

Exploring the application of Personal Brands and Opinion Leadership in Political Marketing

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Abstract

Personal brands have received relatively limited academic treatment despite a commercial sector interest in the technique in the last few decades. As a relatively new academic phenomenon, much of the marketing research in the field is dedicated to the isolation of the personal brand construct from the interconnected areas of opinion leadership, celebrity endorsement and inanimate object brand theory. This paper explores how personal brands are related to opinion leadership theory, and the growth of personal brands in political marketing.

Introduction

Contemporary branding research assumes the brand represents an inanimate object, concept or framework rather than a living person or persona. In contrast, brand theory assumes the brand has the capacity to have an anthropomorphic nature through “brand personality” theory (Keller, 1998; Aaker, 1997; Freling and Forbes, 2005). Keller (2003b:22) states though that brand theory can be extended to people. This is reflected in practice, where personal or human branding is increasingly recognised as a key aspect of the continued growth and strength of branding in arts, sports, politics and professional services marketing (Keller 2003b, Thomson, 2006; Hughes, 2007). Notably, Thomson’s (2006) work demonstrated the value of the linkage between human brands and consumers with it being regarded as the strongest of the different forms of brand relationships. The growth of personal brands in practice underscore’s Keller’s (2003a) differentiation of academics branding research being limited by the narrow definition of branding, (small “b” approach) whereas practitioners have applied branding in a wider context (large “B” approach. This paper is positioned within the ‘large ‘B’ framework by extending the work of both Keller (2003a) and Thomson (2006) into the influence of the personal brand in the political marketing arena.

Personal Brands

Personal brand theory can be considered to be a subset of brand theory. Therefore a human or personal brand would 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. In more recent literature, Thomson (2006, p. 104) defines human brands as: “...a term that refers to any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts”. Other aspects of branding can be extended to personal brands. A personal brand can also identify a good 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, 1997; Keller, 1993).

The meaning of a personal brand to the 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, 1997). For example, personal brands can emphasise an individual component of brand personality aspect to develop larger than life human personality brands (Aaker, 1997). Alternatively, the personal branding can be focused on key attributes (Plummer, 2000) or promises of value such as future intentions to act for the benefit of the consumer (Hughes, 2007). The acceptance of personal branding means that there is an opportunity to develop co-branding strategies between the inanimate product or intangible conceptual elements of good, service or ideas and the human elements of the personal brand through co-branding strategies.

Brands have become more important to consumers and thus to companies as assets (Keller 2002) and there is no reason why personal brands would not be seen in the same way. In fact whenever a political party elects a new leader a new brand is created (Keller 2002). Keller (2002) points out that the difference between how industry defines a brand, big and applied to many things outside the existing definition, and academia, small and applied only to existing theory and definitions, can make conceptualising any brand a source of disagreement between industry and academia. The use of personal brands by political parties can be considered to be one of these areas yet by Keller's argument (2002) this does not mean that it should be applied in political marketing, in fact in so doing Keller (2002:170) would argue that this can add to knowledge about the complex conceptual frameworks in which brands operate. A basic conceptual model of personal brands is presented below. Most brand models are based upon Aaker's (1997) brand equity model work, with some refinement over time (Anselmsson et.al. 2007)

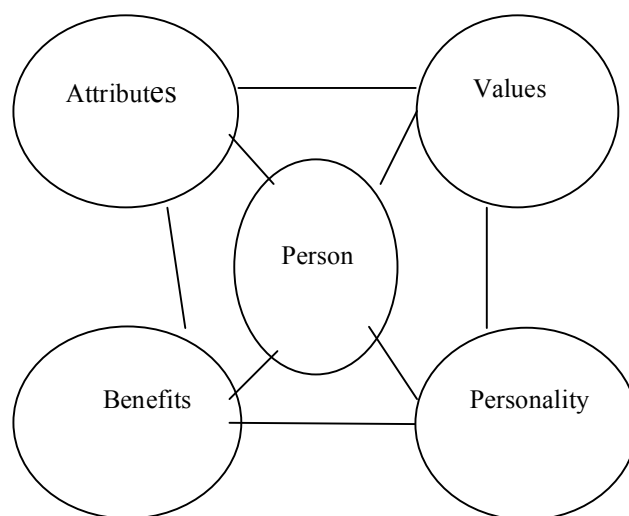


Figure 1. Personal Brand Model

Source: Adapted from Anselmsson et.al. (2007), Kapferer (1997) and Keller (1993).

