

Barack obama's political marketing strategy



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Using a country of your choice as an example, critically evaluate if or how political marketing has been applied in political campaigning or governmental communication

Hilary Clinton began her campaign for the Democratic nomination in 2008 in pole position; she was by far the most recognizable name, already had a core block of support at the grass-roots level and from the outset she had access to the greatest funds. Yet it was the young and inexperienced African-American senator for Illinois who began his campaign as a relative unknown who secured the nomination. This essay intends to examine how the Barack Obama team utilised political marketing in order to win the contest.

Specifically, we will analyse three crucial factors of Barack Obama's political marketing strategy. Firstly it will be shown that by embracing the concept of online social networking the Obama campaign vastly increased its ability to reach out to and connect with his supporters. This produced a wide range of positive results, from increased grass-roots mobilization to greater levels of financial support. Next we will demonstrate that the data mining methods used by the Obama team to profile supporters gave the campaign greater efficiency, both in identifying potential voters and maximizing fundraising opportunities. The third decisive element of Barack Obama's political marketing will be shown to be the way in which he was branded; his was the most professional, consistent and aesthetically cohesive branding effort, with a distinctive message that gave him a clear demarcation from his rivals. In short this essay will argue that these three strategies – the concept of social networking, the extensive data mining and the professional branding of Obama – all served to play a decisive role in his victory and provide important, even seminal, lessons for future political marketing strategies.

Marc Ambinder (2008) argues that “ America’s politics have regularly been transformed by sudden changes in the way we communicate” and he goes onto to show how past Presidents have embraced previous communication revolutions; Lincoln exploited the boom in the newspaper industry, Roosevelt’s radio-broadcast fireside chats enabled him to speak directly to the American people, whilst Kennedy’s assured performance against a less than comfortable Nixon in the first televised Presidential debate in American political history helped win the White House. They all understood and exploited these new media better than their opponents. Today’s newest media is of course the internet and Barack Obama’s campaign for the 2008 Democratic nomination has attempted to fully utilise the internet for political marketing purposes. Whilst using the web to reach out to the electorate, raise campaign money and other such activities is nothing new – witness the success of Howard Dean during the 2004 Democratic campaign – what made this campaign unique was the ‘ joining up’ of disparate new-media strands into a comprehensive array of services. The Obama team embraced the concept of internet social networking, as exemplified by sites such as MySpace and Facebook, to a degree that was unsurpassed by any other candidate. So keen were they to incorporate the social networking phenomenon they hired Chris Hughes, one of the original founders of Facebook (Stelter, 2008). The big idea to come from this was that Barack Obama’s internet presence should go further than merely having a website which detailed policies, provided news, allowed donations and so on; rather there should be a network of inter-linked services and tools that enabled supporters to interact with one another and form a virtual community. At the heart of this was the site My. BarackObama. com which acted as a hub for <https://assignbuster.com/barack-obamas-political-marketing-strategy/>

Obama supporters, allowing them to network at a local level with other supporters. In practical terms this meant the establishment of fund-raising events, the mobilization of activists at the micro-level in order to recruit people to do the groundwork of distributing leaflets and knocking on doors. Although the site was established by Obama's campaign team, once set up it became self-perpetuating; fundraisers were being organized at the ground level, with little or no interaction or involvement from upon high. My. BarackObama. com went further than a standard campaign website, which usually allows the politician to connect with their own supporters. Whilst such an approach can be termed as a sort of vertical, or top down communication, My. BarackObama. com facilitated horizontal communication, that is to say that it allowed Barack Obama's supports to communicate with each other, as well as being able to participate in the campaign.. For a candidate such as Obama this new method of engaging with the public via new media presented him as part of the zeitgeist, as 'next generation'; just as John F. Kennedy was seen as the first President to be *of* the 20th Century so Obama is seen as the candidate that best reflects the 21st Century. Aside from all the inherent practical benefits, the adoption of internet social networking methods also dovetailed neatly with Obama's wider political message of self-empowerment. Indeed, the man himself has made this connection, declaring that the qualities that best described his campaign – “openness and transparency and participation” — were ones that “merged perfectly” with the Internet (cited in Cohen, 2008). In fact we could go as far as to say that, in terms of Obama's use of internet-based social networking, *the medium is the message*; My. BarackObama. com is significant not because it details radical policy proposals but rather because <https://assignbuster.com/barack-obamas-political-marketing-strategy/>

