

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

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Lessons from the Chief CEO

It's all about Marketing

By Robert Donnelly



Positioning won over prattle in the current election. Obama isn't a household word, but **change** is.

The entrepreneurial CEO won out over his more mature competitors.

As I have said in many of my columns marketing is the battle for the customers mind. This election was the epitome of that marketing maxim.

The goal of positioning anything a brand or a concept, in this case the value proposition – **change**, is to get the message to “stick” in the voters mind. To occupy a position in a voters mental value grid. To own a share of their mind. To get through the word filter in the mind. To connect with an existing value threshold, and resonate.

Whether marketing a product or a presidential candidate it's about “differentiation”. Reis and Trout in their seminal tome on positioning said the “whoever gets into the mind first – wins”. Obviously, in this case Obama did just that.

If you are successful and can maintain that position you preempt your competition from owning it. We see that time and time again with many familiar brands like: Polo, BMW, Coke, Apple, Nike and many others.

Obama coined **change** and stuck to it throughout the campaign. While his competitors referred to change and used many other words to reflect their positions, Obama was first to own the word **change**. And each time one of his competitors used the word they only reinforced the position already established by Obama.

His primary competitors Clinton and McCain had many slogans with varying value propositions, Clinton started with “experience”, then shifted to “countdown to change”, and ended up with “solutions for America”. None of which resonated like “change” from Obama.

McCain had so many slogans like the “straight talk express”, “hero”, “maverick”, and others, that his message became blurred and incomprehensible. While Obama stuck with and reinforced **change**, in his advertising and promotional strategy funded by the chest full of money he raised during the campaign.

Shifting promotional messages has never worked as well as consistency. Think about how many different slogans Burger King has had, or Pepsi for that matter. McDonald's and Coke are still the market leaders with the same consistent value proposition year-in and year-out.

To win and create a position takes repetitive promoting of the value proposition. Brand equity is built on the repetitive broadcasting of a brand's unique selling proposition. Look at how much Mercedes spends to remind us they are promoting the “best engineered car” and BMW advising that they have the “ultimate driving experience”.

In every market successful marketers win the battle for the customers mind by promoting their solution as either: the best, something unique, or the cheapest. If your value proposition doesn't “fit” one of those primary criteria that customers are looking for then you have a “fuzzy” image.

In an economic and political climate looking for something different, or a new way forward – **change** was the word that worked. Whoever owned **change** and could reinforce that value proposition **won!**

It's about perception and common sense. Perception is reality in marketing. The voter is looking for something to

believe in like the consumer is looking for value in the products they buy. Your marketing message has to be clear, consistent and resonate with customers.

The political rhetoric of candidates in an election has to meet the same criteria. Every word is dissected by the press and the population. Stumbling over not knowing how many homes you own or talking about "soccer Mom's", and using phrases like "you betcha" does not instill confidence in voters when compared to the calm deliberate and clear presentation of your competitor.

This election campaign was marketing at its best and many lessons can be learned from the way the battle for the voters mind was waged by our new Chief CEO.

If you have questions about how to position your company or brands let me know and let's start a dialogue.



An entrepreneur himself, Bob has spent most of his career involved with starting, growing and selling businesses. Having held managerial positions with IBM, Pfizer and Exxon, he draws upon extensive organizational experience with large and small companies in advising CEOs of growing firms. He is available online to answer questions from Chief Executive readers, as well as offer workshops, tips, books to read and a monthly online column about common issues facing CEOs of growing firms. Bob has been featured in USA TODAY for his work with Inc 500 firms and is associated with NYU's Stern Graduate School of business in their Center for Entrepreneurial Studies where he is a Venture Mentor, Marketing Strategist and Business Plan Reviewer.

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