

How the Obama effect is set to transform Brand America

The engaging strategies used in Barack Obama's presidential campaign have the potential to greatly improve global perceptions of the US, says Helios' **Steve Silver**

There is great anticipation about whether the incoming Obama administration will be able to sustain its new domestic coalition to address the serious issues we face as a nation while improving America's standing in the world, and thereby attracting citizens of other nations to stand with us on issues we care about.

President Obama will have a better chance of achieving these goals if he uses the same approach that he used to attract voters to his campaign - an approach that was first developed in the business world - as part of his plan to govern.

A lot has been written about how the Obama campaign broke new ground in the use of the internet to attract donors, recruit volunteers and generate turnout, while making people feel as though they were part of a bigger movement. This strategy helped to cost-effectively attract large numbers of new people into the political process (especially younger and minority voters) and generate higher levels of engagement. These approaches offer further promise if they are used to help engage the country and the world in the agenda of the new Obama administration.

Brand communities

To understand the potential of these approaches to help the Obama administration deliver on its promise to create a new, more inclusive political process, it is helpful to look at how they are being used successfully in the business world.

In business, the approach used by the Obama campaign is generally referred to as relationship marketing and involves a focus on building and growing customer relationships, rather than on selling products. This approach puts the focus on strengthening the connection between a brand and its customers by carefully managing customer engagement across the life cycle (awareness, consideration and purchase), as well as across points of touch, which include the internet as well as traditional channels, such as phone, mail, advertising and in-person events.

Increasingly, brand marketers have come to see the importance of building brand communities as part of this pro-

Barack Obama's presidential campaign broke new ground by using online relationship marketing to mobilise and organise support



cess. Interest in brand communities began to grow in the mid-1990s with insight into the success of brands such as Harley Davidson, Apple Macintosh and Jeep. For these brands, a community of loyal users was seen to play an important role in shaping perceptions of the brand and in attracting and strengthening customer relationships with it. The growth of the internet has made it easier to form and strengthen such brand communities and has led to an explosion of third-party communities (often using blogs and social networking sites) on almost any area of interest.

Many believe the power of these internet-enabled brand communities and social networks has changed the rules of the game for brand marketers. Chuck Brymer, chief executive of DDB Worldwide, writes in his new book, *The Nature of Marketing: Marketing to the Swarm as Well as the Herd*, that consumers today are influenced more by peers and family than by larger institutions and experts. He argues that we are entering an age of reference, not deference, where speed is the new 'big' and the principles of conviction, collaboration and creativity will make (and the lack of will break) a brand.

In this environment, the key to success has shifted from product marketing to customer dialogue. Brands must collaborate and engage customers as they interact with each other, rather than focusing on one-way mass communication. At the same time, brands must (as always) stand for something that appeals to the communities they are trying to reach and must consistently deliver on those values better than the competition.

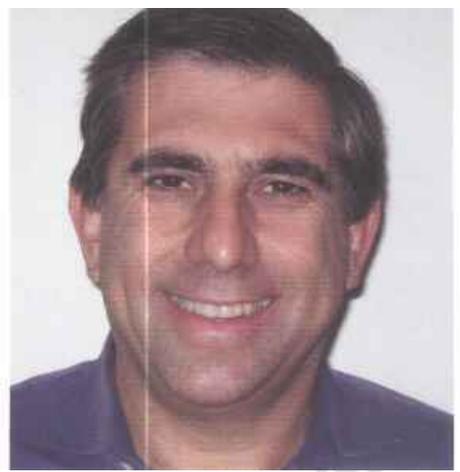
As a result, today's successful brand marketers are actively seeking to get involved in the conversations taking place among their customers, either by creating or strengthening their own brand communities or by constructively engaging with third-party communities. By building and strengthening their own communities, brands can hope to reinforce shared values and attract new members. At the same time, by constructively engaging with third-party communities, a brand can gain important insights into how users perceive it - good and bad - while creating the opportunity to shape perceptions via dialogue.

