

# Obama the Brand: A Paradigm shift in Marketing and Polling



**Prof. Bruce I. Newman**

Professor of Marketing, DePaul University and Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Political Marketing

✉ [bnewman@depaul.edu](mailto:bnewman@depaul.edu)

A very interesting twist has taken place in the world of politics in democracies around the world. Political systems were originally set up to give candidates the opportunity to let voters know who they are and what they stand for during the course of a campaign. However, with the benefit of information technologies, scientific polling, social networking, and a wide host of other marketing-related tools, candidates now use marketing research to do just the opposite: To find out who the voters are and what they want the candidates to stand for. The Obama juggernaut was able to do this as part of an evolution in the political campaign world in the U.S. to great success (see ▶ [Figure 1](#)).

**Key Words:** ▶ Political Marketing ▶ Brand Strategy ▶ Brand Research

**Political Marketing:** “The applications of marketing principles and procedures in political campaigns by various individuals and organizations. The procedures involved include the analysis, development, execution and management of strategic campaigns by candidates, political parties, governments, lobbyists and interest groups that seek to drive public opinion, advance their own ideologies, win elections and pass legislation and referenda in response to the needs and wants of selected people and groups in society” (Newman 1999a, p. xiii).

## 1. Introduction

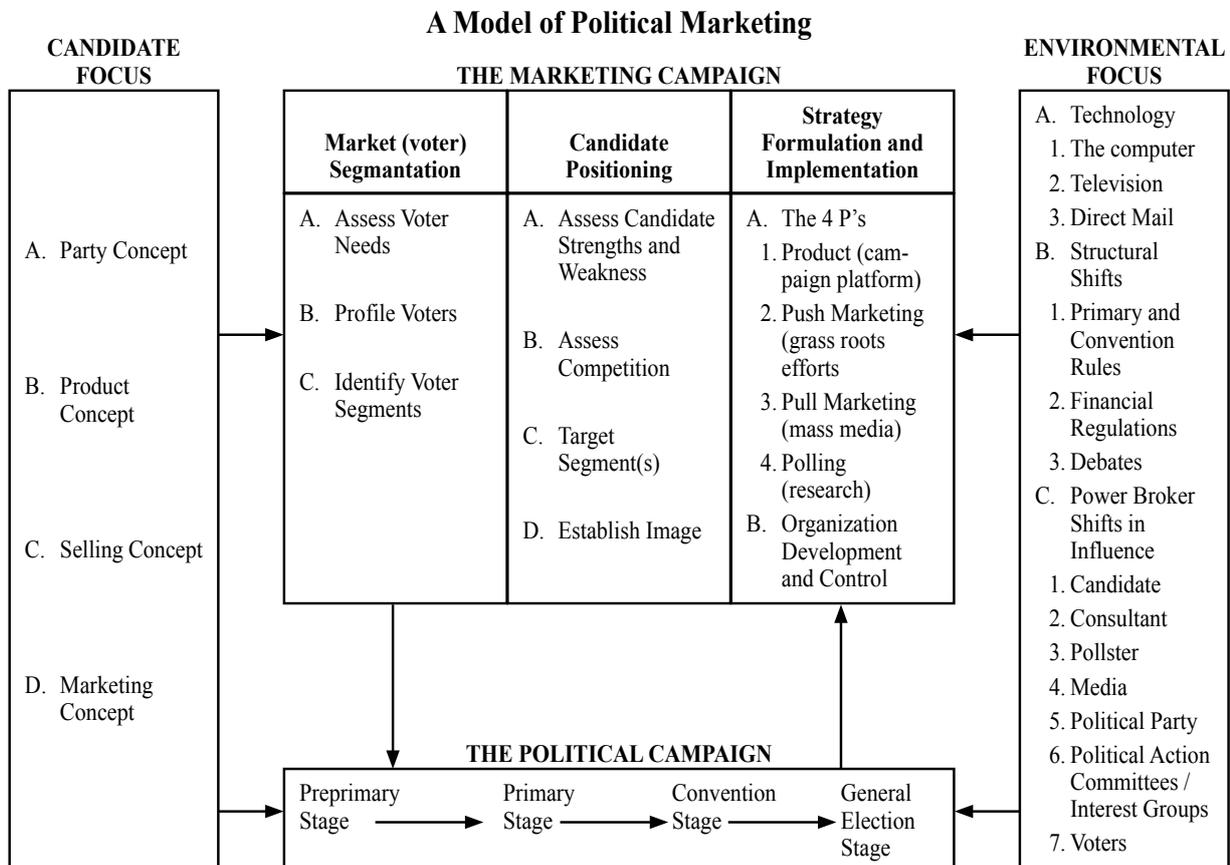
The United States of America just witnessed a Presidential Campaign that she has not witnessed since the charismatic campaign of 1960, when a young, catholic, unknown Senator decided to run for the Presidency, John F. Kennedy. Senator Kennedy took the country by storm, convincing citizens that it was time for the country to elect the first catholic president. Many called this period in America, the Age of Camelot! A handsome president flanked by a beautiful and charming wife, Jackie Kennedy, presented to the world a charming couple who would make headlines up until that fateful day three years after entering the White House when President Kennedy was shot and killed in Texas. Oh, how we Americans have longed for another person to come

