Personal Brands: An Exploratory Analysis of Personal Brands in Australian Political Marketing

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Personal Brands: An Exploratory Analysis of Personal Brands in Australian Political Marketing

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Abstract

Personal brands are a relatively new phenomenon in marketing and there is still little research in this area. This paper will examine the current state of personal brand theory and the relationship between personal brands and political marketing from an Australian Political Marketing context. Next a comparison and contrast will also be made between celebrity endorsement theory and personal brands to support the proposition that personal brands are more appropriate to be used in political marketing. The paper will conclude with future research directions in this area.

Introduction

Most branding research to date has only examined brands from an inanimate perspective; that is brands are not living beings. In practice personal brands are increasing in use and have been part of the reason for the growth and continued strength of some brands in areas of marketing such as the arts, sports, politics and the professions. The growth in personal brands in practice highlights Keller's (2002) thoughts that research into branding by academics was being limited by the narrow definition of what branding is, or a small "b" approach, whereas practitioners have applied branding in a wider context, or a large "b" approach. This gap between researchers and practitioners in many areas of branding needs to be closed by conducting further research. Personal branding is one such area and its relationship with political marketing and party brands in political marketing will be explored. Before examining how personal brands and political marketing are related to one another it is important to understand what is meant by the term personal brands.

Personal Brands

The term personal brand was first used in 1997 in an article in management magazine *Fast Company* by Tom Peters, although no definition was given (Lair, Sullivan and Cheney 2005). Lair, Sullivan and Cheney (2005) argue that personal branding perhaps started earlier, in 1982 with Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People.* The first definition given to personal branding was by Lair, Sullivan and Cheney (2005, p.309) who described it as involving "…the concepts of product development and promotion are used to market persons for entry into or transition within the labour market". Lair, Sullivan and Cheney (2005) therefore take a rather narrow view of what a brand may actually be. Indeed they define branding to be (at 309):

> A programmatic approach to the selling of a product, service, organisation, cause or
> person that is fashioned as a programmatic approach to the selling of a product, service,
> organisation, cause or person that is fashioned as a proactive response to the emerging
> desires of a target audience or market.

At this point in time there is no definition of a personal brand. Therefore for the purposes of this paper it is proposed that the current American Marketing Association definition of a brand is simply be extended to include people.

Therefore a personal brand can be defined as being a *person,* name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller, or group of sellers, and to differentiate them from those of competitors (American Marketing Association 2007).

There is no reason why the other aspects of branding could not be extended to personal brands. A personal brand therefore would also easily identify a product or service and is a sellers promise to deliver consistently a specific set of features, benefits and services to buyers (Kotler 2000) and it has four important characteristics; attributes, benefits, values and personality (Kapferer 1992; Keller 1993). A personal brand's meaning to a consumer is based around each of these four characteristics, and it is up to the marketer to decide what emphasis to place on each so that a brand can be established (Kapferer 1992).

Using this extension of theory, personal branding could also be used with existing brand strategies. This paper will only examine two of these strategies that are of more interest to political marketing researchers. The first is co-branding, or personal branding that is combined with another brand. An example of this would be a university promoting to prospective students the fact that a leading professor will be teaching, or a political party that promotes the fact that it has a new leader or a leader who has changed position on an issue or policy.

The second strategy is of course used individually or exclusively. Many people in the professions brand themselves according to attributes they believe they possess. This is more common in products linked to services, such as marketing, medicine, law, arts or sport. In acting for instance many actors hate being seen as typecast or branded a certain way as this limits their appeal to a target market. In political marketing some candidates run as independents, or individual brands.

Although these strategies are the most relevant to political marketing, this does not solve the question of whether or not in the case of political marketing campaigns should personal brands be used or should party leaders be used as celebrity endorsers for the party brand? Or conversely political parties should not use leaders as brands as this may restrict the marketing strategies in a campaign and the eventual life cycle of the product and instead use the leader more as a credible source. To answer this question it is necessary to briefly examine what makes source credibility effective.

Source Credibility

The definition generally agreed upon is that source credibility is "the believability or veracity of the communication or source of a communication or advertising message. Although it is usually assumed that more credible sources will of necessity be more believable and therefore more influential, research does not unequivocally support the contention" (American Marketing Association 2007). The most important dimensions to credibility are expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness (Rossiter and Percy, 1987).

Some researchers (Lutz 1985; Gotlieb and Sarel, 1991; Ohanian, 1991; MacKenzie and Lutz 1989) were able to find a positive relationship between the use of a highly credible source and changing attitude towards the ad in their research. The use of a highly credible source was found to have a positive affect on ad credibility, and therefore attitude towards the ad. This helped with message acceptance and reinforced earlier studies (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). The findings of these researchers supported the use of a highly credible source (in the right conditions) to improve advertising effectiveness.

As political campaigns rely very heavily on advertising it would make sense to use highly credible sources in an ad to increase their effectiveness. It could be argued though that politicians are hardly highly credible sources. Therefore party leaders would be best used as a brand, either uniquely as in a Presidential style campaign, as in the United States of America or France, or part of a dual branding approach which is more common in a democratic system such as Australia, New Zealand, most of Europe and Canada. Both types of systems will now be examined to see if personal branding is already occurring and if political parties have realised the advantages in using this approach as a brand strategy.

