



The Marketing of Barack Obama

In the end, that's what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or a politics of hope? John Kerry calls on us to hope. John Edwards calls on us to hope. I'm not talking about blind optimism here — the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don't talk about it, or the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it. No, I'm talking about something more substantial. It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a millworker's son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope!¹

– Barack Obama, Illinois State Senator (in his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention on July 27th 2004)

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.²

– Barack Obama, President-elect of the US (in his victory speech at Grant Park, Chicago, Illinois, on November 4th 2008)

Barack Hussein Obama was elected 44th President of the US in the 2008 election. If we re-wind this scene 2 years back, today's achievement by Obama would not have been thought possible.³ He had many disadvantages that a marketer could attribute to a disastrous brand. He is a black man born to a Kenyan immigrant father in a country where racism is still rampant.⁴ He also has a Muslim

¹ "The transcript of a speech by Barack Obama", <http://www.librarian.net/dnc/speeches/obama.txt>, July 27th 2004

² "Transcript: 'This is your victory,' says Obama", <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/04/obama.transcript/>, November 4th 2008

³ Latiff Shiraz, "Obama the greatest marketer of them all!", <http://sundaytimes.lk/090104/Education/eu600.html>, January 4th, 2009

⁴ Kelley Anthony, "Is Barack Obama Black Enough?", <http://www.columbiaspectator.com/2008/10/06/barack-obama-black-enough>, October 6th 2008

This case study was written by Manoj Sadasivan, IBSCDC. It is intended to be used as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. The case was compiled from published sources.

© 2009, IBSCDC.

No part of this publication may be copied, stored, transmitted, reproduced or distributed in any form or medium whatsoever without the permission of the copyright owner.

middle name, Hussein, which most Americans have come to hate.⁵ More important, being a young single term senator, he lacked the experience of his rivals. Even with all these disadvantages, Obama pulled off emphatic wins over the heir apparent in his own party and the invincible Republican machine. Not only did the American people elect a black man as Head of State for the first time, they also voted for a Congress that has the biggest Democratic majority since the 1970s. By voting for Obama and his party, the American people demonstrated their unique capacity for self-renewal.⁶ But the key to Obama's success was his instinct for marketing. It would hardly be too much to say that Barack Obama's presidential campaign is a case study in marketing excellence.⁷

Strategic Planning

Obama announced his candidacy for the presidency of the US of America in Springfield, Illinois, on February 10th 2007. In the beginning itself, Obama assembled what was to become one of the best campaign teams ever in the history of politics.⁸ The key strategist in Obama's campaign team was political consultant David Axelrod. Axelrod played a key role in crafting Obama's main campaign theme of 'change'.⁹ Obama felt that Americans were eagerly looking forward to 'change' because of their dissatisfaction with the economy and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁰ Therefore, he would promise economic redistribution and a foreign policy rooted in peaceful diplomatic engagement. In a country regarded by many Europeans as irredeemably right wing,¹¹ Obama would try to change the minds of the majority voters to his thinking while carefully targeting market segments, which wanted a President who could bring fresh thinking into the country. His main rival, Hillary Clinton, would play into his hands when she started her campaign as the ultimate Washington insider.¹² People felt that she was too much of a Washington insider to bring change to the nation's capital. John McCain chose his irrelevant theme of 'Country first' way too late in the campaign.¹³ Obama's 'change' message was to play a key role in his victories over both his rivals.

Obama also understood that the youth vote was the most powerful place to seed the 'change' idea and building a grass roots community organisation through the internet was the way to build a movement that superseded politics.¹⁴ Axelrod again played a key role in planning and implementing this powerful shift to a bottom-up revolution that drew heavily on Web 2.0 technologies and viral

⁵ "Obama the greatest marketer of them all!", op.cit.

⁶ Baker Gerard, "Analysis: Barack Obama's victory is head-spinning stuff", http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/us_elections/article5084748.ece, November 5th 2008

⁷ Quelch John, "The Marketing of a President", <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6081.html>, November 12th 2008

⁸ "Transcript: 'This is your victory,' says Obama", op.cit.

