

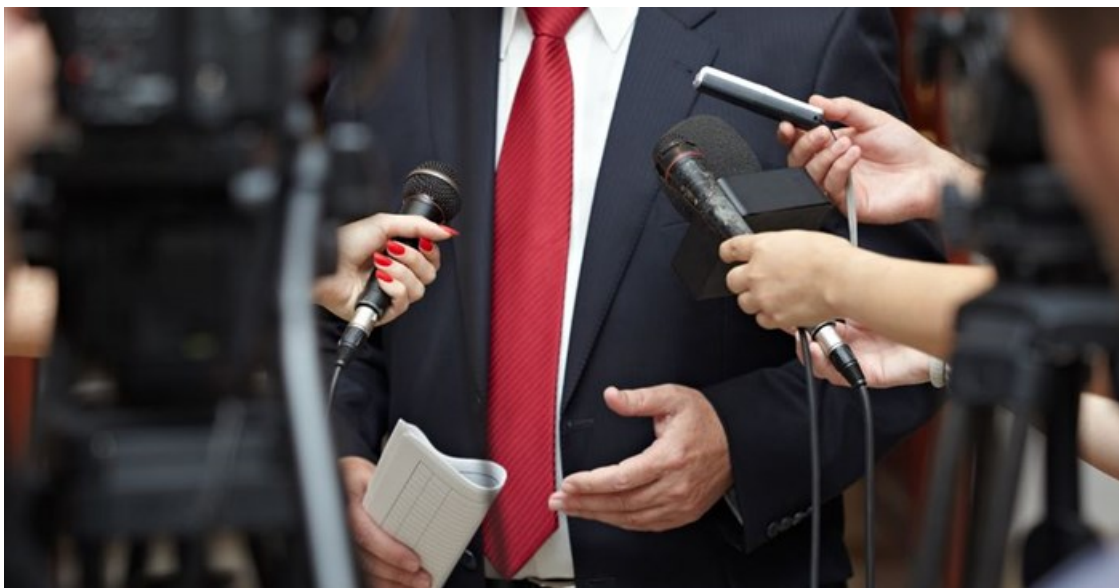
Politics of communication

By  Mike Silver

30 Sep 2015

Growing up with a British father, Sky News was as much a fixture of my childhood as builders' tea and beans on toast...

This subliminal white noise has stayed with me into my adult life and continues to taunt my fiancé when questions to the Prime Minister trump *Project Runway* - more on that another time. Why this fascination? Well, to be honest, I was beginning to ask myself the same question. Self-censorship and political correctness had slowly turned discussions into a generic landscape where you struggle to tell your left from your right. If you think of political parties as brands, their efforts to conform to masses of voters helped them to consistently get us wrong. This changed, however, when two men on opposite sides of the Atlantic, with very different political views, began changing the political landscape as we know it.



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Before we get on to the man with the best hairpiece since John Travolta, let's focus on the previously far lesser known Jeremy Corbyn. On 6 June 2015, Corbyn announced that he would be running for the leadership of the Labour Party in Britain. Little was expected from the firebrand ultra left-wing MP who refused to wear a tie. With Tony Blair's 'New Labour' campaign well entrenched, the pundits predicted he was a no-hoper. Corbyn had other plans though. After the 2008 meltdown, the world had become fixated on austerity. While it helped to steer Prime Minister Cameron's Eton buddies and big business back on track, it did no favours for the poorest at the bottom of the pile. What set Corbyn apart was not just what he represented to low-income earners but also his ability to appeal to a rapidly growing, socially conscious segment of younger voters. In the end, he secured 59.5% of the vote and the most votes in a party leadership election in British political history. Key to Corbyn's success was his accidental hero image and everyday man message and delivery.

Jumping to the far right (and across the Pond), dear Donald Trump has seen a similar spike in popularity through his unapologetic play for the conservative white American vote as part of the Republican nomination race. Like a versatile comedian, few ethnic groups have escaped his wrath. His ability to tap into the paranoid psyche of conservative America has been remarkable. While not always tactful, he has whipped America into a frenzy over everything from illegal immigration to terrorism to perceived Chinese exploitation. His ability to say candidly what so many Republican voters actually think (but are afraid to say) is unrelenting. The fact that there is often little substance to his rhetoric is irrelevant. While the Donald might end up winning neither the Republican nomination nor the White House, he has already exceeded expectations and is the current front runner with 24% support according to recent polls, 9% more than any other candidate (according to a CNN/ORC poll).

So, what can brands and their marketers - both often guilty of middle-of-the-road, generic communication - learn from these completely different (and remarkably similar) campaigns:

1. Common sense: it's important not to over-intellectualise problems, consumers and voters certainly don't.
2. Stand for something: a manifesto that is remarkably similar to that of your competitors is not standing for anything, it's copying. Trump and Corbyn also show that with everyone having moved to the middle, it pays dividends to go far in one direction and in turn show certain voters (and consumers) that you get them!
3. Consistency: once you've identified your brand, hammer it home at each and every message. At every turn Trump plays on traditional American values while Corbyn even took time off from his campaign to join protests aligned to the left.
4. Power of props: Trump has his 'Make America Great Again' baseball cap. Corbyn had his unbuttoned collar and poor boy hat (conveniently, he wears a tie since he's been elected). Both men have made a concerted effort to literally dress up their campaign in a completely unusual visual way, in turn 'merchandising' their message.
5. Mobilising the masses: neither one of them has gotten there on their own. While Trump has fired the pollsters, he's got a whole team of adorers that follow him from pillar to post. Firmly buying into the idea that any press is good press, Trump garnered a considerable amount of PR when one of his supporters asked him whether Obama was in fact a Muslim (Trump refused to confirm or deny the allegation). Corbyn, similarly, tapped into the social consciousness of Generation Y with his passion for tackling their issues, giving them a hero who 'understood' what's important.

Love them or hate them, you can't ignore the success of their marketing tactics to date. For brands, it's simply unacceptable to resort to stale approaches that might have worked in the past. It's almost criminal to believe that a remotely generic positioning strategy works in this day and age. Brands like Nando's have known this for decades, ruffling feathers (excuse the pun) and winning over consumers in the process.

For brands, there is no scarier ballot box than the cluttered supermarket shopping aisle so they'd better rethink the way they take to their soapboxes.

ABOUT MIKE SILVER

Mike Silver is the founder of Elevator, a brand experience agency now part of the Smollan Group. Mike has been working in the below-the-line and brand experience arena since 2000. Current clients include Lipton Ice Tea, Old Mutual and Pernod Ricard.

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