along and sweep us off of our feet. Well, that day has come, and the new John F. Kennedy is Barack Hussein Obama!

Barack Obama, currently President of the United States, began his educational career at Harvard University, where he was the first African-American to be voted President of the Law Review. Even though he was perceived as a liberal, conservatives voted for him. Using the same qualities that helped him win the presidency, he was a good listener, attentive and empathetic, with a powerful mind that could turn different viewpoints into reasoned consensus. He was, even back at Harvard, a black man who moved beyond racial politics, indifferent to politics of identity and grievance. He transcended ambition. But eventually, after a long career as a local activist in Chicago, he chose to run for the Senate in 2006, and won. It was from this position of prominence that Barack chose to use as the foundation for his run for the presidency, beginning in early 2007 when he announced in front of the Springfield courthouse that he was running for the presidency.

Barack was another Senator who was virtually unknown until he gave the Keynote Address at the Democratic Convention in 2004, a platform that has been used in the past as the launching pad for a successful bid to gain entrance into the White House. We saw Bill Clinton, a Governor from Arkansas, do this in 1988, when he gave the

Fig. 1: Model of Political Marketing



\*The model integrates four components into a single framework which will be used to explain how the President is marketed.

1. Newman, Bruce I., *The Marketing of the President* (1994), Sage Publications, pg. 12.

2. Newman, Bruce I. and J. Sheth, *A Theory of Political Choice Behavior* (1978), Praeger Press, pg. 32.

Keynote Address and later became the Presidential Nominee for the democrats in 1992 and went on to win the election. But don't be confused, Bill Clinton was no John F. Kennedy, and Barack Obama is no Bill Clinton, but Barack Obama may very well be another John F. Kennedy. Whereas all three leaders have many of the same characteristics that are necessary for victory in a U.S. Presidential Election today, each represented instances where "experience" was not their strong suit. Let us explore how this could happen and why, in a world as complicated and challenging today, a candidate for the highest office in the land does not have to make experience a pre-requisite to win the White House.

## 2. The Winning Personality

First of all, voters today want a leader who they can relate to on an emotional plane (Newman, 1999b). Yes, they want their leader to be able to express a sincere honesty, capability, and style that makes them feel excited, inspired and hopeful that this person will bring about "change" for the

better. Leadership is all about selling hope to a people! When I was working with Senior Advisors to the Clinton White House in 1995-1996, and sitting around a table in the West Wing of the White House with Deputy Chief of Staff, Erskine Bowles; Director of Communications Don Bear; and Senior Advisor, George Stephanopolos, helping to reposition President Clinton to insure re-election in 1996, I was told by Mr. Bowles that the "real" job of a president was to sell hope to the people. He was so right, sitting at the helm of power, working the President on a daily basis to do just that. It is this ability on the part of a leader that makes experience less necessary in a campaign than the ability to be a great orator, something Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and John F. Kennedy all were.

At that same table in the West Wing I was told that to compare the job of a President to a CEO was a ridiculous comparison! According to Mr. Bowles, once again, the job of a CEO requires making one major decision for the company every month. But the job of a President required making two major decisions everyday! Yes, a huge difference that

called for something perhaps even more important than experience, and that is good judgement. This meant having the ability to stay steady in a time of high pressure; even-handed in dealing with crisis; and able to reach out to different advisors who would help the President think through complicated issues. Yes, once again, we see that all three leaders, John, Bill and Barack all possess this quality. This is a personality characteristic that comes through during the course of a hotly contested campaign, when we witness the candidates under tremendous pressure and tension and observe carefully how they respond to the ups and downs of a presidential cycle, usually including over 20 debates and hundreds of media appearances along the way.