Improved perception

These insights from the business world suggest a way for President Obama to realise his goal of creating a more inclusive political process while creating a mechanism to strengthen the perception of America abroad. As a presidential candidate, Obama said his campaign was not about himself but about us - the voters who believe in him, and even those who have yet to believe in him. What better way to act on this idea than by creating a meaningful way for citizens to engage in dialogue with each other and with the administration on the key issues and choices that we face as a nation?

Communities of interest already exist on all the important issues we face as a nation - healthcare, energy, the environment, education, economic stimulus, ending the war in Iraq, and so on. Obama's administration has the opportunity to create forums to engage these communities to share administration thinking and

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get feedback directly from citizens. Such an approach would engage a broad cross-section of citizens more directly in the political process (realising the promise that the election was really about us) and would help to shape public perception on the issues that matter most. Just as importantly, this approach would be a useful counterweight to the influence of lobbyists on the same issues.

The goal of these forums would not be to achieve consensus - there will always be differences of opinion. But such forums would create a mechanism to move public (and administration) opinion and create a greater degree of shared values among participants. They would also give citizens a voice in the process, which will help President Obama strengthen his relationship with the coalition that elected him, while also providing an opportunity for others to move his way.

These principles and practices can also be applied to engaging the world community on the American agenda. A lot has been written (some of it by myself) in the aftermath of 9/11 on the need for the US to better engage with the Arab and Muslim world on their perception of America - winning the war for hearts and minds. The Bush administration failed to have a positive effect on this problem. In fact, President Bush's unilateral policies hardened the view of America, not only in the

Arab and Muslim world, but also among our allies in Europe and elsewhere.

No doubt an Obama administration that takes a more inclusive and collaborative approach to foreign policy will go a long way towards correcting many negative perceptions of America. Still, there is a further opportunity for the Obama administration to reach out directly to citizens of other countries to participate in a dialogue about American policy.

The Bush administration's attempts to win hearts and minds were all based on one-way communication - for example, Arab-language radio and TV stations and travelling exhibits. The Obama administration has the opportunity to create a real dialogue among people interested enough to speak with us and with each other about the choices we are making as a member of the world community. A series of forums could be developed on issues of global importance, such as global warming, the Middle East, Iraq and Darfur, and these forums could be run in multiple languages. At the same time, the administration could choose to monitor and selectively engage with forums on these topics sponsored by other organisations to better understand the views of the people participating.

The benefits from this type of global dialogue would be enormous. We would have an opportunity to build and grow

a community of like-minded people around shared values. We would also have a direct window into the thinking of a broad cross-section of people on the decisions and actions that we are taking.

Again, the goal would not be to reach consensus on US foreign policy in the world community. There will always be people who are in opposition to us, and one of the signs of a strong brand community is that there is a universal understanding of the opposition brand (for example, Macintosh versus PC). We are not trying to turn our enemies into friends. Rather, our goal would be to create a meaningful dialogue that helps to build shared values among like-minded people who want to participate, and in the process to grow the size of that community.

Summary

Barack Obama changed presidential campaign politics by adopting techniques from the business world that brought new voters into the process, set fund-raising records and mobilised his supporters. The resulting 'bottom up, interactive, community-driven' mass movement is in stark contrast to traditional campaigns that are driven 'top down' by large donors and special interests.

Now President-elect Obama has the opportunity to apply these same principles to the processes of government and to strengthen the American brand community in the process.

At home, the result would be a more direct connection between our political leadership and the people - reducing the power of the special interests and giving individual American citizens a greater voice and stake in the political process.

Abroad, we would gain new insights into the views of the citizens of other countries (which could be used as an input to public policy), while creating a meaningful dialogue about American foreign policy that will help to build shared values among a growing global community of like-minded people.

Communities put the focus of brand building on a new set of relationships

