

Design strategy of obamas campaign

[People](#), [Barack Obama](#)



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To what extent did the design strategy of Obama's campaign contribute to his mass popularity and victory in 2008 followed by a radical shift in public opinion by the end of 2010?

Interview the creative director of the campaign to gain a concise overview of what was required of the design team. Find out any specific communication strategies that might have been imposed on them and explore the reasons behind their design choices (colors, fonts, use of imagery, layouts etc). Investigate if any strategic marketing techniques were used to promote Obama the same way a mass consumption product would be sold.

Research all journals, dissertations and articles relating to the topic of political campaign strategies, design strategies, and communication techniques.

Search news articles for pundit reviews and opinions of campaign success and current backlash.

Conduct a thorough analysis of the ' Designing Obama' book that contains the entire design strategy used by Scott Thomas.

Due to the fact that this is a very recent event the amount of detailed and concise publications based on the topic are scarce. The bulk of the research will have to rely on Internet sources of news articles, pundit blogs and a search for relevant dissertations published by the academic community.

To what extent did the design strategy of Obama's campaign contribute to his mass popularity and victory in 2008 followed by a radial shift in public opinion by the end of 2010?

Answered via the following arguments:

- Social landscape of America conducive to political advertising
- Cult of personality formation via harnessing of mass media
- Misleading and subliminal influence of design
- Expectations of the public too high from ambiguous and contradictory communication

America in 2008 was not the beacon of hope it had once been. There was rising unemployment and a financial crisis that had brought the country's economy crashing down. Poverty was increasing rapidly and people were loosing homes due to foreclosures. The country was massively unhappy that America was still participating in the Afghanistan conflict and to top it all, there had been 8 years under the Bush administration that had seen its lowest approval ratings of all time (below 40%).

Running parallel to this was an America that had become so utterly saturated by marketing that this was one of the only facets of communication people would respond to (research to prove this?). Describe the average american experience? (how often they see ads, how well they respond). The huge obsession with celebrity culture in combination with the

growing global social networks had made it too easy to give rise to a cult of personality.

America was begging for change at this point, which left them susceptible to intelligent marketing and design strategies. It was against this backdrop that in the run up to the 2008 Presidential Election support and enthusiasm for Obama was increasing at a dramatic rate culminating in a frenzy by the time of his victory and inauguration in January 2009.

From the very beginning of the campaign the design team knew they would have to subdue the public perception of Obama's inexperience via his visual presentation. The strategy used was to implement 'the timeless...he's already president feel' (vimeo) into his brand image. The use of consistency was vital as 'one thing that design can solve with consistency is [to] establish...a sense of balance...it can also really...give the visual impression that he's incredibly experienced.' (vimeo).

fig1. Expert use of consistency in the visual communication makes Obama seem organized, experienced and competent.

Thomas (2010, p. 78) 'Because of their evocative power, design and branding elements can create a stable bond between voters and the candidate...we wanted to elicit the feeling that he was a familiar figure whose attributes and values they could relate to and trust.'

Talk about logo, consistent branding,

Thomas (2010) ‘ You can use good design and to a certain degree it blurs the lines a bit.’

Another strategy to distract from Obama’s inexperience was to emphasize how historic the campaign was. Rather than simply stating this in the communication the entire aesthetic was designed around old archival materials. ‘ We wanted to pull from imagery of the past to communicate the historic nature of the campaign’ (vimeo).

fig2. Certain information was designed using real historical documents found in local archives for an authentic vintage feel.

This strategy not only highlighted the importance of the campaign but also using imagery that resembled historical documents, like the original declaration of independence, elicited a sense of patriotism and American sentiment, which could have a strong subliminal effect.

‘ A cult of personality arises when an individual uses mass media, propaganda, or other methods, to create an idealized and heroic public image’ (Wikipedia, 2008). By the end of Obama’s campaign it was clear that this was beginning to become reality. Imagery of Obama appeared in galleries, on billboards and around the city as street art or graffiti, the vast majority of it in full support of him. In addition there were huge varieties of Obama merchandise being sold by independent street vendors all over the country. Social networks were buzzing with his name, independent bloggers were watching his every move and grassroots events, using the same Obama visual design for flyers and posters, were happening on a daily basis.

Even though the ‘ visual tapestry of Obama’ that had been weaved across the country was a collaborative effort from hundreds of individual contributors outside the reach of ‘ brand control’, it still maintained high levels of visual consistency. This was due to the highly efficient and transparent branding principles that required only the use of the Obama logo and typeface to make any visual production appear part of the overall marketing strategy.

To a rock solid and seasoned democratic or republican supporter the choice of political candidate would still have been easy. But for a younger or less convicted voter with no solid viewpoint (research suggests there are more and more of these people) they could be susceptible to ‘ communication based on persuasion in which voters, lacking enduring political convictions, are induced to support a particular candidate or party at election time.’ (Swanson, 2004). This would be particularly effective given the cult of personality bestowed upon Obama by the media coverage of him and from his rock star status fuelled by regular endorsements from celebrities and musicians.

fig3. Obama featured in a music video by the black eyed peas that turned his slogan into an anthem

It is possible that due to this ‘ Obama frenzy’ it had become fashionable to be an Obama supporter and the thought of not voting for a candidate that was fresh, young, creative, energetic, and whose very ideals were adorning the city, seemed worthy of ridicule.