### 3. Obama's Vision

In June, 2008, a poll commissioned by the Obama braintrust revealed the following conclusions:

1. Obama led McCain 49% to 44% among likely voters.
2. The popular thinking was that Obama's image was malleable and highly vulnerable to negative attacks. This poll in fact showed that his image was better defined than McCain's, especially when it came to standing up to lobbyists; putting partisan politics aside to get things done; and telling people what they needed to hear, not what they wanted to hear.
3. The economy concerned the undecided voter more than any other issue.
4. The undecided voters were fed up with Washington and the Bush administration.

These results led the Obama campaign team to concentrate on a few key points:

1. Obama must own the economy and maintain an emphasis on changing Washington.
2. All that was wrong with Washington was summed up in one word: Bush.
3. Anyone who clearly defined himself as the "Anti-Bush" could win.
4. Both Clinton and McCain were seen as Washington insiders.
5. The same strategy that was used in the Primary could be used in the General Election, something that is usually impossible to carry out.

### 4. Obama's Strategy

Obama's Vision Statement was: Change you can believe in. After the midterm election in 2006, Obama had already

determined what his presidential strategy would be. The strategy was based on the fact that the Democrats had trounced the Republicans in Congress. He sensed that the moment was right for an unconventional campaign that would take advantage of voter disenchantment, not just with Republicans, but with politics as usual in the United States. Obama's strategy was consistent with his philosophy of a "ground-up" rather than a "top-down" orientation. This was based on his days in Chicago as a community organizer. The use of social networking was ultimately utilized on the basis of this thinking.

Obama's thinking also relied on the teachings of Saul Alinsky, a radical with a realist bent who once wrote that any revolutionary change needed to be preceded by a passive, non-challenging attitude toward change among the people. Obama knew he had a way of finding non-threatening ways to make people accept change, beginning with his own skin color. To be successful, Obama decided that he had to run a grass-roots campaign because he had to beat Hillary Clinton, who clearly had the establishment behind her, meaning she would have all of the early money and endorsements, as well as a national organization. Obama's thinking was correct, except for the fact that there was not other way to get money if one was not the leading candidate. As it turned out, the Internet proved to be a lifeline of support for his campaign.

Obama's early debate performances were shaky. However, as time went on, he improved because he is a relentless self-improver. As his debate performances improved, his stump speeches took on a more causal, informal appeal. But more important than his speaking ability was his strong stand on the Iraq war, something he repudiated even before the campaign began. Some have argued that this is what made the difference in his ability to beat Hillary Clinton, who did take a stand against the Iraq war until after the campaign was in full swing and it was clear that public opinion had moved in that direction.

During the very early part of the presidential campaign, soon after Barack entered the race, the polls across the country were echoing the same themes: The importance of honesty, leadership, strength, competence, ability to govern effectively, integrity, ability to listen to others and not only the interests of special interests, putting the U.S. first, intelligence, good moral character and family values, a solid vision for the country and trustworthiness (not necessarily in order of importance). Barack Obama's strategy was very much centered on all of these issues, and it was his ability to project the qualities listed above that served him so well during the long, grueling campaign.

## 5. The Turning Point

So what was the turning point in the campaign that pushed Barack ahead? What was Barack's "teary-eyed" moment that connected him to the emotional fabric of the American psyche? It was clearly his speech on Race in America, one that he had to make as CNN was re-playing sermons by the leader in his church, Jeremiah Wright, referring to the U.S. in such negative tones that citizens began to wonder exactly who was this Barack Obama? Why would such a seemingly reasonable and intelligent man sit and listen to sermons from such a demagogue? That answer came in his high-profiled speech given in Philadelphia in the early months of the campaign, which by all accounts was received quite well by everyone, voters and analysts alike.

The speech was so powerful, that it was compared to the great speech given by Reverend Martin Luther King, when he addressed the issue in such a graceful way over 40 years ago. This allowed Senator Obama to connect to the American people in a way that propelled him to a position where he was able to say that he represents the kind of hope that all Americans had been dreaming about for decades. Yes, Americans were looking for the opportunity to follow the words and actions of a leader who would heal the

wounds of racial discrimination that had persisted for so many years in the United States.

