

Turnstiles: Marketing for Event Managers

By Sean King



Marketing Musings from the Presidential Campaigns

As of this writing, immediately before the Conventions for both the Republican and Democratic Parties, we can only comment to the results of the primary season. Obviously, the world of politics is a fluid situation through November 8, but as a one snapshot in time, we hope to offer a different perspective for you to view your marketing work and planning.

Fascinating! It's really the only word you can use to describe what has happened so far in the 2016 presidential campaign. There has been a great deal spoken and written about these campaigns so far, but there must be some marketing lessons learned to help us in our own work. At first you might ask what presidential elections have to do with marketing an event or a festival – but trust me, there is as much crossover in politics as there are in the entertainment, sports or consumer products industries.

Hopefully, we will be able to frame a few questions that might shift the perspective on your work and have you think about your own challenges through the prism of how political campaigns have formulated and executed their plans. What you will not get here is any political commentary in favor or against any candidate, unless of course it offends or excites me as a marketer.

I do not fashion myself to be a political consultant. Actually, I'm far from it. But I am an enthusiastic observer and an acute learner from the lessons being taught when hundreds of millions dollars are being spent on advertising and marketing campaigns. Sometimes the money is spent on ideology, but the majority of it is spent on brands – those of candidates and political parties.

Let's look at some of the interesting items on the Democratic side first.

Hillary Clinton's candidacy was a foregone conclusion eight years ago. For the better part of the last decade, the campaign that was built is now being executed. Yet an upstart self-proclaimed socialist in his 70's gave the campaign a real run for their money – especially among the youngest voting constituency – those in their 20's and 30's.

Sen. Sanders tapped into the same grass roots that propelled the current President to office. The small \$25, \$100, \$250 donors are the ones who created a war chest that even exceeded Clinton's fundraising efforts for several months.

Now, let's look at this from a marketing perspective.

On one hand you have an established name with almost immediate brand recognition. But the brand has its own challenges. Rightfully or wrongfully, there's a question of trust not only in Mrs. Clinton's history but also as an establishment candidate. This uneasiness in the electorate was the pathway the Sanders team chose to follow and amplify to great success. It was not a winning strategy, but Sanders was able to keep young people involved based on having a message that people believed in and wanted to hear.

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and leverage it to your own advantage.

We like to call it marketing jujitsu. If you're promoting an event that already has carved out space in the public's mind, it is imperative to use that for your own advantage. One of the reasons new events and new programming too often fail is because there's no brand recognition with the public at-large, but in creating comparisons or contrasts in the audience's mind, you can help to generate the excitement necessary for your event to gain the necessary momentum.

My own personal perspective is the Sanders team did a better job of creating a vision for folks to buy into. The Clinton team, on the other hand was being much more pragmatic about how they would govern once elected.

Sanders on the other hand was building upon the enthusiasm, especially from the millennial generation, that anything is possible and a revolution can break the stalemate that has frozen Washington for so long.

Here's another point to make in the world of event marketing: **Having the opportunity to create a vision for your guests or supporters is sometimes more important than all of the pragmatic approaches you can list.** This is not an easy strategy. However, most marketing professionals are competent on one side of the ledger or the other but not both.

How do you approach your marketing and promotion? Can you tap into both the vision side of what your guests want to experience and the pragmatic side of what they will encounter at your event? The difference between mediocre success and wild accolades may be the difference in you being able to connect both sides.

Lastly, one of the most interesting statistics from the primaries comes from the analysts at Nate Silvers' fivethirtyeight.com website is the impact of Facebook on this campaign.

Bernie Sanders has been substantially ahead on the number of likes across the country, well in excess of Mrs. Clinton.

One might think given the importance of social media in the last campaigns – particularly in 2008, that the Clinton team would've embraced a strategy to build legions of followers and

"likes." However, they have seceded that territory to the Sanders campaign, and one might argue it has worked extremely well for the challenger.

Of course, 'likes' are not votes, but you would have to admit it would be an indicator of trends across the country especially in younger demographics.

The populist movement in the Democratic party was led by Sanders, yet more people voted for Mrs. Clinton. There was a real, visceral energy associated with Sanders supporters, yet Clinton has lacked the excitement and electricity so far to spur a movement similar to the campaigns in 2008 and 2012.

What is to be learned of all of this? Of course, we don't have access to the inside data the campaigns have, but from what we can extrapolate, the ability for the Sanders campaign to engage through social media is one reason for his success.

Is this because of the "revolution" messaging?

Is this because social media gains more momentum with big, major changes?

Either way, with the changes that Facebook has instilled over the past two years, it is clear that the power is in the hands of the individual and the more any organization, campaign, event or festival can connect with their individual constituents, the more successful your social media strategy will be.