of the way in which it facilitates communication and allows for greater interaction and collaborative decentralized participation. In other words, its actual message is not what significant but rather the way in which information is conveyed and the symbiotic relationship that is formed as a result. For example, just the very fact the Barack Obama was *au fait* with 'Web 2.0' ideas and trends such as social networking distinguished him from his rivals.

The aforementioned Chris Hughes, one of the founders of Facebook who joined the Obama team, ensured that My. BarackObama. com stuck to the founding principles that has made Facebook so popular and effective; despite being a large national-based service, it was organized on a local level so users would interact with those in their real-life communities (Stelter, 2008). An Obama supporter in, say, a suburb of Rhode Island, could interact with other in his/her real-life community, events could be organized, they could meet up if they so wished. Indeed many such social events were arranged; in one example Obama supporters gathered together at each other's house to watch a live webcast of their candidate's speech (Kantor, 2007). However the online strategy was designed not merely to facilitate the social lives of Obama supporters but rather to improve grass-roots organisation, as Joe Rospars, Obama's online director explains; " We've tried to orient the tools less as a social network and more as a mobilization network. We're creating opportunities for people to get out there and do things, the campaign is election-outcome oriented" (cited in Stelter, 2008). The practical benefits of adopting the concept of social networking soon became apparent. The New York Times reported that " in some primary and

caucus states, volunteers used the Internet to start organizing themselves months before the campaign staff arrived”(Stelter, 2008). The real gains of Obama’s new media strategy however can be counted in dollars and cents; in April 2008, as the campaign entered a crucial stage, Obama’s teams raised \$31m, whilst Hilary Clinton managed \$20m (Sullivan, 2008). This gave Obama \$38m for the remainder of his campaign, whilst Hilary \$6m for hers (Sullivan, 2008). Such figures should not fool the reader into thinking that Hilary Clinton’s fundraising efforts were in some way ineffective – far from it, as Peter Leyden of the think-tank New Politics Institute explains:

“ What’s amazing is that Hillary built the best campaign that has ever been done in Democratic politics on the old model – she raised more money than anyone before her, she locked down all the party stalwarts, she assembled an all-star team of consultants and she really mastered this top-down, command-and-control type of outfit. And yet she’s getting beaten by this political start-up that is essentially a totally different model of the new politics” (cited in Sullivan, 2008)

This new model was partly influenced by recent changes in the U. S. in laws pertaining to campaign funding. Due to concerns that massive donations by big business to campaign coffers could potentially cause a conflict of interest once a candidate was in office, the maximum amount allow for an individual donation was limited to \$2, 000 (\$2, 300 for the 2008 election). This shifted the emphasis away from the courting of wealthy donors towards attempts to encourage individuals to get their friends, family members and so on to also contribute the maximum donation. This strategy was the one which enable George W. Bush to amass the enormous sums spent on his Presidential bid, <https://assignbuster.com/barack-obamas-political-marketing-strategy/>

through the means of fundraising events and dinners, in which attendees paid considerable sums to rub shoulders with the candidate themselves (Sullivan, 2008). However, Obama's team use of social networking led to two significant consequences in relation to campaign finance. Firstly, social networking created fundraising events by the grass roots supporters themselves, with no input from the candidate necessary. Secondly, rather than seek the maximum \$2,300 from each individual, Obama's team realized that a greater number of smaller donations meant a higher overall contribution. Of the \$31m raised by Obama

in April 2008, almost all of it came from online donors (Sullivan, 2008) and 94% came in donations of \$200 or less (Sullivan, 2008). In comparison, 26% of Hilary Clinton's donations and 13% of John McCain's were under \$200 (Green, 2008). Let us be clear; the amount that Barack Obama has raised online is unprecedented. Howard Dean was feted for raising \$27 million online in 2004. So far, Obama has raised nearly \$200 million (Green, 2008).

