

Learning From The Obama Brand

Winning Lessons Business Leaders Should Borrow From the Historical Obama Victory and Its Redefinition of Marketing and Communications

SHOW ME AN AMERICAN CEO WITH THE FORTITUDE to pick an issue, a theme, a brand, a strategy, a mission that is truly authentic and touches the hearts and minds of their consumer, and then devotes their unwavering commitment, support and resources to that focus for nearly two years, and I'll show you a CEO that is winning their campaign for consumer allegiance.

REGARDLESS OF ONE'S VOTER PREFERENCE, there are significant strategic lessons to be learned from the historic victory of Senator Barack Obama.

After all, this election witnessed the most engaged electorate in the history of this great nation—culminating in the largest voting population ever. And what is a vote but perhaps the most meaningful reflection of consumer engagement and behavior.

This was no accident. It was an awe-inspiring branding campaign that should be studied by enlightened CEOs around the globe.

The Obama campaign was game changing. And the CEO who isn't paying attention ... well, isn't paying attention.

This campaign, like it or not, elicited extraordinary passion on both sides of the political spectrum, a passion that most company CEOs would—and do—pay big bucks to try to achieve. And while “change” may be taking its course on the landscape of American politics, change should also be infiltrating the strategic direction of the C-suites and boardrooms across America by applying the lessons of modern day politicking to the branding and marketing of their products and services.

Winning today demands new ways of thinking and uniquely aggressive competitive strategies:

FIRST: POSITION AS THE INSURGENT UNDERDOG—AND NOT THE INCUMBENT

Incumbents in business and politics tend to play defense, embrace the status quo and celebrate too soon. Remember, at every key juncture of the 2008 campaign, the Obama team attacked and defined itself as aggressive underdogs; they fought as if they were behind, and they invented new tactics.

And the corollary for every successful business leader today is that you must embrace and ride ahead of change. You must position yourself against the marketplace incumbent and show how you are different, special and better. And you must think, plan, and act like a come-from-behind insurgent underdog and motivate your employees to do the same. Playing offense is the new way to win.



SECOND: STRATEGY IS BOSS

In politics and business, strategy forms a trajectory toward either victory or defeat. For example, a year ago, Sen. Hillary Clinton's campaign undervalued polling numbers indicating over 70 percent of the American people wanted change. They launched a strategy centered on experience. And it took Senator Obama's "Change We Can Believe In" victory in Iowa for the Clinton campaign to reposition the first woman running seriously for President as representing change.

As with the Obama campaign, a successful business leader's strategy is the ice bucket of discipline that cools down emotions, settles all arguments and drives everything he or she does—and doesn't do. This strategy should be based on the intersection of what key constituents—such as customers and shareholders—want and what the company can and must do to deliver long-term value.

Strategy must herd the thousands of small and tactical decisions you make every day and focus every one of your employees and constituents in the same direction and on the same objectives. Making strategy boss is fundamental to victory.

THIRD: USE COMMUNICATIONS TO CONTROL EVERY DEFINITION INVOLVING YOUR BUSINESS LEADERSHIP

Last year, Karl Rove wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that communications directors have replaced ad executives as the new stars of winning political campaigns.

True enough: The hourly cycle of "free" media has become more important than even the cleverest political advertising. Moreover, the Obama campaign's revolutionary use of the Web has done for the Internet what the I-Pod did for music.

So the lesson for CEOs today is to fully leverage communications to take control of fundamental definitions:

- **Define Yourself:** Over 30 years, virtually no global political campaign has been won with a candidate predominately on the defensive—and not controlling their own definition. This is what Senator Obama did with his Philadelphia speech on race in America; and

this is what the Obama campaign did, using contrast, in defining John McCain as an extension of George W. Bush. In politics and business, successful leaders define their own character, personality and values.

- **Define Change:** Falling behind the forces of change puts an organization or leader in a reactive mode, on the defensive. Status quo sameness does not win votes, customers or business partners. So, as the Obama campaign shows us, there is only one effective competitive strategy today: lead change.
- **Define the Future:** In politics, the candidate who has best defined the future for voters in compelling and credible ways has won nearly every democratic election in history. So, too, the successful CEO must define the future of his or her own industry and business in compelling and credible ways.

These are winning lessons business leaders should borrow from politics and the historical Obama victory and its redefinition of marketing and communications. In turbulent times like these, new challenges demand a new strategic model that can help today's CEOs win. ■

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David Morey and Core Strategy Group use a totally unique insurgent framework. The goal is to help businesses succeed. And they've proudly helped thousands of business leaders gain new market advantage and victory.

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