⁹ "David Axelrod Biography", <http://www.biography.com/articles/David-Axelrod-431900>, 2009

¹⁰ "Analysis: Barack Obama's victory is head-spinning stuff", op.cit.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Crowley Michael, "What undid Hillary Clinton", <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-op-crowley8-2008jun08,0,5078706.story>, June 8th 2008

¹³ Al Ries, "What Marketers Can Learn From Obama's Campaign", http://adage.com/columns/home?section_id=300, November 5th 2008

¹⁴ Tepper Marlin John, "Obama's Branding Genius", http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-tepper-marlin/obamas-branding-genius_b_141585.html, November 5th 2008

media. McCain failed to recognise that the context of our times had completely changed. Obama's grassroots strategy was also in striking contrast to Clinton's strategy, which aimed to leverage high name recognition, large donors and strong support among established Democratic leaders. Axelrod planned to start his 'bottom-up' grassroots campaign style by creating short television biographies that projected Obama as the quintessential face of the American dream.¹⁵ Axelrod's television biographies would instantly popularise a virtually unknown Obama and assure the nation that Obama would be the right choice. Axelrod also planned to promote Obama as an agent of change through an elaborate use of modern technologies and the internet. The Obama campaign would mobilise huge pockets of traditionally overlooked voters through the internet and cellular phones, turning countless citizens into grassroots volunteers.¹⁶ The strategy of getting volunteers involved in large numbers became the legacy of the Obama campaign.¹⁷

Market Segmentation and Market Targeting

Obama segmented his market by combining several segmentation variables rather than relying on a single segmentation base. Such a hybrid segmentation¹⁸ of the market was essential to focus on the key demographic and psychographic target groups. While the key demographic segmentation variables were age and race, the key segments Obama targeted were young and minority voters. The strategy to target the youth segment in the age groups of 18–29 and 30–44 paid rich dividends. Exit polls showed that 66% of the 18–29 age group and 54% of 30–44 age groups would vote for Obama.¹⁹ CNN exit polls²⁰ showed that voters in the 18–24 age group broke 68% for Obama to 30% for John McCain and those in the 25–29 age bracket went 69%–29% in Obama's favour. The only age group where McCain prevailed was 65 and over, and that by just a 10-%point margin, 54%–44 %, the CNN exit polls showed. Being a black man, he found it easy to target minority segments like Blacks, Latinos and Asians. The CNN exit polls showed that minorities went heavily into the Obama camp. Blacks, 96% Obama to 3% McCain; Latinos, 67% Obama to 30% McCain; and Asians, 63% Obama to 34% McCain. His psychographic segmentation of the market allowed him to focus on moderates and liberals who were eagerly looking for change. Exit polls showed that 60% of the moderates and 88% of the liberals would vote for Obama.²¹

¹⁵ "David Axelrod Biography", op.cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Dickinson Tim, "The Machinery of Hope", <http://www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/19106326>, March 20th 2008

¹⁸ "Obama the greatest marketer of them all!", op.cit.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Exit polls: Obama wins big among young, minority voters", <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/04/exit.polls/index.html>, November 4th 2008

²¹ "Obama the greatest marketer of them all!", op.cit.

Exhibit I			
Vote by Age and Race			
Total	Obama	McCain	Other/No Answer
White 18-29 (11%)	54%	44%	2%
White 30-44 (20%)	41%	57%	2%
White 45-64 (30%)	42%	56%	2%
White 65 and Older (13%)	40%	58%	2%
Black 18-29 (3%)	95%	4%	1%
Black 30-44 (4%)	96%	4%	N/A
Black 45-64 (4%)	96%	3%	1%
Black 65 and Older (1%)	94%	6%	N/A
Latino 18-29 (3%)	76%	19%	5%
Latino 30-44 (3%)	63%	36%	1%
Latino 45-64 (2%)	58%	40%	2%
Latino 65 and Older (1%)	68%	30%	2%
All Others (5%)	64%	33%	3%

Compiled by the author from "Exit polls: Obama wins big among young, minority voters", <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/04/exit.polls/index.html>, November 4th 2008

Obama targeted all important demographic and psychographic segments by brilliantly exploiting a mix of traditional media and modern technologies.²² But the key segment he targeted was 'youth'. Out of the 44 million Americans in the age group of 18–29 eligible to vote, 17 million were college students.²³ This segment was concerned about the availability of student loans and college costs. Their families found it difficult to cover their college costs because of the recession and tightening of credit markets. Obama addressed their concerns and built a bond of trust with them. A striking feature of his market targeting was the use of many modern technologies for the first time. He bought commercial time on Comedy Central, VH1 and Spike. MTV's networks do not usually accept political advertising and this was the first time a presidential campaign bought time with them.²⁴ His website provided tools to blog, talk to voters, join a local group, find an event and raise funds. It also showed videos about his life and times and provided links to many social