A great example of how the 'snowballing effect' of social networking worked to create donations for Barack Obama is given by Joe Erwin (2008):

"A friend I know, who's an Independent voter and who had never made an online campaign contribution, recently went online and donated \$50 to the Obama campaign. Within two minutes she received a thank-you for the contribution and an acknowledgement that someone in Ohio had matched her contribution as a way of also saying thank you. Two minutes after that, she received another e-mail from the campaign asking if she, too, would be willing to match the \$50 contribution of a new donor, and whether her e-mail

address could be shared so that the new donor could thank her for her match. You get the picture.”

The tactic of asking supporters just to give a little was inspired. Not only did it deliver a vast number of donors – over two million (Stelter, 2008).– but as the vast majority did not contribute the maximum amount, Obama was able to continue to ask them for another ‘ little’ donation time and time again as his campaign went on. Furthermore, such a request is one that he can make again once the Presidential race against McCain begins in earnest. As The Times declares, “ This is a money machine unlike any other” (Sullivan, 2008).

Obama’s method of online fundraising meant that it minimized the amount of time he actually had to be present at events and dinners. In February 2008 the Obama campaign raised \$55m (\$45m from the internet) without Barack Obama personally hosting a single fundraiser (Sullivan, 2008). There are always multiple demands on a candidates’ time during a campaign, so the opportunity to spend less time trying to sweet talk people into emptying their wallets and purses and more on working on policy, speeches and suchlike is invaluable. Not only were the demands on the candidates time lessened but the campaign team soon found that fundraising events were springing up spontaneously, independent of any official involvement, as Andrew Sullivan (2008) explains:

“ This spring, many friends who had never previously been interested in politics suddenly told me about their Obama fundraisers. I was stunned by their activism. No one had asked them. They were arranging the parties or

performances or gatherings through Facebook and MySpace, without any formal leadership from Obama headquarters. Just as Obama's most famous web videos were never commissioned by the candidate – they were created and disseminated spontaneously online – so his fundraising began to take on a life of its own...There is no question in my mind that this is the future of political organisation and fundraising”

Joshua Green (2008) witnessed first hand how Obama supporters became empowered to get involved in a meaningful way. Upon visiting the local Obama headquarters in Silicone Valley, Green found it to be “ jammed with volunteers” who were listening to a Obama speech asking volunteers to phone wavering delegates in Iowa in order to try to get them to back him. Soon these volunteers did exactly that. The next day, Obama had gained nine delegates. What struck Green most about this episode was that:

“ that the headquarters is entirely self-sufficient—not a dime has come from the Obama campaign. Instead, everything from the computers to the telephones to the doughnuts and coffee—even the building's rent and utilities—is user-generated, arranged and paid for by local volunteers. It is one of several such examples across the country, and no other campaign has put together anything that can match this level of self-sufficiency”

As Obama's online director Joe Rospars states, “ the idea is to give them the tools and have them go out and do all this on their own” (cited in Green, 2008)

Another distinct advantage to the social networking system was that it allowed the campaign team to amass a wide array of personal information

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regarding Obama's support. This data went far beyond the usual demographic indicators usually utilized in elections. The subsequent data mining of the information allowed Obama's team to yet again maximize campaign contributions, as well as giving them a stronger, more organized presence at the grass-roots level. Upon visiting My. BarackObama. com you are prompted to either log-in to your account or sign up if you are not already an existing user. This means that, unlike with traditional candidate websites, to access the full range of services you must provide your email address as well as your zip code. Other personal information can also be volunteered. As a result of his internet presence Barack Obama has over five million people signed up to his email list (Madden, 2008). What is significant however is not how much data was available to Obama's people, but rather how it was used. After all, too much information can be overwhelming; how this information was utilized, the way in which it was broken down and 'sliced up' meant that the campaign could achieve greater efficiency and function in a much more streamlined manner. Targeting the right demographic is crucial, there is little point in pouring in money and time attempting to recruit voters who are by inclination Clintonites (or in the forthcoming Presidential campaign, right-wing Republicans). By knowing a voter's age, gender, race, household income, academic qualifications and suchlike, predicting who they are planning to vote for (or indeed if they are likely to vote at all) is made all the more easier.

