

## WHAT OBAMA CAN TEACH YOU ABOUT MILLENNIAL MARKETING

*Feld, Peter*

Consistent mass branding works-but can backfire with other demographics. Baby boomers and Gen Xers declared mass marketing dead long ago. We live in a world of fragmented media surrounded by cynical consumers who can spot and block an ad message from a mile away. But what Gen Xers and boomers may not realize is that the unabashed embrace of select brands by millennials, from technology to beverages to fashion, has made this decade a true golden era of marketing for those who know what they're doing. And when it comes to marketing, the Barack Obama campaign knows what it's doing.

Mr. Obama's brand management, unprecedented in presidential politics, shows pitch-perfect understanding of the keys to appealing to the youngest voters.

Perhaps inevitably, among the first apps introduced for Apple's new iPhone-the latest success from another millennial mass marketer-was an Obama "Countdown to Change" calendar that ticks off the seconds until Election Day.

So what's the appeal to the under-30 set? True, the youth vote traditionally skews Democratic, but the difference this year is that Mr. Obama has actually motivated turnout. His success, it seems, is a result of both product and the branding behind it. The qualities he projects-a cool, smooth aura, the communal values of hope and unity, his teeming crowds and his campaign's seamless graphics-are the essence of appealing to millennials.

"Millennials want someone smart, funny and with a slight edge," observes Allison Mooney, who tracks youth trends for Fleishman-Hillard's Next Great Thing. Mr. Obama's occasional prickly moments, as when he dismissed Mr. McCain's recent ad comparing him to Paris Hilton-"Is this the best you can do?"-shows them he gets it. "Obama's kind of mellow. He doesn't have polarizing views."

Neil Howe agrees. Mr. Howe-co-author with the late William Strauss of "Generations" (1991) and "Millennials Rising" (2001), which christened the generation-said that Mr. Obama "has a certain coolness, detachment and a slight formality. He never loses his temper."

Then there's the messaging. Mr. Obama sticks very well to his script, said Mr. Howe.

And that hasn't gone unnoticed in most quarters. Wrote Newsweek's Andrew Romano, "Obama is the first presidential candidate to be marketed like a high-end consumer brand." His rising-sun logo echoes the one-world iconography of Pepsi, AT&T and Apple.

Design guru Michael Bierut told Romano that the stand-alone logo, consistent use of the Gotham typeface ("very American... conversational and pleasant") and his online look and feel make Mr. Obama the first candidate with a "coherent, top-to-bottom, 360-degree system at work. ... There's an absolute level of control that I have trouble achieving with my corporate clients."

Mr. Obama's packaging might discomfit older generations, who may think of themselves as immune to mass marketing. But it is "no problem" for millennials, whom Mr. Howe sees as averse to chaos and unpredictability (a trouble spot for both the Hillary Clinton and John McCain campaigns), and are "very comfortable with a very smooth brand that has minimal turmoil."

According to Mr. Howe, Gen Xers required niche marketing: "If too many people liked something, it wasn't cool." But mass brand experiences, from the iPod to Harry Potter, appeal strongly to millennials, who have been shown to be a more communal, pro-social generation than their predecessors.

While critics see Mr. Obama's penchant for mass gatherings as arrogant, Mr. Howe finds it perfect for millennials: "They're more civically connected, and they find strength in numbers."

According to Fleishman-Hillard's Ms. Mooney, the Obama campaign's mastery of cutting-edge social media, through the my.barackobama.com site (known internally as "MYBO"), is optimized for millennial appeal. For this generation, "the new pronoun is me, my. Using my-dot brings it to a personal level."

The MYBO site shows that Mr. Obama's campaign has made the leap from CRM (customer relationship management) to CMR (customer-managed relationship) better than many commercial marketers, according to Ms. Mooney. "Young people want to be in control of their relationship with a brand. They want to customize and personalize," as they can on iTunes, Mobile Me and YouLocate. The campaign's site allows this with its use of tagging, discussion boards, photo uploads and other interactive elements.

Of course, most young people will never find their way to the Obama site. But, as with commercial brands, those that do will be Mr. Obama's "passionistas"-his power users and brand ambassadors.

Gen Xers and boomers may have assumed that today's youth are as anti-marketing as they once were; millennials' mass adoption of Mr. Obama's brand may puzzle or alienate them. After a video featuring celebrities like the Black-Eyed Peas' will.i.am and actress Scarlett Johansson crooning along with an Obama speech went viral last winter, a response mocking the mass Obama phenomenon was posted to YouTube, set to "Building a Religion" by quintessential Gen-X band Cake.

Pete Markiewicz, co-author with Mr. Strauss and Mr. Howe of "Millennials and the Pop Culture," said Gen Xer cynics Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert often lampoon the Obama campaign's messianic tendencies. Said Mr. Markiewicz, "Both Colbert and Stewart are liberal, but the worship of Obama sticks in their Xer craws."

John McCain's early-August success in erasing Mr. Obama's lead, with a campaign that directly attacks the Obama brand by mocking his celebrity status, shows that branding can cut both ways.

Which is not to say that Mr. Obama lacks appeal to voters ages 25 to 55. Polls generally show him beating Mr. McCain among voters under 60. And boomers, even if skeptical of mass-branding campaigns, may find the outpouring of youth supporting Mr. Obama reminiscent of their own experiences in the 60s.

But Mr. Howe believes Mr. Obama's appeal to Xers and boomers is "based on an older image of what the Democratic Party means"-agreement with Mr. Obama on issues ranging from Iraq to the environment. Middle-aged voters may end up supporting Mr. Obama despite his branding campaign, rather than because of it.

Because young people vote in such low numbers, some strategists question the wisdom of Mr. Obama's emphasis on appealing to them. But this year, Mr. Obama may have more success bringing new voters to the polls than in converting an ever-shrinking pool of undecided voters.

Citing surveys showing a rising percentage of young voters intending to take part this year, the Washington Post's E.J. Dionne believes the youth vote can be decisive for Mr. Obama in November.

A July 27 Gallup Poll shows both the dilemma for Mr. Obama and the opportunity: Among all registered voters, Mr. Obama led by three points. When the sample was reduced to an older-skewing pool of likely voters only, Mr. McCain led by four. If Mr. Obama can mobilize a fresh source of votes from the normally low-turnout millennials, while making sure to maintain sufficient appeal to older generations, his brand strategy may turn out to be decisive.

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