



Political advertising and the demonstration of market orientation

Political advertising

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to relate manifest market orientation to the achievement of electoral objectives.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents an analysis of advertising content against a framework of criteria drawn from key marketing concepts using examples from recent New Zealand general elections.

Findings – There is a relationship between parties demonstrating a strong voter orientation in their political advertisements and achievement of electoral success. By viewing advertising as a symptom of parties' broader market orientation, the political marketing factors that differentiate the "winner/s" from the others in an election campaign may be uncovered.

Research limitations/implications – The framework has only been applied to New Zealand Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) election campaigns. To make a more concrete connection between demonstration of market orientation and electoral success the framework needs to be tested in more than one electoral system, in more than one country.

Practical implications – The paper reveals a useful way to relate political advertising content to electoral outcome.

Originality/value – This framework has not been used before in the political advertising or political marketing fields. It strengthens the utility of political marketing explanations in relation to voter- and media-generated explanations of election outcomes.

Keywords Market orientation, Politics, Advertising, New Zealand

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Despite it being asserted that to win elections parties need to become market-oriented (Lees-Marshment, 2001), a causal link between political market orientation and electoral success has not been found (Scammell, 1999; Lilleker *et al.*, 2006). This weakens the utility of political marketing explanations in relation to the more traditional voter- and media-generated explanations, for which there is considerable evidence connecting theory to outcome. Rather than question cause and effect, political marketing research has tended to focus on the extent to which candidates and parties are market oriented; that is, whether they use marketing principles and techniques to determine their target audiences and inform their organisational structures, policy offerings and/or communication strategies. Underpinning much of the existing literature is the managerial assumption that achievement of operational efficiencies leads to competitive and cost advantages. In political marketing scholarship this has been translated to mean the greater the utilisation of a marketing process, the more competitive the party, the better the electoral performance. Such a focus on process or



practice makes it hard to relate market orientation with electoral success. It may be concluded that a party or candidate with a market orientation has waged a more effective campaign than one without (Scammell, 1999). But what is not easy to identify from this is the factor that differentiates the “winner” from the others. This is especially difficult when all competitors in an election have a market orientation, as Lilleker *et al.* (2006) found in the 2005 British general election.

There is, however, an alternative way to relate market orientation and electoral success, by focusing on market orientation as a message. O’Cass (2001, p. 1005) has suggested that “market orientation is the overt behaviour of an organisation that has adopted the marketing concept and is the means for implementing the marketing concept”. Although O’Cass interprets overt behaviour as the engagement of a party in a marketing process, overt behaviour could equally be interpreted as the manifestation or demonstration of the extent to which target voters’ needs have informed the party, how its product will deliver benefits to satisfy those needs, and how it positions itself in relation to the competition. Today, when voters’ primary contact with candidates and political parties is through forms of political communication, it is the representation of the party through the campaign message that voters interact with. The challenge is to find a way of relating the message to electoral outcomes. This research paper argues that it is possible to relate manifest market orientation to the achievement of electoral objectives, through the study of the messages contained in party advertising.

Political advertising as evidence

Much has been researched about political advertising over the past thirty years in the political communications field (see Johnston (2006) for a summary). In an attempt to theorise the effects of advertising on voter behaviour researchers have quantified, categorised, described, or speculatively employed advertisements to explain particular electoral outcomes. Yet, it has not been possible to arrive at a general theory of political advertising influence. Political advertising has been found to have some effect on some voters in some circumstances. But exactly why some advertising campaigns have more impact than others remains unresolved. When political advertising was one of the main forms of direct communication between parties and voters it was understandable that it might be considered an independent variable with its own effects. However, when making a voting decision today voters may (or may not) draw from a range of communication influences, mediated and un-mediated, targeted, narrowcast and broadcast, personal and impersonal. It is no longer possible to theorise that one form of communication is more influential or affective than another.

There is still good reason to examine political advertisements, however, for what they signify about a party’s deeper campaign message, and the evidence they provide of a party’s market orientation. The structural features of advertisements (for example, sound, visual image, movement, pace, colour, typography) enable parties to fill advertisements with signs that communicate so much more than policy alone. Thus political advertisements also carry messages about the people and places that are important to the party; the affinity parties feel they have with voters; the extent to which voters needs have informed party priorities; myths and histories shared between party and voters’; leadership offerings; and the threat parties sense from their competition.