Personal Brands and Political Marketing

Previous research into political marketing has already established that marketing principles, including branding, can be applied to political marketing as effectively as "traditional" areas of marketing such as commercial products and brands (O'Cass 1996). Lloyd (2005) extends the definition of terms such as 'consumer' and 'product' to include the political consumer and the political product. Lloyd (2005) also supports the extension and modification of the marketing mix which will better apply specifically to political marketing, a thought touched on by Needham (2006). Needham's (2006) research supports the application of marketing by political parties as a tool to lower post-purchase dissonance and encourage brand loyalty. Needham's (2006, 2005) research supports the notion of personal branding, although it is not clearly stated as such. Needham (2006, 2005) believes that successful parties develop brand attributes in their leaders to maintain relationships with supporters beyond the initial transaction, although by doing so they can create problems for leadership succession. This research indicates that the development and application of personal brands with the party brand in political marketing is something that is perhaps already happening, even though researchers have yet to identify this as occurring.

However, by applying the definition of what a personal brand is it can be seen that personal brands have existed in politics for many years, where they have taken been used as part of a co-branding or individual branding strategy. In a co-branding strategy, the most common seen in use, the leader of a party has often been used as a signifier to consumers of a change in brand positioning by a political party. Examples of this in recent times have included "The Howard Government", "Rudd Labor", or "New Labour" as so successfully used by Tony Blair in the UK. This is also the most effective for mainstream political parties as by changing a leader of a party, either by name or positioning, then they can quickly reposition themselves in the market. A leader as a personal brand enables the party brand to quickly establish itself in a new position in the market, whereas not using the leader as a brand and more as a highly credible celebrity endorser for the party brand would see this taking a lot longer to achieve as consumers would not have any signifier of a change in position.

This proposition would explain why Australian Labor Party (ALP) leader Kim Beazley found it hard to convince the electorate that he was part of a new Labor Party brand when he was re-elected leader of the party in 2005. It would also explain why Kevin Rudd, at the time of writing, has dramatically assisted with the repositioning of the ALP brand since his election as Federal Opposition Leader. Kevin Rudd as a personal brand has very different brand elements compared to Kim Beazley. This differentiation between personal brands is exactly what the ALP needed to signify to the electorate that the product it was offering was a better co-branded product than previously. Applying the four levels of meaning a brand has to a consumer; attributes, benefits, values and personality (Kapferer 1992; Keller 1993), it can also be easily measured how different Kim Beazley is to Kevin Rudd. Although this is an Australian example there is no reason why this can't be applied to a personal brand in other countries or even other industries.

As many political parties in many democracies rely upon a co-branded approach to their marketing it can be seen just how important it is that a leader of a party be considered a personal brand, and that this brand is managed accordingly. It can also be seen that those parties with a personal brand that is inconsistent with the party brand are likely not to do as well as those parties with who have a personal and party brand that are similar to each other. A good example in Australia of this is best seen with the demise of the Australian Democrats. Whilst the party had a personal brand leader that was consistent with the party brand the party was successful at elections. The moment that this changed, and a new brand emerged positioned in the same place in the market, the Greens, the party was doomed to lose significant market share, which it has.

A personal brand analysis also helps explain why it is in political marketing that some independents have defeated co-branded product. In many forms of marketing, such as Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) an individual brand defeating a co-branded product in market share is common place. Yet in political marketing this is seen as a unique occurrence. Applying a personal brand perspective to political marketing would change this perception. Political parties would need to run an effective personal brand differentiation campaign in order to defeat the independent in place as clearly consumers in that electorate have rejected the current co-branded approach.

This perhaps explains why celebrity candidates are used in some seats by major political parties. In fact there are several celebrity candidates for the Australian Labor Party in the forthcoming federal election who are running against strong personal brands, such as the ex Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) newsreader Maxine McKew who is standing against Prime Minister John Howard.

In democratic systems where there is a direct election for the national leader the strength of the personal brand is even more important. In recent elections in France the conservative leader, Nicholas Sarkozy demonstrated how important it is for consumers to be able to attach the four levels of brand meaning to a personal brand and also why marketers need to market these levels of meaning to consumers effectively. The United States of America has many examples of strong personal brands or ineffective personal brand campaigns that enabled the incumbent to win only because consumers had no way of differentiating between one brand and the other.

The disadvantage of any personal brand though is exactly that: they are based on a person and no person is perfect. It is also hard for this reason to alter a personal brand quickly. Although

in the age of continuous polling leaders of political parties can change policies quickly, they can't change who they are so easily. Personal brands need also to be carefully managed and like any brand it will as a product only have a finite life span in the market place. Deciding how long this life span is for a personal brand is a topic perhaps for future research.

Conclusion

Personal brands are a fact of marketing that has largely long gone unrecognised by academics due to a gap in brand theory and development. Personal brands are very noticeable in political marketing where the leader of a party is a personal brand and is used as part of a co-branding or individual branding strategy. This is a more modern phenomenon as in the past the leader was more part of the party brand and therefore acted as more of a celebrity endorser for the party brand.

However over time political parties realised that a leader was an excellent signifier to the electorate, or the consumer, of a change in direction of the party and thus more and more emphasis was placed on the leader becoming a personal brand that was then used in a co-branding strategy. This is what is seen in most modern political campaigns.
Individual brands are also successful in Australian political marketing campaigns, with several examples of personal brands, such as Pauline Hanson, or Peter Andren in the federal seat of Calare, defeating the more successful co-branded approach of the major political parties.

Political parties that have not realised the importance of a co-branded strategy using a personal brand, such as the Australian Democrats, are also the same parties that have suffered significant loss in market share. Whilst not completely attributable to a lack of a personal brand, it is a factor and one that has not been considered before from a marketing perspective.

Political marketing also demonstrates that personal brands do exist in marketing. They also support the theory of Keller (2002) of the need for researchers to close the gap with practitioners in branding practice. Whist this paper has only considered personal brands from a political marketing perspective, there is no doubt that they exist in many areas of marketing. Future research into personal brands should consider the link between the factors that make a source highly credible and the strength of personal brands, the use of personal brands in a co-branding strategy and personal brands and consistency between personal brands and parent brands.

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