## 6. The Competition

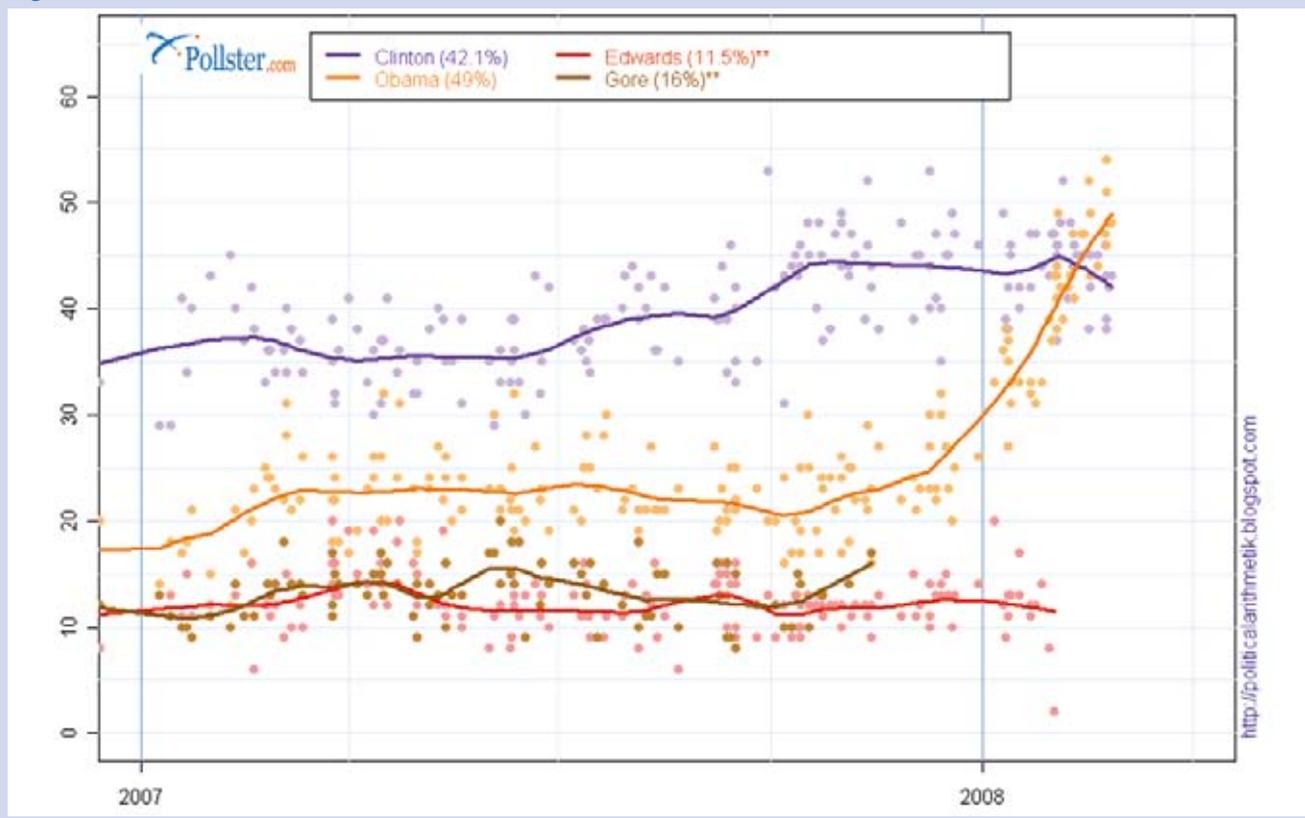
The competition during the 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign included a wide variety of seasoned and freshly minted politicians, all of whom were looking to become the most powerful person on the planet. A short bio of each of the key players is listed below.

### 6.1. The Democrats (see > Figure 2)

Barack Obama was the fresh face on the political scene. A great orator who would become the first African-American president to be elected in the history of the United States. He was highly intelligent, but untested. He was a great fund-raiser and represented a "John Kennedy" image, with similarities including his youth, magnetism, natural grace, eloquence, wit and hope of a new generation in the same way that John Kennedy influenced Americans in 1960.