There are, of course, other forms of communication that provide evidence of a party’s market orientation. Ormrod and Henneberg (2006, p. 34) argue in favour of

party manifestos as the “*pars pro toto* of the whole offering”. They acknowledge other factors in a political offering like candidate characteristics, party image and history. However, they disregard these as perceived rather than “actual”. Their delineation of perceived and actual is methodologically convenient rather than conceptually sound, however. The manifesto is a written document, easier for scholars not trained in visual analysis to codify and content analyse. Candidate characteristics, party image and history tend to be communicated visually, and require different methods of analysis. However, neither word nor image has any claim to be more actual than the other; the meanings of words are as contestable as the meanings of images. The solution is to devise methods for analysis that enable the meanings carried by the words and visual images to be understood from a political marketing perspective.

Framework for analysis

The framework proposed here does just this. It was initially developed to analyse the visual and verbal messages contained in the television, billboard and print advertisements of the highest polling political parties in the 1999, 2002 and 2005 New Zealand general election campaigns. It has a general utility, however, providing for the analysis of advertising content against criteria derived from the most commonly accepted definitions of customer/voter and competitor orientation from the marketing literature (Butler and Collins, 1996; Collins and Butler, 2002; Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Lees-Marshment, 2001; Narver and Slater, 1990). It is acknowledged that customer/voter and competitor orientation are not the only factors that constitute market orientation; that many forms of orientation are internal to an organization, for example (see Lafferty and Hult (2001) and Ormrod (2005) for a more comprehensive discussion on this). But with an interest in the way market orientation is overtly manifest, the framework was developed around the orientations that specifically intersect with the political marketplace.

The framework operates using visual and verbal signs as evidence of market orientation. The signs were developed by asking the question “if the market orientation factor x was to be articulated or demonstrated, how might it be manifest in an observable form?” In the next section I outline the criteria used to identify market orientation in political advertisements and then demonstrate how the framework was applied to a recent New Zealand election campaign (Table I).

Voter orientation

Target audience identification

Target audience/voter identification is a fundamental political marketing concept. If they are to sense and respond to the needs of voters, parties need to understand who their core and potential voters are. In commercial advertising, where it is widely accepted that advertising relies upon consumers’ self-identification with advertising images to strengthen involvement with a message, it is commonplace to include images of the target audience in advertisements. Likewise, the framework assumes a party with an understanding of its target voter groups will include images of them and their environments in its advertising messages.

Sense and response to voter need

The framework assumes that parties that are concerned to demonstrate their engagement with voters, or for whom voter needs have informed their offerings, will demonstrate this

Table I.
Criteria used to identify market orientation in political advertisements

| | Market orientation | Observable form |
|--|---|---|
| | <i>Voter orientation</i> | |
| | Target voters identified | Images of target audience and environment featured |
| | Sense and response to voter needs | Images of party and/or leader interaction with target voters including images of listening and words of togetherness |
| | Maintenance of relationships with core voters | Evocation of party history and myth; acknowledgement of shared characters, themes and stories Images or words of care for core supporters The co-presence of other texts recognizable to core supporters Kept policy promises Consistent leadership offer from one campaign to another Party vote requested and what policy and leadership offered in exchange |
| | Offer in exchange for party vote | |
| | <i>Competitor orientation</i> | |
| | Whether the party behaved as would be expected of a party occupying their strategic market position (for example, market leader, challenger, follower, niche party) | Whether: Competition identified and targeted in messages Policy appropriated from smaller niche parties Concern to increase market share demonstrated Openness to coalition arrangements demonstrated Niche parties remain true to original <i>raison d'être</i> |

in images and words of togetherness, such as images of listening (nodding, laughing, touching). It might also be found in the use of personal and inclusive pronouns. In my study I related parties' visual images of togetherness with their use of the words "we", "our", and "I", in their opening night addresses. Widespread use of the former was seen as evidence of a party wanting to demonstrate affinity with target voters; the latter was seen as evidence of a party preferring to promote its leadership as a product.

Voter relations management

A fundamental political marketing concept is the need to satisfy relationships with existing voters in order to maintain a core group of supporters who may be relied upon to vote for a party. The framework assumes that parties wanting to maintain a consistent relationship with core voters will demonstrate this in their advertisements through consistent leadership messages and the evocation of party history and myth. Parties may also be expected to provide evidence of having met previous promises.

