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Candidates' brand attributes factor into voters' decisions

Ever since Joe McGinniss' 1968 *The Selling of the President* about the packaging of Richard Nixon, the candidate-as-product has been a recurring campaign-coverage theme. Candidates are launched, positioned, and advertised like products.

Candidate brands matter because voters, like consumers, have neither the time nor inclination to study each offering in detail to make a fully informed choice. Brands are shorthand for traits that speak to psychic or emotional needs. Am I an environmentally sensitive outdoorsy type? Patagonia must be the brand for me.

So what are the front-runners' brand attributes? John McCain is the "straight-talker" – the un-politician. But he thought he so owned this positioning that he could take chances with it. The result was extreme brand confusion and dilution – roughly comparable to Starbucks getting caught running coffee "sweat-fields" in Columbia. To reclaim his brand, McCain is now taking extremely unpopular positions like wanting more, not less, war in Iraq. Good luck with that, John.

Rudy Giuliani's principal brand attribute is strong leadership. His brand's iconic moment was, of course, 9/11 when he courageously marched to Ground Zero. Strong leadership is always a powerful attribute for a presidential candidate. And, while 9/11 is the brand's "logo," it is given depth by Giuliani's willingness to take on everyone from labor unions to "squeegee terrorists" in his successful effort to remake Gotham into a livable city. He continues to reinforce the brand by standing up to the social conservatives in his own party on issues like abortion, gun control, and gay rights.

Barack Obama owns a brand attribute that is always strong in commercial and political markets: "new" or "fresh." Voters are unhappy with the war in Iraq, political bickering, the direction of the country, and the incumbent President. Being fresh has enormous emotional appeal. But, recent political history is littered with fresh candidates who went stale: Howard Dean, Ross Perot, and Gary Hart. Staying fresh through a full campaign cycle will be difficult, if not impossible. Obama's brand managers should be checking his "pull date" and preparing for some rebranding.

Hillary Clinton is an exercise in brand extension (if you liked Bill, you'll love Hillary). The strategy worked for George W. Bush, but because of that, it may not work as well this time. Clinton has two sets of brand attributes. To insiders, she is "inevitable" (better get on the bandwagon). To voters, she is "experienced" – an audacious claim by one of the least experienced candidates in either party.

Whatever brand attributes the remaining candidates may want, they are most likely stuck with "loser." Even when the media cover their campaigns, the tone is "nice guy likely to finish last – if at all." And, who has the strongest brand growth potential? Those yet to be introduced: those boys from Tennessee, Newt Gingrich and Fred Thompson. ■

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