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Donald Trump & Harley Davidson: Deconstructing the New Political Paradigm

Liz Nickles (author *Brandstorm*) & Laurie Ashcraft

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DONALD TRUMP & HARLEY DAVIDSON: DECONSTRUCTING THE NEW POLITICAL PARADIGM

Liz Nickles (author *Brandstorm*) & Laurie Ashcraft





As long as there have been politicians, political branding has done a brisk business. As Charles deGaulle observed, “In order to become the master, the politician poses as the servant.” Louis XIV was “The Sun King.” Abraham Lincoln was “The Great Emancipator.” JFK was Camelot. In today’s brand-o-rama world, there has never been a greater scramble for politicians to put a firm stake into a branded identity, to stand for something that can instantly communicate their persona and appeal to constituents and persuade voters to become supporters.

Functional branding

How a brand connection is made is often the biggest differentiator between brands. Some try to connect emotionally with their audience, while others are functional and call out their promises/features. For instance, in the consumer products arena, FedEx primarily offers and promotes features involving delivery – making it a functional brand. However, competitors can copy this feature and offer the same variations on timing and service. FedEx’s biggest competitor is UPS, the world’s largest package delivery service. Neither service offers especially unique features and little to no emotional connectivity. And both are gaining increasing competition from Amazon and, more recently, Uber. It would be very difficult to shift long-standing consumer perceptions of FedEx and UPS from functional to emotional. So Amazon and Uber have a window to make an emotional connection and, if their service at least retains parity, win the branding game—and the consumer business.

Similarly, if a politician talks mainly about plans, programs, and promises, offering merely rational facts and data, he/she risks not making a meaningful emotional connection. Other politicians’ brands can make parity offers. And today’s voters—especially Generation Y, raised on bytes and Instagram, aren’t likely to dig too deep to dissect all the facts. An analogy can be made to print brochures vs. video clips. Print brochures, once the staple of marketing communications, basically listed facts and figures in a long-form story. Consumers were expected to do their “research” and compare brands side by side—literally putting one list of features beside another. Emotional appeals were considered “soft.” Similarly, politicians stood in front of their platforms, which were like political brochures. Each plank of the platform represented a feature. It was a tour de force of functional branding. But, in today’s multi-dimensional, multi-media, global community, where emoji have morphed from one smiley face to an international lingo of thousands of characters, and, like the Roman gladiators, a brand can live or die on a simple thumbs-up or a thumbs-down, is this enough to win the game? Probably not.

It’s too soon to predict the outcome of the U.S. presidential election; however, already, some surprises have emerged. Looking at the candidates from a branding point of view helps deconstruct, for instance, the unexpectedly broad appeal of Donald Trump, and the branding obstacles faced by other candidates.

Although she is attempting to make an emotional connection—including references to her roles as mother-of-the-bridal and new grandmother-- Hillary Clinton is in danger of being a purely functional brand. The fact that she’s woman makes emotional connections even more complex. Emotion can work both for and against her. Even the word “emotion” surfaces issues of gender politics. Then there’s the personal aspect. Secretary Clinton has been married for forty years to the same man, which, for better or worse, should be rich emotional territory, but their problematical marital issues have put her in a double bind; references to her marriage conjure up images she doesn’t want to dwell on, like the shadow of the blue dress in the Shikler presidential portrait. She strategically relies on logic, staying in gender-neutral, functional territory. A leader who leverages logic tends to the long-range and theoretical, armed with an arsenal of facts and expecting others to follow their logic and join their crusade. That’s Hillary Clinton’s strength—and her weakness.

Emotional branding

Harley Davidson. Vroom, vroom! Rev up, hop on, you’re a rebel! With or without a cause. Harley Davidson is an emotional brand that offers a sense of rebellion. It’s a contrarian. Emotional brands shortcut the facts and figures, going right to the gut.

For politicians, emotions resonate and connect instantly, internally, so voters don’t have to go through the high level thinking or sorting out facts. When they feel emotionally connected, voters feel understood. And these emotional connectors provide a kind of invisible shield—emotional brands are like Teflon. Anything, accusations, even the facts, can roll right off them. In the U.S. in 2013, motorcyclists were about 26 times more likely than passenger car occupants to die in a crash per vehicle mile traveled and five times more likely to be injured.¹ Honk if these facts stop enthusiasts from buying a Harley when they could buy a predictably safe family sedan.