Offer in exchange

Exchange is the fourth political marketing concept used in the framework. This is the notion that voters will exchange their vote for the party or candidate that will offer the most value and best meet their needs. In political advertisements the offer is most evident in billboards and newspaper advertising, condensed into a few words, a slogan, logo or photographic image. Specific items for analysis in my study included the messages conveyed by the leader's facial expression, camera close-ups, dress, and the physical setting of the leadership image. In addition, I looked for offers of something new or different in relation to the competition. This may have been words or images signifying added value to existing policy platforms; particular benefits that the party would provide in exchange for the party vote; or something new addressing an unmet need in the marketplace.

Competitor orientation

In order to find evidence of competitor orientation, the framework relates party messages to the political market position typologies derived from Kotler (1994) by Collins and Butler (1996, 2002) – market leader, challenger, follower and nicher. In market leader advertisements I looked for parties wanting to increase their competitive strength and value to voters by introducing new policies and personalities; defend their market share by anticipating and responding to attack messages from challenger parties and/or by launching attack advertisements at minor parties; and defend their position by core voter retention messages emphasising stability and consistency. In challenger party messages I looked for consistency and commitment in attacks on the market leader; awareness of, and preparation for, attacks from other challengers; and policy or leadership offerings that differentiated parties from their competition. In follower party advertisements I looked for consistency in messages from one campaign to another; support messages for the party they had chosen to follow; and the offer of something that differentiated them from the competition. In niche party advertisements I examined whether they remained true to the original niche message or whether they had changed emphasis; whether they had found a new niche or niches to promote; whether they were prepared for a larger party appropriating their niche.

Electoral success

To relate manifest market orientation with electoral success the messages conveyed by the visual and verbal signs needed to relate to electoral outcomes. In my study a party that achieved the party vote objectives it set at the commencement of the campaign was assessed as having achieved electoral success; if it failed to achieve its party vote objectives it was assessed as having failed to achieve electoral success, even though it may still have crossed the five per cent threshold and retained a presence in parliament. I also related my analysis to the New Zealand Election Study (NZES) statistics on voter retention and flow (Vowles, 2002; Aimer and Vowles, 2004; Vowles *et al.*, 2005). I assumed the number of new voters attracted to the party, and from which party they came, to be evidence of a party's success in offering greater benefits to new voters than other parties; the number of previous voters a party had retained to be evidence of the party's concern for core voter satisfaction; and the number of previous voters taking their vote elsewhere as evidence of a party neglecting the needs of its core voters.

2002 New Zealand general election

This section demonstrates the application of the framework to a recent election campaign, focusing on the differences between the two major New Zealand political parties. In the 2002 general election the incumbent Labour party increased its share of the party vote to 41.3 per cent, up from 38.7 per cent in 1999. This was only the fourth time since the election of the first Labour government in 1935 that a second term government had increased its percentage of the vote, and the first time since the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system was introduced in 1996. The opposition National party suffered its worst result ever, slumping from 30.5 per cent in 1999 to 20.9 per cent of the party vote. There were substantial differences between the two parties' advertising messages that help explain the outcome.

In its advertising messages Labour demonstrated its ability to sense and respond to the needs of ordinary voters. There were images of Prime Minister Helen Clark interacting with ordinary New Zealanders, including Labour's core target voters from 1999 (beneficiaries, students, pensioners, sole parents), and many new ones. Labour made an effort to grow its share of the vote by including images of people in business and industry, voter groups more traditionally aligned with National. Images of Helen Clark succeeding on the international stage and meeting famous people rewarded core voters for their support. Clark's verbal dialogue signaled that Labour shared an affinity with its audience. Labour had the highest average utilisation of the inclusive pronouns "we" and "our" of all parties in the verbal dialogue of its opening night address. Labour was conscious of the importance of meeting its promises to an untrusting electorate and showed voters that it had met its 1999 promises. There was a consistency of style and offer in its messages: including Clark as the central offer and a commitment card (first used in 1999) containing new policy offerings to cement the loyalty of its core supporters and grow its share of the market.