²² Temporal Paul, "Building brand Obama", <http://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/Documents/bao/BusinessatOxfordWinter08.pdf>, November 6th 2008, page 21

²³ "Capturing the Youth Vote: McCain, Obama Target Concerns About Paying for College", <http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/Nextstudent-894472.html>, August 29th 2008

²⁴ Rutenberg Jim, "Obama Aims TV Ads at Younger Voters", <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/10/08/obama-aims-tv-ads-at-younger-voters/?pagemode=print>, October 8th 2008

networking sites. The reach achieved through social networking was one of the most impressive elements of Obama’s online marketing campaign.²⁵ In the final month leading up to the election, the Obama campaign used mobile advertising to target youngsters.²⁶ Quattro Wireless helped run a ‘Vote Early’ mobile advertising campaign to target the youth. The young user base of Boost Mobile was targeted with banners on the operator deck and text ads at the bottom of SMS messages. People could also contact the Obama campaign on mobile by texting HOPE followed by the number.²⁷ Obama even purchased virtual billboards in nine different videogames from Electronic Arts and once again took his presidential campaign somewhere no political campaign has gone before.²⁸ Retail outlets known as ‘Obama branches’ sold accessories and memorabilia such as his ‘Change the World’ T-Shirts all over the US.²⁹

**Exhibit II
‘Change’**



Source: www.huffingtonpost.com

Branding

The Obama branding sought to ensure that Obama owns the ‘change’ (Exhibit II) idea in the voters’ minds. A first step in this direction was the publication of his second autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, on October 17th 2006. Soon afterwards, Obama was endorsed by talk show hostess Oprah Winfrey and his autobiography became number one on both the *New York Times* and Amazon.com bestsellers lists.³⁰ In this book, Obama expounds on many of the changes that would later become part of his 2008 presidential campaign. He also admitted to past indiscretions in his autobiography and cleverly defused negative criticisms well before the election campaign started. After announcing his candidacy for the

presidency in early 2007, he repeated the ‘change’ message over and over again so that potential voters identified Obama with the concept.³¹ He attracted the attention and empathy of voters with his personal charisma and oratorical skills. His events were brilliant spectacles that were choreographed

²⁵ Cleanthous Alex, “6 Lessons We Can Learn From Barack Obama’s Online Marketing Strategy”, <http://www.webprofits.com.au/blog/2008/07/23/6-lessons-we-can-learn-from-barack-obamas-online-marketing-strategy/>, July 23rd 2008

²⁶ “Obama Used Mobile Advertising To Target Youth And Voters In Key Battleground States”, <http://www.reuters.com>, November 5th 2008

²⁷ “Building brand Obama”, op.cit.

²⁸ Davenport Misha, “Obama will be the first candidate to advertise in video games”, <http://www.suntimes.com/entertainment/videogames/1220900.obamagames101408.article>, October 15th 2008

²⁹ “Building brand Obama”, op.cit.

³⁰ Graff Garrett M., “Could Oprah Help Elect Obama?”, <http://www.washingtonian.com/articles/people/2907.html>, December 1st 2006

³¹ “What Marketers Can Learn From Obama’s Campaign”, op.cit.

to perfection. His advertising messages throughout the campaign continued to communicate his upbeat themes of hope and ‘change we can believe in’.³² The emotional appeal was driven home with solid and specific policy details. The ability to skillfully combine emotional and functional benefits is essential for successful branding.³³

The success of the Obama branding campaign can also be attributed to its consistency. Obama ‘positioned’ his brand consistently throughout the campaign and targeted different market segments with a consistent message. While Obama kept his message of ‘change’ unchanged, both John McCain and Hillary Clinton changed their positioning and message delivery several times during the campaign.³⁴ Hillary Clinton first tried to position herself on ‘experience’. She was after all one of the best-known women in America and wife of one of the most successful politicians in history. But when she saw the progress Obama was making, she changed her positioning by adopting the slogan ‘Countdown to change’. By then Obama had come to own the ‘change’ idea in the voters’ minds and she was criticised for taking a leaf out of Obama’s book. So she changed her positioning once again by adopting the slogan ‘Solutions for America’. This confused the voters even more. McCain also first tried to position himself on ‘experience’. After all, he was a well-known war hero with a long and distinguished record as a U.S. senator. However, McCain later decided to adopt the slogan ‘Country first’. By then it was too late in the campaign and the slogan had little appeal to the average voter.³⁵ Voters not only remembered Obama for the changes he was proposing but also trusted him for being so consistent in his message.³⁶ The discipline to be consistent in positioning and message delivery is core to successful branding.³⁷

