



GREG SCHNEIDERS

Candidates' VP choices are risky for their brands and reputations

Presidential campaigns can offer great lessons in brand management, and never more so than in the race between Sens. John McCain (R-AZ) and Barack Obama (D-IL). No two politicians have done a better job of brand management than these two. McCain's brand is "experienced maverick" – 26 years in Congress, often taking on the leadership of his own party and championing principled and unpopular causes. Obama's brand is "charismatic change agent" – young, bright, eloquent, and a symbol of a brave, new, globalized world.

But, as they headed toward their parties' respective conventions, each man's brand seemed as limiting as it was empowering. As a Republican with vast DC experience, McCain could not hope to compete with Obama for the critical "change vote" that seemed likely to determine the election's outcome. Obama seemed to be offering many voters more change, as well as inexperience and uncertainty, than they could comfortably swallow. Each needed to expand and shore up his brand.

Enter Sen. Joe Biden (D-DE) and Gov. Sarah Palin (R-AK). Obama chose first, and, rather than reinforce his personal brand, he opted to "diversify" and shore it up where it was perceived to be lacking. He chose a seasoned DC insider with even more foreign policy experience than McCain. McCain also opted for diversity, going with a running mate who is as much of an outsider as you can get – a first-term, female governor of Alaska with zero DC, national, or foreign policy experience.

Both candidates shored up, but also diluted their brands. Why would a "change agent" pick the ultimate DC insider?

Why would a candidate obsessed with foreign policy place a neophyte within a heartbeat of the Oval Office and the nation's nuclear arsenal? Each candidate has benefited some from the shoring up of his brand, but each has also run the risk of undermining his core appeal.

Which candidate will be better served by his choice? As I write this, there is a growing consensus (supported by recent polls) that McCain has gained more than Obama from his running mate. I disagree. I think the risk for McCain is much more serious than for Obama. If, in the coming weeks, Palin is deemed to be truly unqualified to assume the presidency, the McCain brand is undermined in two critical ways. First, his presidency could be deemed potentially more "risky" than that of Obama. Second, McCain could be found guilty of bad judgment and gross irresponsibility.

If the campaign reveals Biden to be too much of an insider, it will surely take some luster off Obama's change-agent brand. But it does not raise questions about his judgment, nor does it suggest that the country will be placing a high-stakes bet on his good health and safety.

Curiously, as brand managers, McCain turned out to be the bigger risk-taker, while Obama "played it safe." At this writing, it seems as if McCain's gamble paid off. If I were a gambler myself, I'd lay heavy odds it will not in the end. ■

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