

“Change” “Yes we can”

A marketing case study on Barack Obama's US presidential campaign

By Alyson Mar, FCIM, Chartered Marketer

Foreword

How powerful are these simple and direct messages.

The election of Barack Hussein Obama as the first African American to be President of The United States of America has made history worldwide.

The day of election results announcement, around noon time on Wednesday, November 5, 2008, coincided with the CIM HK Monthly Social Gathering in the evening. I seized the opportunity of this event to share with guests my personal views on the campaign leading to Obama's victory from a marketing perspective. Of course, there are many other important elements in the campaign in Obama's route to the presidency, and I am not an expert to analysis this case on a political level. However, it makes an interesting case study to follow the campaign by reviewing all the marketing philosophies and promotional strategy.

Introduction

Obama's win as the 44th President of the United States in the history of the country's 232 years, could be considered as a landslide victory. Having monitored his campaign for US Presidency during the past 20 months, his victory is not merely a miracle or a case of “being there at the right place at the right time”. Obama's success is contributed to a carefully crafted political campaign, whereby numerous marketing elements can be identified. It is also a good case to demonstrate the power of marketing in practice, and marketing professionals have a lot to learn from this campaign. I have heard that Obama has been voted as Marketer of the Year by the US advertising industry.

Like most successful marketing campaigns, the following elements are observed in Obama's campaign:

- 1) SWOT Analysis
- 2) Identify Target Market
- 3) Strategic Brand Management and Positioning
- 4) Integrated Marketing Communication Strategies
- 5) Implementation & Control

SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis helps marketers to build on strengths and capture opportunities; rectify or reverse weaknesses and threats. In the case of Barack Obama, the followings have been observed:

Strengths:

- Obama's charisma is full of wit, charm, energetic, positive and youthful.
- In terms of personal image, he is well educated and a well-behaved family man.
- Background and upbringing make him to be an average minority citizen in the States, but never emphasised on his ethnic background in his lobbying speeches.
- Skilled orator and lawyer with strong communication skills to attract attention.
- Before the long campaign, he was a nobody and got nothing to lose for forging ahead facing strong contenders like Hilary Clinton and John McCain.
- Always well prepared for his speeches, which he delivered with full confidence.
- He has demonstrated to the voters that he has the quality to be a great leader.
- He is proactive and good at strategic thinking because he knows how to put up a strong team of experts to develop the campaign for him.
- He understands his "customers" and knows what to give them to satisfy their current needs and expectations.

Weaknesses:

- Obama is an African American although his mother was an American.
- Began his campaign as a virtual unknown.
- Obama does not have any foreign affairs experience.
- A relatively short political career: Obama served on the Illinois Senate between 1997 and 2004; then elected US Senator in November 2004.
- Obama defeating Hilary Clinton might upset ladies voters.

Opportunities:

- American people's concerns must be addressed to draw voter support and in this economic turmoil, economy affects everybody. Obama had been consistent in addressing this issue during the campaign speeches.
- He is perceived by the people to be good at economic areas based on his past academic study and his work in the community organizations in Chicago.
- High level of discontent among Americans on outgoing administration, e.g. handling of economy and war. Obama kept on repeating to the voters that it's time for change.
- Opponent, John McCain, emphasised on his past involvement in Vietnam war, hence portrayed as out of touch with public sentiment and was unable to address on current critical economic issues.
- Media and public challenged McCain's ability to make critical decisions by inviting Sarah Palin as candidate for Vice President. The wrong choice upset a lot of female voters and enabled them to look at Obama differently.

Threats:

- Is the "average American" ready to accept a non-Caucasian President?
- Obama's inexperience in handling foreign affairs was being challenged and later he invited Joe Biden, a veteran in foreign issues, as his partner candidate for Vice President.
- Older and more conservative white Americans are more inclined to vote for the Republicans.
- Middle class people did not want to change their complacent style of living.
- The numbers of voters and turn-out rate were low.
- Economic turmoil affects the whole world. The international community casts doubts on next US President's ability to stabilise the US economy.

- His middle name, Hussein, had been a target of his association with the Muslim world.

Identify Target Market

Following careful consideration, the following target segments have been identified:

- Obama and his team are very clear who their supporters are.
- Youth, particularly those below 30 years of age.
- Swing states and swing voters.
- The minority communities.
- Knowing the target groups, Obama and his team have provided hope to fit the customers' needs.

