



## HIGH-DEFINITION NEWS

# Politics and Marketing: What Candidates and Product Marketers Learn From Each Other

By Clark Crowder

Here are a few tidbits that illustrate the blurring of lines between politics and marketing: in a Consumer Intentions and Actions Study conducted by BIG Research, a polling company, it was found that the majority of Wal-Mart shoppers support George Bush in the upcoming US presidential election. The study also found that the majority of shoppers at Best Buy electronics stores support challenger John Kerry.

In another survey, conducted by two big branding companies, it was reported by *The Wall Street Journal* that consumers associate President Bush with Bud Light beer and Ford cars and Senator Kerry with Heineken beer and BMW cars.

Links associating presidential candidates with certain retailers and brands is the study of voters as consumers—and vice versa—because in fact, they are both. In the same way, politicians are both candidates and products.

As we veer into the final weeks of the Grand Ritual of the US election cycle, marketing pros will recognize many techniques long used by the private sector that have been co-opted by candidates at all levels of government. On the other hand, politicians have come up with new techniques of their own that are instructive to those charged with branding, sales, marketing and advertising in the private sector.

In this election cycle, there are a couple of new phenomena that are affecting the way candidates position and market themselves. For example, blogging has added a new layer to the political process. Bloggers, those who use Weblog technology to self-publish political opinion on the Internet, have increased in importance in this election as a check on the news media. For example, a blogger exposed phony documents used by CBS-TV in a story about President Bush's National Guard service. Blogging has also become a very important conduit for spreading vote-getting messages and information in a "word-of-mouth" style.

The Web and the Internet have increased in importance as well. While marketers have always recognized and utilized the power of the Net, political organizations have taken its use to new levels in terms of cheaply, but rapidly organizing and motivating grass roots efforts. Howard Dean's early front-runner status in this election cycle was partly attributed to his team's mastery of the Internet and viral marketing.

## What Marketers Learn from Politicians

In particular, there are three characteristics of political campaigns that marketers can learn from as they consider their own organization's marketing and sales strategies.

**Perpetual Crisis Mode** – First, political campaigns are in perpetual crisis mode. This gives them a palpable sense of energy and urgency. The use of emotional rhetoric and polarization gives a good campaign a fervor that is contagious, and which pulls in volunteers, and ultimately voters, when the call to action comes.

Some industries have this urgency built in because of the rapid pace of change. For instance, in the Silicon Valley, where the competitive landscape is intense and technological innovation breeds rapid change, it isn't hard to maintain energy in a workplace or sales force because the business is always at stake. But even in more traditional industries such as commercial airlines or supermarkets, margins are wafer thin and pricing is a dynamic, competitive, minute-by-minute activity.

**Staying Close to the Customer** – Political landscapes change and shift constantly with each 24-hour news cycle. This calls for deep, up-to-the-minute monitoring of that environment and acuity in measuring voter opinions. Continuous polling both by the political candidates and the news media allows presidential candidates to know day-by-day and word-for-word how their message is being received. This enables messages to be cast—and recast—based on developments in the world, another candidate's pronouncements, or news outlets' "take" on the candidate's own message.

Marketers also need to develop the same "rapid-response" capability to measure the opinions of consumers, customers, regulators, and other business stakeholders. Marketers use advertising copy testing, brand attribute tracking and competitive assessment (among many tools) to gauge their position in the marketplace, but the comparative *infrequency* of the application of these measures vs. major political candidates often allows a competitor to silently gain ground.

**Nimbleness** – The third instructive characteristic of political campaigns is nimbleness. Although *each* US presidential campaign will spend over US \$300 million during the course of a 9-10 month campaign, so much is at stake that political campaigns must be able to turn sharply in making massive shifts in resources and in messaging and positioning. When it looks like a given state is a lost cause, or that the votes are locked up with a specific segment of the electorate, campaigns — based on continuous polling — instantly shift advertising and human resources to another crucial swing state where there is more bang for the political buck. This ability to "short-cycle" and quickly shift resources in response to minute-by-minute measurement is a marketer's dream.

This is partly because the "campaign" is essentially autocratic and directed by a small core of leaders who can make quick, top-down decisions with a minimum of bureaucracy. It's also because the laws governing campaign advertising and communications allow campaigns to gain the lowest rates and most favorable contract terms with radio and television outlets.

