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Close-Up: Live issue - What can Obama teach marketers?

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Did the US's first African-American president rewrite the marketing rulebook?

When Barack Obama said 'Change has come to America' in his US presidency acceptance speech, he was not just talking about the direction of the country.

By running the most expensive presidential campaign in history, Obama has changed the dynamics of how candidates are marketed, through traditional and new media marketing tactics. So can this success be applied to brands?

Obama's decision to turn down dollars 85 million of capped public funding enabled him to raise, in part through donations on the internet, dollars 640 million, of which dollars 230 million was spent on TV ads. He ran a campaign in all 50 states, climaxing with a dollars 3.5 million 30-minute TV advertorial broadcast in primetime. Lord Bell, the chairman of Chime Communications, believes that outspending John McCain was the final nail in the Republicans' coffin.

The heart of Obama's campaign revolved around the promise of change. By staying on-message, he was able to take ownership of the word and dominate the political battleground. Sticking with one definable message, he tapped into a zeitgeist that resonated with the electorate - something successful brands have been doing for years.

It would seem that Obama's initial success rested on traditional marketing rules: have a simple message that is consistent and taps into a human truth, and outspend the opposition.

'In some ways, ironically, people have been tempted to rip up brand management books of late and claim a brave new world needs brave new principles and practices. Perhaps Obama's campaign shows that many of those old principles are timeless,' Guy Murphy, the global planning director at JWT, says.

The Obama brand was also something that the electorate was keen to buy into. He oozed charisma, had an empathetic biography and was a spellbinding orator.

'Exploiting that level of liking and bonding is the thing that builds winning brands around the globe,' Dr Robert K Passikoff, the founder and president of the US brand consultancy **Brand Keys**, says.

Under the guidance of his chief strategist, David Axelrod, and campaign manager, David Plouffe, from the consultancy AKP&D, Obama bombarded voters with a campaign which recognised the importance of TV, the internet and social media.

Alongside GMMB, Obama's ad agency, groups, such as MoveOn.org, created anti-McCain ads, and Obama's supporters blogged and created a huge amount of user-generated content - something few brands have managed successfully.

Placing an emphasis on social media, Obama was able to interact on a more personal level with voters in battleground states. The Obama camp also cut approval lines and times so that they could respond to the electorate faster and more personally, via digital and mobile platforms.

Murphy says: 'I think part of his brand was that he wanted to represent a new era and therefore the choice of media had to be new era media, which he got just right.'

However, what seems to be a crucial lesson here is appropriate and inventive use of media planning. At one fell swoop, he killed the established practice of public funding for presidential campaigns and, in doing so, changed the face of US advertising for future candidates.

'When the book gets written about this election, beyond the obvious first African-American president line, they are going to look at the media planning and see that Obama was consistent with a new 21st century image that all companies can learn from,' Passikoff says.

AGENCY CHIEF - Lord Bell, chairman, Chime Communications

'Obama had a fantastically simple message that he never changed: change.

'He out-spent the competition and demonstrated that the more money you spend, the more likely you are to be successful. One must also not underplay the fact that Bush and the administration were so unpopular.

'Third, he was black. Millions of black Americans have never bothered to vote before.

'The concept of branding has always been about having a single-minded proposition and outspending the competition.

'He communicated to so many people because it was primarily on TV: it would be wrong to say it was a digital election.'

BRAND EXPERT - Dr Robert K Passikoff, founder and president, **Brand Keys**

'One critical lesson is to have an identifiable, leveragable strategy and stick to it.

'If you put the election into the context of brands, it was an issue of understanding that possessing some resonating meaning to the voters was critical.

'The decision process when you are casting your vote or pulling out your credit card is more emotional than rational. The Obama brand was able to create a stronger emotional bond with the electorate.

'Loyalty is always going to be the leading indicator for positive behaviour in the market place. But you can't rely on that core group to make sure the bottom line is going to be in the black and not the red - or in the blue and not the red.'

CREATIVE - Jonathan Cranin, creative consultant, MoveOn.org

'Obama was consistent and stayed on-message relentlessly around change. He was operating in a two-product world, but, somehow, through all the negative stuff, he kept it as one piece of cloth.

'Staying on-message was critical to Obama's and most great brands' success. But choosing the right message is even more important. In Obama's case, he made the decision two years ago to run against Bush and the status quo was a message of optimism, unity and hope. He captured that idea with the word 'change' because everyone knew what kind of change he meant.

'A brand promise is important and ultimately trumps a rational comparison.'

PLANNER - Guy Murphy, global planning director, JWT

'I think the lessons that can be learnt are to be simple, consistent and touch a deep human truth.

'It was not a complex campaign, there weren't complicated messages, it was all focused on change. The message never altered, in contrast to McCain, whose messaging and language seemingly changed throughout.

'Those three rules would be in most people's brand management manual anyway. If you look at the great brands, that is precisely what they have done.

'None of this is surprising, but it is a very good reminder as the world gets more complex to see how such a pure campaign, which adheres to some timeless principles, has worked so well.'