Hillary Clinton was the odds-on favorite to get the Democratic nomination before the primaries began. She had working for the best political mind in the country, Bill

Fig. 2: Democratic Poll



Clinton, her husband. Had she been elected, another first would have taken place in the history of the U.S., a female president. Her problem is that along with the personal issues that separated her from Barack, she still had to contend with the stigma of being married to only the second president in American history to be impeached. That would haunt her throughout the campaign, especially when many thought he was playing too large a role in her organization.

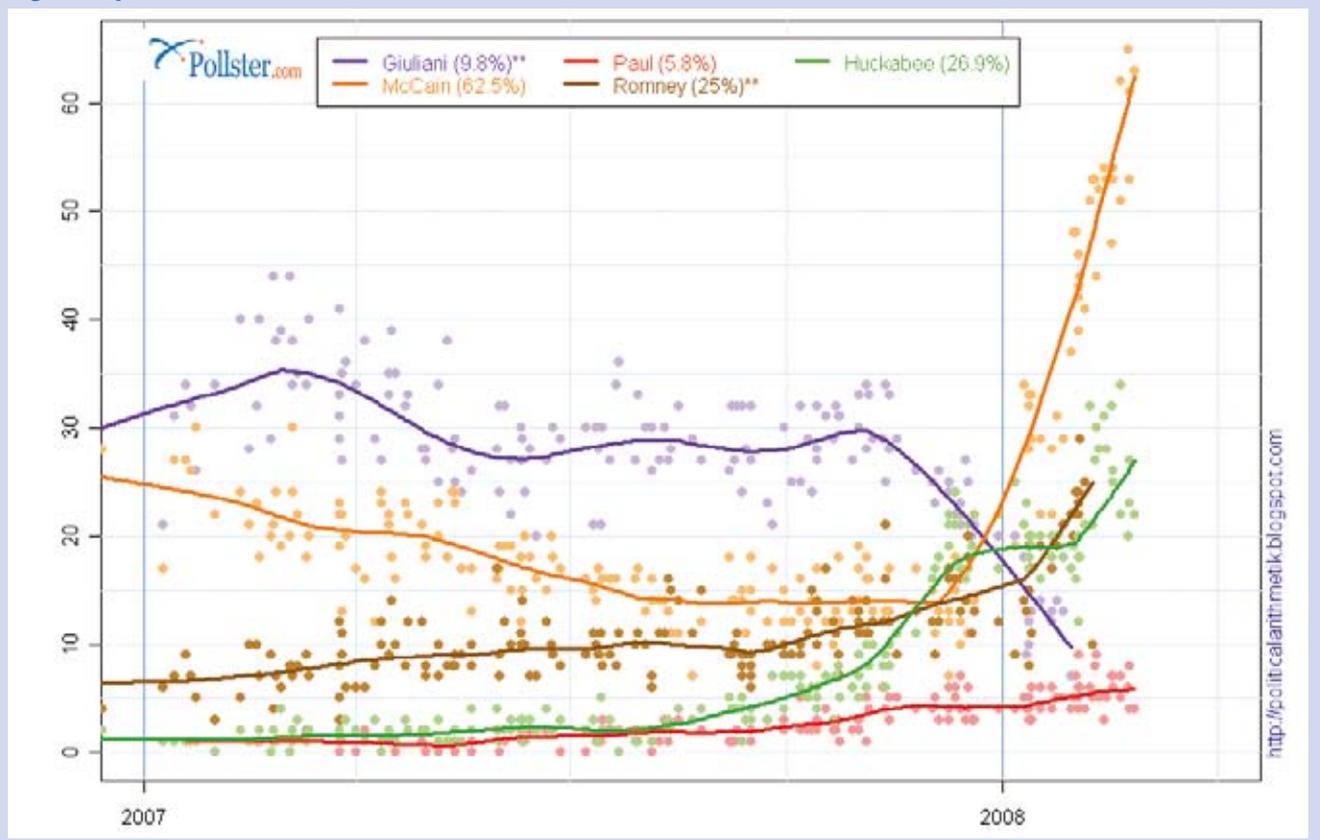
John Edwards is the man that would eventually be accused of planning a wedding after his wife, known to have had terminal cancer, had passed away. These events unfolded later in the campaign after he did not receive the nomination. But up until that point in time, he was a rather attractive candidate to many of the party insiders. He presented a vision to the American people of two Americas, the haves and the have-nots. Ironically, this was a man who came from a poor family, became immensely wealthy as a personal injury lawyer, and decided to devote his professional image to helping the poor. His strategy was very clever, which centered on targeting the first primaries in New Hampshire and South Carolina in the hopes of a big win in either state, followed by a lot of financial support and interest from the media. Neither hope ever manifested. Part of his image problem that he never overcame was being tied to

the losing campaign of John Kerry in 2004, when he was chosen as his running mate to become Vice-President. Voters never forgot that he and John Kerry lost that race to George Bush.