## What Politicians Learn from Marketers

Politicians lift many techniques and strategies directly from marketing textbooks and best practices. Here are several areas where they could learn even more:

**Use of Technology** – The discipline that companies bring to the marketing process is something that politicians could learn from. Using technology to make a sales force more efficient is something that the political organizations are beginning to do, but they have a long way to go. The Web’s ability to unite disparate or far-flung aspects of the candidates’ volunteer armies (i.e., *its* sales force) is very powerful and can be a key in feeding up-to-the-minute information and motivation to its volunteers.

**Precision Targeting** – Politicians can also learn from the ways marketers provide clarity in situations where lines are blurred. For example, there has been much talk of swing voters and “battleground” states in this election, but who exactly are the swing voters both candidates seek to persuade and how can they deliver a direct message to them? Very recent studies have shown that young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 are largely undecided or are not even planning to vote. How can the candidates get to them with a message that will motivate them to get to the polls on November 2?

Marketers would likely prescribe a strategy that primarily encompasses the Internet, including blogs and e-mail, and maybe a little bit of well-placed advertising on very targeted television and radio programs in the swing states. Also, seen on the streets of San Francisco are black T-shirts that merely have the date of the election emblazoned on the front — so as to prompt questions from youthful voters. Also, the right celebrity endorsements wouldn’t hurt with that age range either because pop culture and certain large sub-cultures are very important to young people.

**Leveraging Sponsorships** – Celebrity endorsements have long been a staple of marketing businesses, but in the past couple of elections, presidential candidates have also sought to leverage “star power” by not only seeking endorsements from popular musicians, but also by getting them to tour key, contested states, as Bruce Springsteen and others are doing this election for [moveon.org](http://moveon.org), a group committed to a “regime change” in the White House.

So, with the presidential election in a statistical dead heat, we voter/consumers can step into the voting booth, fire up the touch-screen and vote for the candidate that has found a way to resonate with us. May the best candidate — or marketer — win!

***Your feedback is welcomed and should be directed to Clark Crowdus, Principal, High-Definition Consulting Group at [clark@high-def.biz](mailto:clark@high-def.biz).***

---

**RESOURCES:**

The following resources are recommended by High-Definition Consulting Group:

**Web site: E-Democracy.org: Promoting Candidate and Election Web sites**  
<http://www.e-democracy.org/us/promote.html>

**Web site: E-Week**  
<http://www.eweek.com/category2/0,1738,1237933,00.asp>

**Web site: Factcheck.org (Annenberg Public Policy Center)**  
<http://factcheck.org/article.aspx?docID=131>

**Web site: Wheretodoresearch.com**  
<http://www.wheretodoresearch.com/Index.htm>  
<http://www.wheretodoresearch.com/Marketing.htm>

**Article: MSNBC: "Candidates and Celebrities: Gilt-edged by Association?"**  
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3540741/>

**Article: The Marketing of The President 2004 – Baseline Magazine**  
<http://www.baselinemag.com/article2/0,1397,1409226,00.asp>

**Article: Showtime Seeks Presidential Candidates for New Series – Promo Magazine**  
[http://promomagazine.com/news/marketing\\_showtime\\_seeks\\_presidential/](http://promomagazine.com/news/marketing_showtime_seeks_presidential/)

**Blog News for Bloggers – Presidential Candidates Turn to Blogs**  
<http://blogsearchengine.com/blog/index.php?p=38>

---

*High-Definition News* is brought to you by High-Definition Consulting Group, a San Francisco-based marketing and business consulting firm that specializes in identifying and clarifying marketplace opportunities. Our aim is to bring you brief, but thought-provoking content and nuggets of marketing wisdom from our experience and from the experience of others in an easy-to-digest format.

**TO CONTACT HIGH-DEFINITION CONSULTING GROUP, please do not reply to this message, but use the following contact information:**

**E-mail: [clark@high-def.biz](mailto:clark@high-def.biz)**  
**Phone: 1-415-876-4300**  
**Fax: 1-415-876-4333**  
**33 Lupine Avenue, Ste. 300, San Francisco, CA 94118 USA**  
**<http://www.high-def.biz>**

Copyright © 2004 High-Definition Consulting Group. All rights reserved.

---

**PAY IT FORWARD - If you find any material in this or future newsletters of interest to your clients, colleagues, or friends, feel free to forward it to them with our compliments.**