Not only did Obama's people collect data from their own supporters, they also used information that was already in the public domain, such as census records and voter registration records (Madden, 2008). Statistical software

and market research tools used in the corporate domain were then used to isolate trends or common factors that indicated whether someone would be likely to vote Republican or Democrat, for Hilary or Obama. Whilst such research cannot guarantee to predict an individual's voting behaviour it does allow for more educated guesses. For example, Obama's campaign team would know that members of the American Civil Liberties Union would be more likely to vote for their candidate than members of the National Rifle Association. This data mining process meant that time and money could be more efficiently targeted and channeled. In the Iowa caucus the Obama team used sophisticated tracking mechanisms to firstly identify supporters, then hold their support. Internet sources were used to build mailing lists based on political, professional and personal interests. To gather information on voters his team trawled social networking sites, and not just MySpace and Facebook but also more niche sites that catered for white collar professionals, baby boomers, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians and the homosexual community (Slevin, P. & Vargas, J. A., 2007)

Data mining for political ends is nothing new. During the 2004 Election George W. Bush used consumer data to target potential new supporters (Madden, 2008). The Democrats used similar information to target wealthy donors (Madden, 2008). The difference with the Obama campaign is that his team used far more detailed information in pursuit of far wider reaching aims. For Obama's people even information that may at first seem to have little or no relevance was utilized in order to accrue an advantage. The time at which people on the mailing list read the emails sent to them was monitored and if a consistent pattern emerged, they would always send

them at that time of day. As Michael Bassik, a Democratic consultant with online advertising company MSHC Partners explains, “ the marginal benefit of sending some people an email at 2 o’clock vs. 3 o’clock vs. 4 o’clock might not make sense [at first] but once you start getting an e-mail list that’s 3 million, 4 million, or 10 million people, increasing the returns for a fundraising e-mail by 5 or 10 percent means additional returns of tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars” (cited in Madden, 2008). A user of My.BarackObama.com would have their usage tracked so it would be known how often they visited and when and thus their commitment to the campaign could be measured. All members – nearly a million people (Stelter, 2008) – were asked to complete a detailed survey of their voting habits, previous contributions to political campaigns, the political groups and issues they care most about and if and when they visited church (Madden, 2008). All of this information was then collated in order to build a profile of an Obama supporter. This information was then put to use via traditional electioneering methods. Neighbourhoods in which the data showed the highest percentage of likely Obama supporters were extensively canvassed. This integration of old and new methods is what made Obama’s data mining a success. Online information was joined up with offline data, everything became integrated, as the following example given by Andrew Sullivan (2008) shows:

“ Obama’s trademark mass rallies...aren’t just media draws. Everyone who wanted to get into the 75, 000-strong rally in Portland...had to provide an e-mail address. By the time they came home from the event, an e-mail was waiting for them, asking them for money or for referrals to other friends, and

encouraging them to form “ affinity groups” to spread the network wider and wider”

The information gleaned from data mining was combined with the advantages of social networking by Obama’s team when users of My.BarackObama.com were encouraged to help the campaign by canvassing in their own areas. They were supplied with information that told them which of their neighbours were most likely to vote Democrat and who in their area was registered as an independent voter (Stelter, 2008).