In contrast National was barely oriented towards the needs of voters in 2002. It focused its campaign on introducing its new leader Bill English, who had replaced former National leader Jenny Shipley nine months earlier. National's advertising messages promoted English as ordinary and hardworking, motivated by the needs of his friends and family and his personal beliefs. National had the highest average utilisation of I-statements, and the lowest use of inclusive pronouns, per minute in its opening night address. This was not enough to turn English into an alternative leader to Clark, however, at a time when Labour's message repeatedly stressed Clark's successes as Prime Minister on the international stage, and reminded voters through her inclusive language and images of her interacting with core voters, that she cared and could be trusted to deliver on voters' needs. In an effort to avoid references to its recent past in government from 1990 to 1999 National tried to re-brand itself as "new", and focused on the youth of its shadow front bench. But this, combined with a new and untested leader, did nothing to strengthen National's bond with its traditional voters (who were then not all that young). National appeared unaware of the need to offer something of value in exchange for the all-important party vote. It never specifically asked for the party vote in its advertising messages, instead telling voters to "get the future you deserve"; which many took as an invitation to look for minor parties who might better satisfy their needs. Seemingly unaware of the strategic behaviour required of a challenger party National had no advertising messages that attacked Labour or any of the third parties that eventually saw its 2002 vote eroded so badly.

Discussion

In broader terms, my application of the framework to the 1999, 2002 and 2005 New Zealand general election campaigns found that parties demonstrating a strong voter orientation in their political advertisements also achieved their electoral goals. They demonstrated an affinity for their target voter groups by showing images of voters and their environments, and images of party leaders interacting with voters. They demonstrated concern for the satisfaction of the needs of existing voters by using words of togetherness and indicating they had met their previous promises. They did not change their policy or leadership messages dramatically between campaigns. There was a visual consistency to their television, print and billboard advertising

messages that rendered the messages easy to recognise and remember. These parties were clear about what they were offering in exchange for the party vote and offered something over and above previous campaign offerings in order to attract new voters.

Parties that demonstrated in their advertising a care for core supporters but not new voters either failed to achieve their party vote goals or only partially achieved them. Those parties that worked hard to attract new voters while taking old voters for granted tended to gain new supporters, but lost old supporters, and were unable to expand their overall share of the party vote. Parties that demonstrated more of a product orientation, trying to sell a remarkable rather than a responsive leader, also had less electoral success.

While most New Zealand political parties demonstrated some degree of voter orientation, the same cannot be said for competitor orientation. Most parties' advertising messages were not differentiated from their competition. There is little evidence of party understanding of the competitive positioning strategies they needed to adopt in order to achieve their party vote objectives. It is difficult to state with any assurance that there is a relationship between a demonstration of competitor orientation in political advertisements and electoral success. That is not to say that demonstration of competitor orientation is not significant; just that New Zealand political parties do not seem to be aware of its importance, yet. More detailed analysis of the three campaigns may be found in Robinson (2004, 2006, 2007).

Conclusion

One of the weaknesses of existing analyses of political advertising is that they are not underpinned by a methodology that connects forms of political communication with electoral outcomes. While it is still not possible to claim that there is a causal link between a party's market orientation and the achievement of its electoral goals, by applying a market orientation communication framework to the visual messages demonstrated in political advertisements this research paper shows it is possible to identify a relationship between demonstration of voter orientation and achievement of electoral goals.

I have been careful not to assert that voters are directly influenced by the messages they receive through political advertising. Advertisements may be one of many forms of communication voters come into contact with in an election campaign, and may influence some voters under some circumstances. But by viewing advertising as a symptom of parties' broader market orientation, this study has shown that it is possible to analyse advertising content against criteria drawn from key marketing concepts and uncover the political marketing factors that differentiate the winner/s from others in an election campaign. If a more concrete connection between demonstration of market orientation and electoral success is to be identified the framework will now need to be tested in more than one electoral system, and in more than one country.

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Claire Robinson is Head of the Institute of Communication Design at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand. She is a regular commentator in the New Zealand news media on electoral politics, leadership image, political advertising and marketing. Her research expertise lies in the visual communication of political messages. She has contributed chapters on political advertising and marketing to *The Baubles of Office: The New Zealand General Election of 2005*; *New Zealand Votes: The General Election of 2002*; and *Political Communication in New Zealand*. As a designer she was responsible for a CD-ROM of political advertising and extracts from television debates that accompanied *New Zealand Votes*, for which she won a Wallace Award from the New Zealand Electoral Commission in 2004 for "her contribution to public understanding of electoral matters". More recently, she produced, with Curtis Baigent, the DVD containing extended media coverage of the 2005 general election that accompanied *The Baubles of Office*. Claire Robinson can be contacted at C.Robinson@massey.ac.nz

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