Strategic Brand Management and Positioning

Marketers today are urging for brands to take on personalities for it to better relate to the target audience. What would happen if the brand is in fact a person?

- As political campaign took on marketing persona, Barack Obama was developed to become a personal brand.
- He has become an icon, a star and an idol with lots of followers.
- Fresh brand appearance, facilitated by clear and crisp theme and slogan which were consistent throughout the campaign.
- Core value of brand is "Change" - brings new hope and opportunities; and "Yes we can" demonstrates a strong action with simple and clear message for the people.
- "Change" is exactly what the frustrated people wants, and "Yes We can" leads to a promise by the people to be engaged in making this change.
- Obama's can-do attitude makes him a brand that delivers positive messages to pull people's together.
- After creating and developing a clear and healthy personal brand, Obama and his team have extended the brand to the swing voters.
- Being a young and energetic brand, Obama is portrayed as the next generation of American leader.

Integrated Marketing Communications Strategies

- Obama is a good orator who can effectively get his messages across in public speeches or debates.
- "Change" and "Yes We Can" are simple, high impact, easy-to-remember, easy-to-catch-on theme and slogan.
- The campaign using these two taglines brought about hope in current times of global turmoil, inspiring and motivating the Americans to embrace in change. And the change can only be achieved by the People.
- In a country that has been increasingly divided, e.g. by wealth distribution, opinions on war, gender and racial equalities, etc., calling on people to be united is a powerful message to touch their hearts.
- Leverage on Web 2.0 technologies, like Facebook or MySpace, reaching out to the young target groups and non-voters in the past, engaging their involvement,

not only in registering their voting rights, but also as volunteer workers for his campaign.

- A large proportion of the campaign money was generated on-line with small donations below US\$100, but from millions of low-income groups.
- Strong media presence and his numerous visits helped to lobby for supports in key swing states.
- The above initiatives helped to shape the people's attitude towards Obama – from unknown to underdog, then to vote him in as future president.

Implementation and Control

- Implementation and control is important in any campaign. Analyse the most update results, and make adjustments to rectify the failures in a proactive manner.
- Choosing the right partner as the Vice President after defeating Hilary Clinton, a very strong opponent, was a critical decision. He chose Biden, who is a veteran in foreign affairs, to complement his inexperience in this area. Furthermore, Biden is a Caucasian.
- Obama's team had identified the potential in the swing states. He needed to establish himself to the voters there that he had the caliber to deliver the changes.
- For the conservative Republic states, the increase of new and young voters, might swing the number of votes to his favour.
- As a result, over 130 million US citizens turned out to cast their ballots, representing two-third of registered voters. This is one of the highest turnouts in the past century.
- 68% of voters in 18-24 age group and 69% of 25-29 voted for Obama.

Conclusion

Other key factors for success:

- STP Theory – Segmenting, targeting and positioning
- 4P's (Product, Price, Place and Promotion) to convert them into 4C's (Customer solution, Cost to customer, Convenience and Communication)
- A perfect marketing mix to position himself as a capable world leader

Through the SWOT analysis, Obama has been able to capitalise on his strengths and opportunities to his competitive advantage, while effectively turnaround his weaknesses and threats. Having built a clear, simple and effective brand image for Obama, the communications campaign effectively shaped public perception that Obama is the US President who can bring about real change to lead the US (and the rest of the world) out of the current global economic slump.

Obama and his political strategists have put on a spectacular campaign which was not just about electing a new president. The campaign engaged the American people, whether you are white, black, Asian, Latino, Mexican or other ethnic backgrounds. All these people come together to make this campaign a success. Between the two candidates, Obama has demonstrated that he is the stronger leader, with the people of America listening and supporting to him.

If the political campaign of Obama is to be analysed by the classic marketing 4P's, 5P's, 8P's, etc., People has been the most important 'P'. By leveraging on the expertise of a team of political and marketing strategists, Obama has been able to build on his competitive advantage and change people's behaviour. Finally, he could shape people's perception by electing him to be the 44th President of the United States of America.

Whether Obama is going to be the right choice to turnaround America or not? That needs time to be seen. And it's not the intention of the writer to comment. However, looking at the victory of Obama by putting in strong marketing elements, he will continue practicing marketing in his term.

Do you still doubt that marketing is just for sales, advertising, etc.? Every industry needs good marketing. Good marketing practice can play an important role in facing the current economic tsunami, particularly in Hong Kong. The case of Barack Obama's campaign has proven that even politics need good marketing?

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