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Proposal Week #2

26 Apr. 2011

Building a Brand through Name Recognition from Yard Signs: Campaigning in the 21st Century

Introduction

Todd Makse and Anand E. Sokhey have conducted multiple studies regarding political yard signs and subsequent voter participation in political campaigns, but they, among others, have yet to establish that yard signs help effectively brand a candidate, resulting in higher name recognition, the candidate as a brand, and ultimately, a won election. According to James Druckman, campaigns help shape how constituents vote, leading to the presumption that good campaigns create votes in a candidate's favor (591). The influences of a good campaign can be seen in the candidate's election (such as Barack Obama's successful Presidential campaign in 2008); a bad campaign can result in a disappointing defeat (such as the 2004 John Kerry Presidential campaign). Tracy Sulkin and Nathaniel Swigger explain that campaigns have become highly professionalized (233), with rhetorical moves carefully planned to achieve the greatest effect on the greatest number of voters for the lowest cost. Candidates who realize they are salespeople marketing themselves as a brand often do better than candidates who do not. Having effective yard signs to garnish attention and create name recognition help candidates become the brand they want to sell to voters.

Candidates compete not only against each other, but for the attention of their constituents. Voter consumers are bombarded with ads and messages constantly. Television and radio advertisements for candidates are often drowned out by other ads, along with the programs in which they are featured. Ads in newspapers have lost their effectiveness as newspaper readership has declined steadily. Yard signs, however, remain one protected way of advertising that doesn't often compete with other ads, programs, or information. Yard signs stand out in seas of green, uncluttered landscapes. With prominent, bold colors typically in red, white, and blue, campaign yard signs offer candidates the chance to have their names seen multiple times per day by constituents free of other distractions and competition. This potential for constant viewing increases the candidate's name recognition. Through the use of yard signs, candidates begin to build a brand, and advertise themselves as the best candidate.

In an election year, the average (statewide) campaign purchases 10,000 to 50,000 yard signs for their candidate, costing around one dollar each (Urbina A18). Avery Johnson explains how this practice has changed in the last decade, with candidates now charging constituents for yard signs and other campaign promotional paraphernalia rather than giving away political merchandise as in years past (Johnson D.1). Now, not only can supporters donate money to a campaign, but, beginning in the last ten years (Johnson D.1), voters must also buy merchandise to show which candidate they support, further increasing fundraising totals along with the name recognition and branding of a candidate through blatant displays of the candidate's logo. Common forms of political merchandise that help increase name recognition and the branding of a candidate include bumper stickers, buttons, yard signs, and t-shirts.

As a candidate running for office, name recognition is one of the most important aspects involved with winning a race. Becoming a brand has become the latest method to help gain name

recognition and achieve victory in a political race. Politicians have tried to capitalize on the relentless media coverage of everyday citizens, learning that the more media coverage they receive, the more they have name recognition with constituents, and the more they become a brand. Widely marketing the candidate through the use of advertising organized by professional campaigns also helps to increase name recognition and brand the person with the name as the candidate for the job.

Branding is more than just name recognition. Branding has its roots in rhetorical moves such as ethos, pathos, and logos, and Theodore E. Jackson, Jr. explained that “[b]randing is about communicating a message that is rooted in emotion” (31). Candidates must appeal to the emotions of voters to make themselves and their messages stand out. Campaigns strategically appeal to the emotions of voters through rhetorical moves designed to elicit positive reactions. With more access to technology and the Internet, campaigns have moved their sales pitches online through Twitter updates, Facebook posts, and personalized emails sent to supporters. Barack Obama’s 2008 Presidential campaign was the first to capitalize on these strategies and connect with a younger, more tech-savvy voting bloc, creating record turnouts and increased political participation.