Personal Co-Branding

Personal co-branding is personal branding that is combined with the brand of an idea, good or service. For example, in academia, both university and professor might promote their respective co-association to draw on the strengths of mutual brands. The leading professor lends specialist niche credibility to the university, and the university's broader reputation, prestige and reputation reinforces the individual's brand (Thomson, 2006). Recently, this mutual brand share approach has become increasingly common with the co-branding of the

political party with the personal branding of the party leader. Examples of this in recent times have included “Howard Government” (Maiden, 2008) and “Rudd’s Labor” (Hughes and Dann, 2008) which is contrasted with the non-leader endorsed “New Labour” (Sackman, 1996) used initially in the UK, which was subsequently subsumed into Blair’s New Labour over time (Needham, 2005).

This is effective for mainstream political parties as by changing the leader of a party, the party can effectively reposition and rebrand themselves in the voters’ minds. This is seen in the United States where every 4 years the US Presidential election, the single most important democratic event in the world, witnesses two personal brands co-branded with a political party fighting for electoral supremacy. The personal brands allow the parties to build the co-branded product around the human element, and it is this that differentiates the products from one another. Even the choice of Vice President is important for this reason, well demonstrated in the 2008 US Presidential campaign with the youthful Democratic nominee, Senator Barack Obama, choosing an ageing white male conservative in Joe Biden. The Republican nominee, John McCain, choose nearly his opposite in the conservative, youthful Governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin, as his Vice President nominee.

In Australia in 2007, rather than targeting the “L-Plate Labor” factor, the Coalition invoked a negative personal brand to their advantage for the 2007 campaign. However, they were unable to repeat the personal brand association against the ALP’s repositioning under the “Kevin07” banner. “Kevin07” invoked a dual marketing repositioning strategy. First, the ALP moved towards the Howard Government’s perceived brand strength on economic grounds through Rudd’s conservative fiscal product offerings. Second, the ALP invoked the personal brand strength of Rudd as being in touch with the ordinary voter through the “Call me Kevin” and “Kevin07” as a deliberate differentiation from “Mr Howard” and “Howard’s Liberals” which positioned the Coalition’s personal brand on their perceived weakness of being out of touch with the electorate.

Re-positioning

Brand positioning relies on organisations providing the consumer with a frame of reference that in turn signals the outcome they will receive when consuming the brand. Sometimes the frame of reference used is that of competing brands (Keller, Sternthal and Tybout, 2002). Many professional service providers position themselves according to attributes they possess. This is common in fields such as law, medicine and financial services. Creative or performance-based services also use this strategy, but they continually strive to reposition themselves. For example, movie or theatre actors want to avoid being typecast or branded as a certain type of actor, which can limit the future roles they are offered and their appeal to a target market. In political marketing parties can reposition by changing leaders, and individual candidates can reposition by running as independents, or individual brands.

In democratic systems where there is a direct election for the national leader the strength of the personal brand is critical. The level of detail involved in personal branding and positioning for presidential candidates in the US is extraordinary. Newspaper columnists are even analysing the font typeface used by the candidates in their collateral materials, and questioning whether it is consistent with their intended personal brand positions (Heller, 2008).

Word of Caution: The Limitation of the Personal Brand

While co-branding strategies can be highly successful, political candidates and parties need to consider the ramifications of adverse public opinion in the case of a political incident. Parties who endorse candidates are at the mercy of the candidates' behaviour during their relationship. Conversely, independents that fall out of favour with the public do not have a party brand to "lean on" during adverse times. They stand as independent personal brands and can not use the goodwill generated by political parties to weather political storms. The affect of such incidents highlights the strength but also fragility of the relationship between public opinion and personal brands. For the leader brand, such as that of a Prime Minister or President, it also reinforces that the public look to them as leaders on all issues. This means that the leader brand needs to realise that regardless of the influence of any stakeholder group they must be seen to take leadership of an issue as this will be critical in reinforcing the key brand elements that consumers attach to the brand but also means that their opinion will be more respected than that of others who perhaps may act in a more partisan way.

Additionally, 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 synergistic. The recent demise of the Australian Democrats provides a good example. During times when the Democrats had a personal brand leader that was consistent with the party brand, the party was successful at elections. Recently however, the Greens have occupied a similar political space with stronger leaders. However, as the Democrats case demonstrates – personal brands are short term solutions that are dependent on a planned succession of co-branded leaders who continually strengthen rather than damage the central party brand.

