



MARKETING LESSONS FROM THE **2016 ELECTION CAMPAIGN**

As I write this article, five months removed from the 2016 Presidential Election, the reverberations are still being felt. Some repercussions are good, some not so much. But one thing is for sure, marketing and in particular social media, played a major role in the outcome of who eventually wound up occupying the White House and we may never be the same.

Who would've thought that FBI officials would be commenting on marketing and social media? But the effects of this past election have implications far beyond just the borders of the United States, but also throughout democracies around the world.

So you may be asking yourself, "what does the work of hackers and digital warriors overseas have to do with my festival or event?" Indulge me for a few minutes to illustrate how some of the strategies and tactics used in the most recent election can help you market more effectively and provide you a glimpse into where marketing is headed.

Before we begin I want to let you know this is not about the politics or the candidates in the election. Nor is it about the popular vote or alternative facts.

This article is more of an Op-Ed piece with some hard and fast takeaways from the marketing impacts of the election and a glimpse towards the horizon of what is yet to come in marketing's future.

The journey to 2016 actually begins in 2008 when the Obama campaign revolutionized the way campaigns were executed. The campaign planners took traditional methods and expanded them to target, organize and motivate voters in very specific states and counties. Mass media advertising platforms such as print, radio and television were still powerful. But as social media – in particular Facebook – was still in its infancy, the era of big data was about to dawn. The Obama campaign tapped into what data existed at that time and calculated as best they could down to the precinct who needed to vote for the Democratic Party to be victorious.

The takeaway from 2008 was that political campaigns would never be the same. In 2016, just eight short years later, the game has changed again. Social media is far from mature, but much more robust than eight years prior. With targeting and message-tailoring on digital platforms and

the next generation of automated marketing all around us, the decision on which candidate to vote for, which car to buy and which event to attend will never be the same.

In 2016, a record \$2 billion was spent on just one election. Of that \$2 billion, the two numbers we need to take away is \$1.055 billion and \$500 million. The former number is the amount the Clinton campaign spent and the latter, the expenditure of the Trump campaign. \$1.055 billion to lose. Let that sink in a minute.

With so much money being spent on advertising surely some lessons were learned for the rest of us. Our role as event marketers, and all marketers, is affected knowing that with a goal of winning an election, tremendous levels of testing and analysis went into each step of the campaigns. The lessons learned will eventually trickle down to our marketing project plans; some sooner than others.

So where did all of that money go? The easy answer is that the Clinton campaign focused on all of the traditional media and campaign trappings of staff, travel and boots on the ground organization. The Trump campaign leveraged the fact they knew exactly what states they need to win and targeted their efforts on those regions with laser focus using the latest tools in digital and social media. *The takeaway as events marketers is that we need to remain focused on our objectives and try to eliminate waste from our marketing to track results and leverage success.*

Among the din of Fake News, Twitter, Hashtags and Wikileaks there are some strategies and tactics to learn for our own events. Once again, with hundreds of millions of dollars being spent on advertising and promotion in the election, it is beneficial for us to learn from the success and failures of those who fought these battles and leverage them for our own success.

Here are some quick topics that have become part of the national discourse, but can help you in strategizing your next campaign or promotion:

Fake News - As one source of the FBI's analysis of the impact of outsiders on the election, it is hypothesized that foreign governments utilized ways to deploy stories that were factually false and injected them into social media channels. With the use of automated technology or bots, these stories gained traction and the line blurred between truth and fiction.



At one point in the fall, stories verified as “fake” had more engagement than stories from “mainstream” news sources.

Pew Research reports that 60% of people get their news from Facebook or social media. If you don't have a strategy or significant presence on Facebook, you better.

Twitter – I've long believed that Twitter was the bastion of those individuals with huge personas such as politicians, actors, musicians, athletes, etc. As the current President reinforces nearly every day, Twitter has its greatest effect when amplified by all other media. The President had 19 million followers on Election Day. He received 66 million votes. Those votes came from more than just Twitter followers.

Unless you have a very strong personality associated with your event, I recommend you use Twitter as a way to disseminate information as you would any other news outlet or organization. Leave the colorful characterizations or the follower-building to others you can tap into via retweet to deliver results efficiently on this platform.

Hashtags – Once the domain of snarky web trolls, hashtags have now become an avenue to streamline your event online and aggregate all of your social engagements under one umbrella. The single most successful hashtag of the election was #feelthebern in support of Bernie Sanders. Created by a volunteer supporter after much time was spent by staffers in testing other options, #feelthebern tapped into the zeitgeist and away it went!

Referring back to the FBI, they analyzed one particular incident in August 2016 where foreign actors created a major news story out of a small uprising in Turkey by simply using hashtags such as #Bengazi, #Trump in order for the story to begin trending and eventually get the attention of the mainstream news in order to amplify. It worked surprisingly well enough to lead coverage the next day in many mainstream news outlets.

If you are not pulling together all of your social under one hashtag and promoting it as we once all did with websites, you are missing an opportunity for your audience and followers on keeping up with

what is happening and what is next. Keep an eye on hashtags in your community and use those as well.

Wikileaks – While many can disagree on the tactics of why and how Wikileaks gained a foothold on the international stage, we can agree that a very simple and easily duplicated strategy can be implemented based on developments in the 2016 election. A “slow drip” news strategy was employed throughout the final few months of the campaign by which a small piece of news was delivered each day surrounding one aspect of the campaign and then amplified through a choreographed communications strategy.

What if you were to execute the same strategy for your own event? What if you were able to leave enticing breadcrumbs every step of the way towards your eventual goal. If done creatively (and not maliciously), in theory you would be able to heighten expectations and build engagement among those who follow you closely, and others who just might like to be part of the fun.

These four concepts are just a few of the takeaways that event marketers might want to be thinking about when planning their next advertising and marketing campaigns. With such a proliferation of resources put towards winning the election, we would not be taking advantage of the brilliant teams of marketers who were tasked with using the most cutting edge tools and ideas to deliver an election victory.

“Marketing Lessons from the 2016 Election Campaign” is also an IFEA Webinar available to members for viewing. Join us to learn even more takeaways from this monumental sea change in the way marketing and advertising is working at the very cutting edge.

Sean King is a Principle at Aspire Consulting Group in Allentown, PA and has been consulting with small businesses and non-profit organizations for over 20 years. He also blogs regularly at www.artsmarketingblog.org. You can follow Sean on Twitter @skingaspire or contact him at: sking.aspire@gmail.com.