A good example in American politics is the famous Kennedy/ Nixon debate in 1960. This 60-minute political duel represented a turning point in American political marketing, and what it proved holds true today—even more so. In the sixties, the radio

was a powerful media instrument. Those who listened to the debate on radio declared it a draw, or claimed Nixon the winner. Those that watched it on TV were convinced that Kennedy won. Kennedy left the podium that night with a winning brand. People who saw the tanned, young, confident politician saw beyond the facts--they saw a breath of fresh air. The subsequent election was so close that historians say that without that TV debate, Kennedy would have lost the election. "It's one of those unusual points on the timeline of history where you can say things changed very dramatically -- in this case, in a single night," says Alan Schroeder, a media historian and associate professor at Northeastern University, author of *Presidential Debates: Forty Years of High-Risk TV*.²

Who would have thought that Donald Trump, the king of 24 carat, gold-leafed excess, the prince of the One Percent, would garner a popular following so strong it thrust him into the early lead of the Presidential race, like American Pharoah out of the gate? Who would have thought he had so much--or, actually, anything-- in common with Harley Davidson? Trump is a prime example of an emotional brand -- connecting in a rebellious way with contrarian voters. He is the Harley Davidson of today's politicians.

Donald Trump is the epitome of an emotional brand. His theme, "Make America Great Again," speaks to patriotism, a disgruntlement with "PC" demands, a lack of trust of the news media, and a desire for less government control. There is no need for him to outline the facts/features of the process. His appeal is emotional, not functional. There's very little in the center of his emotional vs. functional Venn diagram. Trump's apparent lack of ability to filter his thoughts before speaking them only adds to his emotional appeal--he comes across as authentic, unscripted.

Hybrid Emotional and Functional Brands

Then there's Prius, a brand that appeals emotionally to those who consider themselves both emotional environmentalists and logical consumers. The appeal of these hybrid brands involves the features that can back up the emotional platform. Prius

¹ Source: <http://www.iii.org/issue-update/motorcycle-crashes>

² Source: <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2021078,00.html>

³ Source: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/116711284/2012-Nonvoter-Survey-REPORT>

⁴ Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/07/27/donald-trumps-surge-is-heavily-reliant-on-less-educated-americans-heres-why/>

"walks the talk." It's the unusual political who can do both. Bernie Sanders is an example of a segmented emotional brand who also has the facts. He also appeals to those who are dissatisfied with politicians--similar to Donald Trump. He comes across as authentic, also like Trump. But, unlike Trump, he readily responds with facts and proposed programs when asked. And, unlike Trump--he is coming into the election with no clear-cut brand to begin with. Trump is coming in as a household name. He's an instant icon--as was, in a different way, Barack Obama. Or Ronald Reagan. Like Reagan and Obama, all Trump has to do is stand in front of a podium and he instantly connects. Trump's name/brand is plastered on buildings in every major city in America. He has been the star of his own hit TV show, "The Apprentice," where he was showcased to millions of viewers as a leader, since 2004. It wasn't "Meet the Press" or a political pundit debate, and that works in his favor in this case. He's had his share of marital scandal, but not in the Oval Office.

In the last U.S. presidential election, 93 million people simply didn't turn out to vote. The facts alone--whatever they may be-- will not get these people off their couches and into the voting booth. Trump has the ability to emotionally connect with and turn out this vote. Among U.S. nonvoters, a plurality say they are not sure of their political leanings. This group tends to be less educated; more than four in ten have only a high school education or less.³ Trump skews higher among this segment.⁴ Is this nonvoting segment likely to respond to a functional list of facts? Probably not. More likely, they'll respond to the gut-level appeal of a politician with an emotional brand. Trump has already leveraged this ability to zoom to the lead in early polls. This surprised many politicians. But it should not surprise those of us who understand branding.

It should be a very interesting election. Marketers-- start your engines. Politicians-- watch our dust.

Liz Nickles



Laurie Ashcraft



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