Online Marketing

Obama used the internet effectively to promote awareness and build a loyal following. He leveraged his personal website to engage not just donors and volunteers but all citizens. The first time you visited his site you were asked to join his mailing list. Once you subscribed you would start receiving high value emails from him driving you back to his website to take action.³⁸ The website was very well designed and navigating within the site was a pleasure. The content of the website included compelling topics that grabbed the attention of all citizens and the site was regularly updated with videos, articles and latest appearances of Obama. Every web page encouraged voters to ‘Donate Now’ and helped the Obama campaign in attracting more donors than the entire Democratic or Republican party nationwide. The traffic to the website increased after the Obama campaign carried out Search Engine Optimisation activities³⁹ to ensure that a search for the words ‘Barack’ or ‘Obama’

³² “The Marketing of a President”, op.cit.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “What Marketers Can Learn From Obama’s Campaign”, op.cit.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “Obama the greatest marketer of them all!”, op.cit.

³⁷ “The Marketing of a President”, op.cit.

³⁸ “6 Lessons We Can Learn From Barack Obama’s Online Marketing Strategy”, op.cit.

³⁹ Dorasch Michael, “Barack Obama Presidential Campaign Website Success Secrets”, <http://www.planet1.com/search/barack-obama-presidential-campaign-website-success-secrets.html>, September 8th 2007

in any of the top four search engines will have the presidential campaign website of Barack Obama first in the list. Obama and his team also made use of the sponsored listings when they purchased advertising based on his name and other keywords. Most keywords related to the presidential election campaign were captured by the Obama campaign.⁴⁰ Blogging is yet another tool of online marketing that was effectively exploited by the Obama campaign. The official blog was beautifully integrated with the website and the Obama team included active bloggers who continuously posted articles that promoted Obama. Supporters also tirelessly submitted positive news about Obama to social news sites such as Digg and Reddit.⁴¹

Obama believed that there is no more powerful tool for grass-roots organising than the Internet.⁴² He entrusted the task of organising an online community to Christopher Hughes, the co-founder of Facebook. Hughes saw what was possible before anyone else and built a virtual mechanism for scaling and supporting community action.⁴³ His key tool was My.BarackObama.com or MyBO for short. MyBO is an interesting and easy to use social networking website that allowed Obama supporters to create groups, plan events, sign up for updates, set up personal fund-raising pages, download tools, and connect with one another. MyBO gave supporters a voice on Obama's website and let the campaign reach its most passionate supporters economically and effectively. What made MyBO unique is not the technology itself, but the people who used the online tools to coordinate offline action.⁴⁴ The online tools were used to make real-world connections between people who were hungry for 'change'. This social networking initiative gave Obama the biggest ever volunteer group - mind you, majority of them young - working tirelessly for his campaign.⁴⁵ Over a period of 21 months, millions of Americans used MyBO to organise local communities on behalf of Barack Obama and even made calls to neighbors about this campaign.⁴⁶ By the time the campaign was over, volunteers had created more than 2 million profiles on the site, planned 200,000 offline events, formed 35,000 groups, posted 400,000 blogs, and raised \$30 million on 70,000 personal fund-raising pages.⁴⁷ Obama had changed politics and marketing forever.

Harvard Business School professor John Quelch feels that 'like any great brand, Obama has built up a bond of trust with the American people. His election has also given the US the opportunity to reestablish its moral leadership around the world. But like any brand, he has to deliver now on his promises, both actual and perceived. In the current economy, that will not be easy.'⁴⁸

⁴⁰ "Barack Obama's Ultimate Guide to Marketing: How he Used Internet and Social Media to Become President-Elect", op.cit.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Stelter Brian, "The Facebooker Who Friendened Obama", <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/07/technology/07hughes.html>, July 7th 2008.

⁴³ McGirt Ellen, "How Chris Hughes Helped Launch Facebook and the Barack Obama Campaign", <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/134/boy-wonder.html>, March 17th 2009.

⁴⁴ Hughes Chris, "Moving Forward on My.BarackObama", <http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/chrishughesatthecampaign/gGxZvh>, November 7th 2008.

⁴⁵ "Obama the greatest marketer of them all!", op.cit.

⁴⁶ "Moving Forward on My.BarackObama", op.cit.

⁴⁷ "How Chris Hughes Helped Launch Facebook and the Barack Obama Campaign", op.cit.

⁴⁸ "The Marketing of a President", op.cit.