## 6.2 The Republicans (see > Figure 3)

John McCain would move up and down in the polls, only to become the party's nominee. Many thought he was finished early on, when his debate performances were far from stellar, but it would be the same persistence and doggedness that helped him survive Vietnam as a prisoner of war that would propel him to the top of his party. He was a real war hero, but in American politics, that image has not been sufficient to win an election since John Kennedy did in 1960. The biggest problem for McCain, and the one that eventually killed his chances of winning the race was his support for the Iraq war, and George Bush. However, it was a strategy he needed to follow to win the primaries and get the support of the party faithful amongst the Republicans. The nature of U.S. politics calls for candidates to make extreme policy stands to become the nominee of their respective party, and then try and re-position themselves for the general election (Newman 1999). He was also perceived to be too old and very much part of the "Washington" scene to compete with the fresh face of Barack Obama.

Fig. 3: Republican Poll



Rudolph Giuliani, the Hero of 9/11, was thought to be the odds-on favorite in 2008. He seemed to have all the characteristics voters were looking for: A hero figure, good speaker, the “John Wayne” personality who would come into the White House and fix things. It did not work out that way for Mr. Giuliani. He had a very bold, anti-Republican stand on abortion, he supported it, the only one in his party. That kept the more conservative supporters in the party leery of him. His theme was anti-terrorism and the importance of security at home, an image that connected well to who he was. Many thought he was too busy having a good time on his campaign bus with old friends, and not presenting himself as a serious candidate.

Mike Huckabee was one of the biggest surprises in the campaign of 2008, a former Governor of Arkansas who took the country by storm. He was an eloquent speaker who played a guitar, seemed very likable, former Baptist preacher, who was not even an asterisk on the Republican scene until his excellent debate performance helped him win an early and important primary in Iowa. Unfortunately for him, he was never able to define who he was beyond his populist appeal to be all things to all people. He should be a serious contender in his party in 2012.

Mitt Romney was the one candidate who looked like he should be president. He was good-looking, with a square jaw, beautiful family, former Governor of Michigan, seemingly having all of the components necessary to create a positive image of himself. He was a wealthy businessman who spent the most money on television advertising early on in the campaign. He also headed up the 2002 winter Olympics in the U.S. He was also a Mormon, a religion in the U.S. that did not endear him to the Evangelical Christian party members who did not agree with many of his positions. This was the case of a candidate who proved that having the most money does not insure victory.

## 7. Why Barack and not Hillary

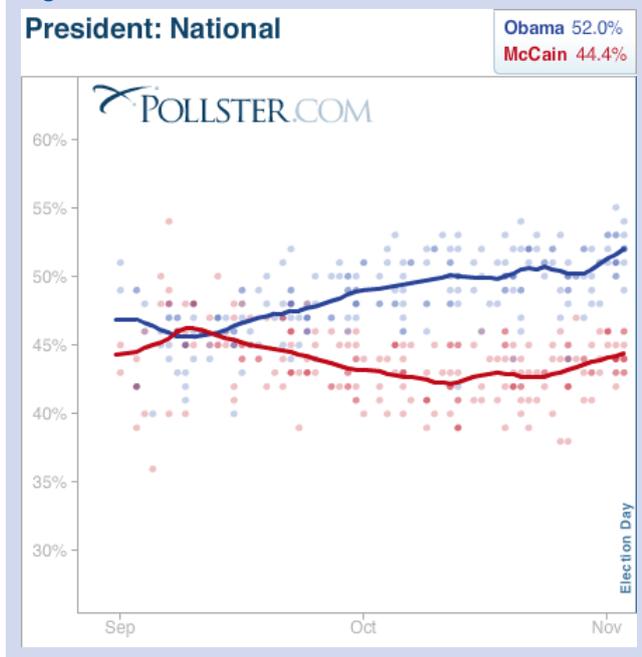
Yes, there is no doubt that Hillary had an abundance of experience, but unfortunately for her, it was not sufficient to satisfy the voters in a period of time when citizens were looking for leaders who they thought could bring disparate groups together through compromise. Voters also wanted a leader who was strong, yet sensitive. Whereas Hillary was able to stay cool, detached, and strong throughout most of the campaign, she did have her moment when she let down her guard, or as some would say, she shed her armor of steel and let a tear run down her cheek. As analysts looked back at that moment, there seemed to be a consensus that it probably did not help her to sell hope, but perhaps helped her to connect emotionally with her supporters in a way that she hadn't up until then.