The Red Side

Heading into their Convention in Cleveland, the Republicans are being led by an upstart, political newcomer who has mastered the merging of social media and celebrity to engage an unsatisfied population. The old school establishment never found the answer for how to address this challenger and this has become a classic case of an old brand not knowing how to pivot to take on a new brand.

In a primary campaign that once had seventeen candidates, only one survived, yet his support from fellow Republicans is minimal at best. Of course, there are plenty of reasons for this lack of engagement, including messaging that can be determined to be questionable

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at best to even his biggest supporters.

Gone are candidates who represented different factions of the party, some which were on paper to be exceptionally capable candidates, but who failed to connect with the voting public.

The Jeb Bush campaign, with incredible name recognition and a war chest of \$100 million plus, was unable to go toe-to-toe with the appetite for change within the country. Unfortunately, even with some progressive ideas, the Bush brand simply did not have the luster needed to propel the candidate into a meaningful position within the competition.

There is a marketing lesson to be learned by brands and entities that **you will not keep your same space indefinitely by doing the same old, same old.** When in all reality, you’ll get a shrinking slice of the pie as newer, more agile competition takes your market share. This sounds unremarkably familiar to many of my colleagues in the arts world.

The Bush campaign is a political version of a “New and Improved” product that really wasn’t, and failed to resonate with the audience. No matter how much money you put into marketing, campaigns such as these are destined to fail by not connecting to the imagination and vision for the future. Of course, the political world skews this concept due to heaviness of the subject matter (economy, trade, healthcare, foreign policy), but one can project these same challenges to any event that simply lacks the energy to drive people to do something.

**What do you want me to do?
Give me a vision of what it’s going to be like when we get there!**

In too many cases, good marketing folks wring their hands saying “we didn’t have enough resources (money, time, personnel)”, when in most cases it is the concept of what we are selling that is not connecting with our audience.

On the other hand, Donald Trump is the candidate that the 21st Century created. In this social media-driven, what’s trending, brash is best,

speak it like it is, reality-tv world, Trump is the natural evolution.

Trump has proven many of the marketing truisms that are out there. Celebrity has value. Speaking in sound bytes is how people like to learn their news. Twitter is the perfect platform for personalities to share their worldviews.

What’s better than Twitter to share your thoughts if you are a star of the political, entertainment or sports world? **But just because Twitter (or Snapchat or Instagram) works for them, doesn’t mean it works for every marketer.**

Twitter is the platform for anyone that has a following. The entire platform is driven by celebrity – whether a movie star, sports icon or a high profile personality local to your community or activity. Most organizations and events fail on Twitter because there’s no “there” and the audience is too small or too niche or too seasonal for it to work.

When organizations or events use Twitter in that same way, we fail because there’s not a building of a conversation and it’s simply a moment in time. We haven’t built the following necessary for people to hang on our every word. We can use Twitter to broadcast information, but to really tap into our follower’s imagination and make it mean something, more engagement is necessary.

That fact, combined with the small percentage of the population on Twitter, causes it to not be worth the time invested by our colleagues at non-profits or departments where time is the most precious resource.

One of the other marketing staples that the Trump campaign has been able to master is to **find the right message and stay on it.** Trump has been speaking the words many people want to hear. “Make America Great Again.” This is very simple and one of the few messages on which he has stayed consistent. Despite where the other candidates may take the conversation, he has claimed the space of what his targeted audience wants to hear.

In the end, the results have been pretty remarkable. Through the primaries, the

Republicans have come out in droves to vote at participation levels higher than the past few election cycles.

Trump has tapped into a common man ethos or at the very least – the place where a vocal majority of Republican mindset resides. What stands yet to be realized is whether the cult of personality can win in the general election.

From a marketing perspective what is interesting to watch is how Trump’s aggressive style and personality and “winning” messaging plays to so many different demographics. One of the pillars I believe of successful marketing is to **“go big or go home.”** And it is clear Trump is using this strategy in spades, although maybe not in the way many would have hoped.

If one were writing this script (and who knows someone might be) what is the next, bigger, more controversial statement that can be made by candidate Trump that will feed the next news cycle?

Momentum in advertising is a difficult thing to harness and the Trump campaign has been successful at generating more and more each given day. Another lesson to be learned for marketers or fundraisers.

The new approach of this campaign is foregoing the tactics established over several decades of campaigns of not raising significant amounts of money, not using traditional television advertising, relying solely on social media, not having a “ground game” of volunteers in the key battleground states. Will this pan out? Or at some point will the traditionalist approach be needed and will it be too late to get started.

It is clear that political campaigning has changed in 2016 and maybe forever. **Establishment is gone. Dealing straight with the public on your terms is the norm.** Those are both trends we as event and festival marketers need to wrap our heads around, sooner rather than later.

I encourage you to reflect through some of the elements we reviewed here to see how they may help you in sharing your unique event or festival. What would you do similarly or what would you avoid when creating your next marketing plan?

And beyond all, please
VOTE on November 8!

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