With the perception of impartiality a leader brand will attract more media attention than a more partial leader brand, regardless of position. For example, the Prime Minister instantly has a higher expectation of impartiality placed upon them as leader of the nation compared to the leader of the opposition. Therefore the Prime Minister needs to recognise the fact that they will be looked to as an opinion leader much more than the opposition leader as they are representing not just their political party but also the nation as a whole. Newman (1999) identified the social imagery of a candidate and a party as being an important factor in an individual's political choice behaviour and Roka (1999) highlighted the importance of public opinion on attitude formation and how information is processed and prioritised by the political consumer. This has created a dilemma in the new era of political marketing that is can leader brands ever be used as both opinion leaders and personal brands when they are part of a dynamic political marketing process that is heavily influenced by relationships with different stakeholders? The nature of the relationship between opinion leaders and personal brands in political marketing is perhaps more organic than in other areas of marketing as the era of permanent campaigning (Needham 2005) has blurred the lines between the two in a process that is in of itself in a constant state of flux that makes any application difficult at the best of times, which is perhaps why so many parties and leaders get the application wrong.

Opinion Leadership and Political Brands

Opinion leaders have long been used in marketing to assist firms introduce new products (Chan & Misra 1990) or to raise awareness in a target market (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955). Their influence upon other consumers has been recognised by their inclusion in some models of the consumer decision making process (Rogers, 1995; Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman, 1996). Opinion leaders have also been defined as a type of interpersonal communication (Weimann 1991; Rogers & Shoemaker 1971) that have an influential position in the flow of information

and influence in personal networks. There have been several hundred studies (Weimann 1991; Rogers & Shoemaker 1971) that have attempted to define opinion leadership in terms of demographic, psychographic and socio-economic variables, media exposure, social positions and personality traits. Whilst these papers have enabled a broad definition of opinion leadership to be established, they led to much debate and argument (Weimann 1991; Lin 1973) over how opinion leadership could and should be measured. Recent debate has focused on measuring the influence of opinion leaders on opinion seekers, or those people who are searching for information to either raise their awareness about a product or who are seeking an opinion on a product they may wish to purchase (Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman, 1996; Punj & Staelin 1983, Assael 1987). This is where opinion leadership is thought to have its greatest influence on consumers (Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman, 1996; Punj & Staelin 1983, Assael 1987).

Are political party leaders' opinion leaders?

Historically, positioning the political leader as an opinion leader was unlikely to be an effective strategy. Lazarsfeld's (1948) study found that many voters regarded family members and close personal friends as being opinion leaders rather than the mass media. Lazarsfeld did not investigate if the party leaders themselves were used as opinion leaders by survey participants. However, if the most broadly accepted definition of opinion leaders are that they are individuals who exert an unequal amount of influence on the decisions of others (Rogers & Cartano 1962), then a person occupying the formally acknowledged leadership role of Prime Minister, Premier or Opposition Leader should be able to exert some level of opinion leadership. Political party leaders fall within the definition of an opinion leader as described above. Within their political parties, leaders have an unequal amount of influence on the decisions of others, including staff, Government departments and, on occasions, even the media. Yet their role as leaders of a political party may restrict their influence as the consumer may assume the opinion leadership is primarily for the benefit of the political party.

However as Thomson (2006) and Keller (2003b) raise the effects of associations that personal brands have with other brands and issues can impact upon the longevity of personal brands. As Thomson (2006) highlights the relationship between personal brands and non-personal brands needs to be examined from a more supplementary and subsidiary perspective. In the case of political marketing personal brands can be seen to be supplemental and subsidiary to the main party brand. However where existing brand theory needs improvement (Thomson 2006) in this area is that it is not able to explain how autonomous personal brands, such as independents, behave and how they can be successfully launched and positioned into the market. One possible way of resolving this issue would be to conduct a survey of consumer's opinions towards both autonomous personal brands compared to that of subsidiary and supplementary personal brands, similar to format to that used by Thomson (2006). The issue of relatedness between personal brands and issues would also need to be researched as part of this study as this can be important in how consumer's perceive the value of personal brands (Thomson 2006).

Conclusion

Although personal branding is a recent term, political parties, and indeed many other organisations, have been using personal branding for many years. Personal co-branding can be effective for rapid repositioning of a political party, and personal branding (not co-branding) can be effective for repositioning an individual candidate.

However as Keller (2003b:26) stated personal brands need also to be carefully managed to maintain a strong relationship and value proposition with the market. This relationship can also present the biggest challenge for personal brands as in order to provide value in use (Gronroos 2006) a person needs to provide value to consumers based upon the constructs identified by Aaker (1997). Opinion leadership maybe one method of doing this, but as Thomson (2006) identified this association may prevent the value in use concept (Gronroos 2006) that has become part of marketing in 2008.

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