The final key element of Barack Obama’s political marketing strategy that we will discuss is branding. In his campaign Obama applied practices used for the branding of consumer products by corporate entities. He realized that consistency was the watchword; consistency of message and consistency in the way in which that message is delivered. The use of consistent and expertly designed fonts, logos, slogans and web design prompted Newsweek to declare that “ Obama is the first presidential candidate to be marketed like a high-end consumer brand... in a way that transcends the mere appropriation of commercial tactics to achieve the sort of seamless brand identity that the most up-to-date companies strive for” (Romano, 2008). Just as with much else of the campaign, the operation to create ‘ brand Obama’ was consistent and wide ranging. The online efforts were joined-up and synchronized with offline marketing. Obama’s team again took what can be described as a holistic approach. All of the graphics were in the same typeface, the Gotham font. This is true of the website, placards, leaflets and other literature. At Obama rallies all non-homemade signs are in the same font, which, according to graphic designer and critic Michael Bierut, is a more

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impressive feat than one might initially imagine; “ every single non-handmade sign is in that font. Every single one of them. And they’re all perfectly spaced and perfectly arranged. Trust me. I’ve done graphics for events –and I know what it takes to have rally after rally without someone saying, ‘ Oh, we ran out of signs, let’s do a batch in Arial’...There’s an absolute level of control that I have trouble achieving with my corporate clients”(Romano, 2008). There were even occasions at rallies when supporters were requested to trade their home-made signs and placards for official Obama material so as to maintain the aesthetic cohesion (Brady, 2008). The typography used by Obama is significant for the message that it relays to us. His use of the Gotham font is fitting, as like the man himself it is a modern American creation. It was devised in 2002 for New York’s public buildings (Romano, 2008; Heller, 2008; Brady, 2008). Experts in the field insist that it is “ assured, elegant, and plain-speaking” (Brady, 2008), “ conversational and pleasant” (cited in Romano, 2008) and “ substantial yet friendly...Up-to-date yet familiar” (cited in Heller, 2008).

Various experts have waxed lyrical about their admiration for how consistent, comprehensive and professional Obama’s branding campaign has been, whilst insisting that to successfully orchestrate such a huge, nation-wide branding effort in such a short and concentrated time-frame is something that even the major players in the corporate world have not been capable of (Romano, 2008; Heller, 2008; Brady, 2008). As we have seen with the adoption of social networking, the Obama campaign was as comfortable in dealing with new media sources as well as traditional media outlets. His campaign was transmedia, he understood that many people, especially

those in the younger demographic, no longer get their news and other information from solely the television, radio or printed word. Instead many diverse platforms are used; websites, email, podcasts, mobiles phones and other such devices. Obama's branding strategy, along with the rest of his political marketing operation utilized all media forms to deliver a coherent message. Keith Reinhard of the major advertising agency DDB Worldwide sees Obama as the ideal political product; "" Barack Obama is three things you want in a brand. New, different, and attractive. That's as good as it gets"" (cited in McGirt, 2008). His inspirational rhetoric, his promise of change, his idealism are his unique selling points, they differentiate him from the other candidates. The ' Yes We Can' message appeals to the younger, perhaps more cynical and apathetic segment of the demographic, it resonates with an audience tired of negative campaigning and broken promises. His is a message in of inclusivity, of empowerment; "" Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time...We are the hope of the future"" (cited in McGirt, 2008).

In conclusion, Barack Obama's use of political marketing has been crucial in making him the Democrat's choice to contest the 2008 election. The use of social networking strategies was perhaps the most impressive and important element. The Obama campaign exploited the new opportunities of social networking far better than any other. The ' Yes We Can' attitude of his speeches took hold so strongly with his grass-roots support because the opportunities that new media provided for them to become part of the campaign. Supporters were enabled to organise events and engage in political activism with minimal ' top-down' management from the campaign

team. The amount of money raised online, and the number of donors is unprecedented. Instead of reaching out to the wealthy elite and big business in the hope of large donations, Obama's fundraising methods have conclusively shown that greater funds can be gathered by receiving smaller donations in much higher amounts. The data mining used meant that targeting potential supporters was made easier and more efficient. Having better information on the political issues that voters were interested in also helped to maximise donations and build support. The Obama brand achieved a remarkable level of consistency, professionalism and aesthetic cohesion and was delivered across a whole host of media, both old and new. His campaign, particularly the way in which the internet was utilised, could well signal a seismic shift in political marketing. Regardless of whether not he becomes President it seems almost certain that Barack Obama has changed the way politicians market themselves to the electorate.

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