Yes, there are many emotional levels that a leader has to connect on with voters, but the one that really counts is hope! Hillary was perceived to be the kind of leader who would bring about the change that Barack promised to deliver to the American people? But due to her lack of charisma and oratory skills, and lack of presence on stage, she was not able to wrestle the nomination away from Barack. So why was Barack Hussein Obama so successful at leading American citizens to be convinced that he would bring hope and change in a way that no other candidate could? The answer lies in his family background.

Barack, a man of contradictions represented the manifestation of hope, embodied in a leader in a country made up of immigrants from all over the world. A man born to a White mother, African father from Kenya, raised by his white grandparents in Hawaii, relatively poor most of his life, graduated from Harvard University to live the American Dream, in no different a way than Bill Clinton did. Barack was married to a woman who many viewed as the next Jackie Kennedy, an intelligent, charming woman who would bring a grace and stature to the White House that the American people have not seen since the Kennedy, or “Camelot years” in America. So what was wrong with Hillary's family background? Well, for one, she is a Clinton, synonymous with politicians who don't give up, never fade away, and keep on fighting to the last day. Yes, she has a family background that is distinguished, but unfortunately for her, it is also well known, not new, slightly flawed by an Impeachment her husband went through, which unfortunately for her, didn't offer the novelty and newness of a Barack Obama.

As every CEO of a major corporation knows, either constantly innovate or die! The same holds true in politics where voters are constantly looking for a “new face” to watch on their television sets everyday for the next four years. And it is not enough to just innovate, you must communicate that message to your customers or they will not know that you have a product or service offering that is any different from what they are currently using. Thus, the same “image management” techniques used in business are put to the test in a time-pressured campaign for the presidency where there is instant information and communication about the campaign from the “New Media” one finds on the Internet that is then reinforced with images and faces plastered across the news on television sets across America in the “Old Media.” The Obama campaign was brilliant in its use of the “New Media” and merging it with more old-fashioned techniques that are still necessary to get voters to the polls.

So, let's compare the two key moments in the campaign for Barack and Hillary. Barack's moment was represented one of courage and grace under tremendous pressure. Hillary's

**Fig. 4: General Election Poll**

represented one of vulnerability and stress under the same kind of pressure. So where does the role of experience play in the minds of voters as they assess the two leaders in their moment of crisis? Unfortunately for Hillary, it didn't play much of a role at all, and for the inexperienced Barack, it allowed him to show the American people that what really matters in leadership is not experience, but grace under pressure; the good judgement to know how to talk about a highly sensitive subject; and the honesty to reveal some precious private parts of his family background that allowed him to connect with the American public in a personal way. This is why Barack Obama won the Democratic nomination in 2008, and went on to be the next President of the United States. In the same way that John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic President, took the country by storm in 1960, so did Barack H. Obama do it as the first African-American President.

## 8. The Theme of the Advertising Campaigns

- Barack Obama: Hope, change, good judgment, ability to fix Washington, Kennedy-like image.
- Hillary Clinton: Fear, leadership, experience, focus on healthcare policies and Bush failures.
- John Edwards: Two Americas, passion, connection to working class people.
- John McCain: Fear of terror, national security, leadership in the Senate for over 20 years.

- Mike Huckabee: Message of struggle from his own life, success as Governor, devoted father and grandfather.
- Mitt Romney: Leadership that would turn around the economy through technology, successful businessman.
- Rudy Giuliani: Fear and leadership during crisis.

## 9. The Use of Marketing by Obama (see > Figure 4)

Barack Obama won because he made better use of the Internet and other marketing-related technologies to support a product, the candidate himself, with a full-fledged marketing campaign. Barack's bold strategy to enter each and every primary race gave him the ability to begin to develop a database of supporters that would prove to be invaluable as he went through the campaign season. With the use of facebook, flickr, twitter and other social networking sites, the Obama strategists successfully targeted young voters who wanted change in the U.S. political system. Through these technological outlets, first used by Howard Dean in 2004, but unsuccessfully, the Obama juggernaut was able to get the support and fund-raising from millions of people who each gave under \$300/person, on average, but enough to build a multi-million dollar campaign that would support the advertising that eventually killed the McCain campaign, that was woefully under-funded.