“...Cause you’ll be real embarrassed if he won and you wasn’t down with itâ€?. (Chris Rock)

Vote for Obama — making the voting process easy should in practice enable all the people with clear convictions to vote for the candidate they know they want. In reality it allows undecided voters to choose a candidate they may not really believe in but vote anyway via peer pressure, cult of personality, ease of use ‘wht not?’ This results in inaccurate assumptions of public opinion being drawn from the poll.

Transparency of brand — all brand assets available for download so anyone can create visuals that resemble the official Obama brand material. This creates a sense of solidarity with the brand. And the subsequent result is an impression that the brand is literally everywhere as the entire grassroots movement is branded and appears to be part of the overall design strategy.

Boundary destruction — versatility of the logo allows it to be tailored to any group who want to be associated with Obama or simply show their support. The broken boundaries create a sense of solidarity and add to the impression of world wide brand saturation.

In order to allow the global community of artists to contribute, the campaign team initiated the Artists For Obama poster series. According to Thomas (2010, p. 127) ‘[the] idea was to invite artists to participate in the creation of a new kind of campaign poster, one that would be the expression of the individual artist rather than a reiteration of campaign materials’. The first contribution to this initiative was a poster by Shepard Fairey and to many,

his invitation seemed counter intuitive. He is a well-known street artist who has built his fame on defacing public buildings and creating work with huge anti-establishment connotations. His campaign poster has been deemed the most iconic image of Obama ever created, yet it's unclear if the visual of Obama above the word HOPE was intended to be ironic.

fig4. A contrast between Shepard Fairey's previous 'anti-establishment' aesthetic and the Obama poster.

To most people this poster symbolized the revolution that was coming but considering the lost enthusiasm following Obama's presidency the question is if this powerful image created a false anticipation of revolution in the minds of the American people. Thomas (2010) 'I've kind of heard that tone, where...Shepard Fairey's poster...had this very anti-establishment aesthetic that could have played into the minds of those that thought this was going to be a revolution...changing Washington DC from the inside out.'

Since the Obama frenzy has subsided it is clear that the revolution people were hoping for hasn't happened. In an interview with the National Journal, Shepard Fairey commented on his plan to contribute work to help Obama in 2012 but stated 'he couldn't design the same Hope poster today, because the spirit of the Obama campaign hasn't carried over to the Obama presidency.' (Madhani, 2010).

In June 2008 the Obama design team created a seal to be displayed on his lectern that very closely resembled the Presidential seal. This caused controversy in the media and when Steven Heller ask Scott Thomas to name

the most heated design battle of the campaign ' Thomas brought up the infamous " presidential seal" debacle' (Kessler, B. 2008).

fig5. Obama in front of the controversial custom presidential seal with Latin slogan saying ' yes we can'.

Imagery such as Obama standing in front of a ' presidential looking' seal before he is president can have subtle subliminal effects. It implies that he has already won before the election has taken place and can be a powerful persuasive device if used strategically. Sol Sender, the designer of the Obama logo suggested ' although the " presidential seal" was used by the campaign only briefly, seeing Obama-the-candidate standing behind that familiar regal eagle had a lingering effect in the minds of voters' (Kessler, B. 2008). In addition to this the voters have been subject to rock solid consistency in the visual communication that has solidified the Obama brand deep in their subconscious minds.

From the outset of the campaign the three keywords used to inspire the nation were Hope, Change and Progress, which were the three ideas that the American people were so desperately seeking in 2008 Thomas (2010, p. 78)'our strategy would not have worked if Obama's message hadn't rung so true and hadn't resonated so deeply with the American public'. These words however inspiring are somewhat ambiguous unless the exact implementation of each is explained but this was rarely the case when used by Obama. Regardless of this, they became woven into the visual language of the campaign to the point that the word Hope had become synonymous with Obama. A news reporter commented about an Obama rally he

witnessed ‘ Obama almost never got into specifics. It was change, change, save the country, change, yes we can, change’ (Wendel, J. 2008).

people are VERY focused on Obama and don’t really know much about what he stands for(Wendel, J. 2008).

Where are we now?

A downward spiral of disappointment, anger and lost enthusiasm swiftly followed and continued to the end of 2010. Senate elections in November saw the Republicans taking back the House, and many of Obama’s policies of ‘ Change’ were rejected by the American public (most notably the healthcare reform suffered a 59% opposition). In addition to this, his approval rating had fallen from 65% in 2009 to 45% in 2010.

The reason for such a huge turnaround in public opinion after Obama’s monumental success can be attributed to two possibilities. Either the American public developed and overzealous expectation of Obama and his intentions based on the strategic design of the campaign, or they were not as open to ‘ change’ as they seemed to imply. Either way it is clear that something must have caused this huge inversion to occur.

Talk about how it is clear that design contributed to both a distorted view of what the public really wanted and how Obama was perceived to be something more than he actually was in reality.

‘ There were many Americans seduced by the feel good Madison Avenue campaign of Obama, but the trouble with hype is that after all the BS, you

must be able to produce something, four years is a long time to run on hype’(flopping aces)

‘ Independents and Democrats are admitting to themselves that the Obama image [created] is nothing more than an allusion that they wanted to believe, against common sense.’ (flopping aces)

‘ the campaigns are now so intricate and so all consuming that the ability it takes to win a campaign is not the same skill set to govern and are we raising a generation of leaders that can win campaigns but not adequately govern?’ (john steward, daily show).