

Buyer beware! Obama named “Marketer of the Year”

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About three weeks before he won the general election, President-elect Barack Obama was delivered a different sort of distinction—from the advertising world. Obama was named "*Advertising Age's* marketer of the year for 2008." The annual award is voted upon by hundreds of advertising executives and marketers at the annual Association of National Advertisers conference, entitled "Masters of Marketing."

Obama beat out the marketing campaigns of Apple computers, Zappos.com, Coors beer, and Nike athletic apparel for the award at the Orlando conference, which was held between October 16 and 19. The trade journal *Advertising Age* selected the shortlist, which was voted upon by the more than 700 industry executives and experts in attendance. John McCain, Obama's Republican rival, was also placed on the list of nominees. However, he attracted only 4.5 percent of the vote, as compared to Obama's 36.1 percent.

Obama replaces last year's winner, the video game system Nintendo. The runner-up in 2007 was the insurance corporation GEICO, which features a talking lizard and a cave-man in its ads for discount insurance.

Advertisers who voted for Obama were enthusiastic in their praise. "I honestly look at [his] campaign and I look at it as something that we can all learn from as marketers," said Angus Macaulay, an executive with Rodale Marketing Solutions. Linda Clarizio, president of AOL's Platform A, said, "I think he did a great job of going from a relative unknown to a household name to being a candidate for president." Jon Fine, *Business Week* marketing columnist, emphasized Obama's success at social networking. "It's the f***in' Web 2.0 thing," he was quoted as saying.

Marketing executives were stunned by the speed with which Obama's campaign converted the candidate into

a well-known household name. His performance, they believe, may hold the key to the success of their own product lines. Brian Collins, founder of an eponymous "experiential-branding" firm, gushed: "Across multiple media platforms, they've managed to drive a potent, single-minded design and messaging coherence that should shame many national brands. I mean, this is close to a level of design strategy from a great brand like Nike or Target."

In a lengthy analysis, *Advertising Age* examined the ingredients to Obama's marketing success, focusing on his campaign's Internet fundraising and its capitalizing on "the latest developments of social networking" and "social media and niche marketing" strategies such as text-messaging and Facebook. Obama, the magazine pointed out, surrounded himself with admen: "His campaign team has had a firm grasp of branding, messaging [that has] been able to balance mass marketing with. Mr. Obama's team is led by chief strategist David Axelrod and campaign manager David Plouffe, both from agency AKP&D Message and Media.... After locking up the primary campaign, Team Obama also enlisted a stable of agencies including Murphy Putnam Media, Squier Knapp Dunn Communications, Shorr Johnson Magnus, Dixon Davis Media and SS&K."

Free celebrity endorsements helped. Numbers of Hollywood stars and musicians campaigned for Obama gratis. *Advertising Age* commented on the handicap the Republicans face on this score: "Those celebrities may seem like a liability at times, but you can bet that the Republicans wouldn't be making such a big issue of 'celebrity' if their party had a few hundred A-listers (as opposed to a handful of B-, C- and D-listers) eager to get the word out."

Of course, critical to any marketing campaign are vast

sums of money. In this regard, the Obama campaign reached new heights, vastly out-raising and out-spending his Republican rival.

Obama, who recently released his final campaign fundraising report, raised \$745 million during the course of his campaign—more than double the amount raised by McCain. Obama's fundraising total easily eclipsed the *combined* total of the 2004 presidential candidates, George Bush and John Kerry, who together generated \$653 million. In the last five weeks before the general election, Obama broke his own personal record, culling in another \$104 million. His campaign was so prolific that he has been left with \$30 million in the bank, which he can stockpile for 2012.

Contrary to media-promoted image, only about one fourth of Obama's campaign funds came from small donors. While Obama raised more from small donations than McCain, a survey by the Campaign Finance Institute concluded that Obama "raised significantly more large-donor money in absolute terms than any of his rivals or predecessors."

In selecting Obama as the best marketer of the year, marketing experts have chosen well. Not only did Obama establish himself as the leading "brand" in the US electoral process, he quickly became an iconic label all over the world with his slogan of "change we can believe in." The central component of the marketing campaign's success was the implicit argument that the candidate's skin color would mean that, once in office, Obama would carry out a radically different agenda than the Bush administration. Since the election, Obama has done much to disabuse people of this notion, selecting a right-wing cabinet committed to the war in Iraq and austerity at home.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has long argued that a particularly degrading feature of US political life is the promotion of persona and image as a means of confusing and diverting the social anger arising from the shared reactionary policies of the two-party system. With the Obama campaign, the image-making reached a new level.

But for those who believe that Obama's marketing campaign can go on indefinitely, we say: *caveat emptor*! As any good ad man can tell you, a product that does not function as advertised cannot sell for long.



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