Obama was able to attract more citizens than any other campaign in history. A total of \$639 millions in funds were raised from individuals giving \$300 or less. His campaign strategists understood and appreciated the use of all communications media, notably the Internet to engage and communicate with voters in a personal and emotional manner (Newman 1994).

The tone and demeanor of Obama was communicated consistently throughout the whole campaign, in all media outlets, from start to finish. The theme of his campaign was consistent, with his upbeat image of hope and change people could believe in. In political marketing, it is equally important to match the message with the candidate as it is to hit on the correct themes (Newman 1999a). Obama had the ability to combine an emotional appeal with a rational foundation, and the discipline to be consistent in positioning and message delivery to brand himself successfully.

From a tactical standpoint, the Obama team was able to anticipate and outsmart his competition. For example, they always showed respect for Clinton, and then McCain, but still were able to brand them successfully. McCain was

labeled as the “third term” Bush. At the same time, similar to the Clinton War Room, the Obama machine built a hi-tech nerve center that was able to rebut negative attacks almost instantaneously (Newman 1994).

The Obama team fought the ground war as brilliantly as the air war (TV advertising). This has been referred to as “Wholesale” and “Retail” politics, respectively. The Obama team built a 50 state strategy, investing in caucuses vis-à-vis the Internet, successfully getting volunteers to attend. This was an area where Howard Dean did not succeed 4 years earlier, having realized that the Internet could be used to target voters, but it is necessary to use follow-up to reinforce commitments to attend caucuses. The Obama team had a volunteer network of Captains in every state that drove volunteers to caucuses, coffees, and supported them in the same way a Corporation would as they roll out a new product.

## 10. Conclusion

Like any great brand, Obama had to deliver on his promises, even during the campaign. The branding system used during the campaign was brilliant, with a 360 degree top-bottom delivery. Below is a list of “brand” characteristics that were utilized during the campaign:

1. At rallies, every single non-handmade sign was in the same typeface, called “Gotham.”
2. All signs were perfectly spaced and arranged.
3. The website used the same elements as the signs: Clean and smooth.
4. Obama became a Pop Celebrity.

These are lessons that can be learned from Obama’s branding strategy, and are easily applicable to all products and services. There must be consistency in the brand strategy at every level of implementation. No, not every organization has a Pop Celebrity that can match the fame and attractiveness of a Barack Obama to be used in their commercials, but it is something that every corporation must now think about as they consider innovative ways of capturing and holding the attention of their customers. There is nothing new and different about the use of such a strategy, but in a post-Obama era, marketing and branding has been changed, both in the political and commercial marketplaces.

The design strategy of a logo must be consistent with the image and core aspects of the product or service being sold, and based on research that reveals the trends that will impact on your customers. A positioning strategy must be thought out very carefully, and then consistently relied upon. The final version of the logo used by the Obama team was developed by Sol Sender, someone who never worked on a political campaign before. According to Mr. Sender, the stripes were re-formulated to project a symmetrical sense of motion across the horizon. One could argue that this projected and reinforced the image of Obama as a “forward” looking leader who would move the country beyond the failures of the past, notably, the failure of the Bush Administration and his foreign policies.

The Obama campaign succeeded because it relied on the successful merging between the worlds of politics and marketing. The Obama campaign will go down in history in the same way as the Kennedy campaign went down in history as a guide for future campaigns in democracies around the world (Newman 1994). Although the application of marketing to politics has been well established for several years now, the Obama campaign highlights some well-known principles in political marketing that will spell success if followed. Marketing, and Political Marketing is all about appealing to peoples’ dreams. Politics is all about selling hope. The successful leader will drive public opinion, and not let it drive the campaign. Leaders must talk about voters’ concerns, not their own. Ultimately, the real challenge to President Obama will be to sell controversial reforms to the people, because the campaign does not end with the election, it is just the beginning. This article was meant to highlight the cross-section of these two different disciplines which when used in concert correctly, can make the difference between winning and losing, as it did in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election ([www.politicalmarketing.com](http://www.politicalmarketing.com)).

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