relevant message – a position that matters. And so it is, too, in the failed professional services marketing campaign.

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