These winning strategies affected the political races two years later, in 2010. Candidates attempted to build off the excitement from the 2008 election, which had record turnouts and participation (Makse 236), by energizing voters and making sure they got to the polls again in 2010. The race for the U.S. House of Representatives in Minnesota’s 6th district was especially notable. The candidates in that race, Rep. Michele Bachmann (R) and Minnesota State Senator Tarryl Clark (D), raised more money for their campaigns than any other U.S. House race (Baxter

n.p.). Yards were littered with campaign signs, television was dotted with political ads for the two candidates, and news programs featured stories on the candidates and their race almost daily.

Background

Before we can discover why the 2010 U.S. House election in Minnesota's 6th district was so energized, we must know more about the two candidates. Michele Bachmann was first elected a state senator in Minnesota in 2000, defeating an eighteen-year incumbent. After redistricting, she defeated another Senate incumbent in 2002. In 2006, she defeated Patty Wetterling (D) with fifty percent of the vote compared with Wetterling's forty-two percent ("Official Results"). Bachmann took over the U.S. House of Representatives seat from Mark Kennedy (R) in Minnesota's conservative 6th district, and with this win, became the first female Republican from Minnesota to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives ("About"). The 2008 election had Bachmann against Elwyn Tinklenberg, where she won with forty-six percent of the vote over Tinklenberg's forty-three percent (Minnesota Public Radio).

When Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone and DFL Associate Chair Mary McEvoy were killed in a plane crash in 2003, Tarryl Clark was elected to take over as Associate Chair of the Minnesota DFL ("About Tarryl"). In a special election to replace newly elected mayor of St. Cloud Dave Kleis (R) in 2005, Tarryl Clark was elected as the Minnesota State Senator for District 15, representing central Minnesota's mid-size metropolis St. Cloud as well as the surrounding area ("About Tarryl"). In 2006, she won re-election and was then elected as the Minnesota Senate Assistant Majority Leader ("About Tarryl").

Bachmann and Clark competed in 2010 for the U.S. House of Representatives seat representing Minnesota's 6th district, covering from just north of Minneapolis/St. Paul to central

Minnesota. Based on the Federal Election Commission data from the 2009-2010 House election cycle, during the 2010 campaign, Michele Bachmann raised \$13.5 million and spent \$11.6 million while Tarryl Clark raised \$4.72 million and spent \$4.69 million (The Center for Responsive Politics). Michele Bachmann won the election with fifty-two percent of the vote, while Tarryl Clark garnered only thirty-eight percent (“Unofficial Results”).

By using a visual rhetorical analysis, I will assess campaign logos as seen on yard signs from the Bachmann-Clark race to determine whether candidates received higher name recognition. If a candidate received higher name recognition, it will be important to determine the impact of yard signs on the higher name recognition. Secondly, whether the candidate was seen as a brand must be determined. If a candidate was seen as a brand, the role of yard signs in helping to create and promote the brand must be discovered. From these analyses, we should be able to determine why Michele Bachmann defeated Tarryl Clark in 2010.

Research Questions

In order to further examine the issues of branding and name recognition in political campaigns, I will explore and answer the following research questions:

- How have political campaign promotional materials changed in the last ten years?
- How has the changing technological landscape affected how campaigns are shaped and how candidates are marketed?
- How does rhetoric shape the creation and promotion of political campaign materials?
- What rhetorical strategies do campaigns use to attract voters?
- What effects do campaign yard signs have on voters?

- How do people's assumptions and interpretations from their lived experiences affect how they view campaign promotional materials?

Purpose

I propose to make the argument that campaign yard signs are key factors in campaign rhetoric because they increase name recognition, incite political participation from voters, and brand candidates, helping political races get won. However, more campaign yard signs do not necessarily equal more votes; in the same way, more fundraising dollars do not equal a win. Examining why voters place campaign signs in their yards and how this act of participation correlates with other forms of political participation and support can also help determine whether a campaign thrives. Successful campaigns may have more money or yard signs than their losing competitors, but they are successful because they are often based on branding a candidate. Branding can come from the name recognition created by campaign promotional materials such as yard signs.

Through these promotional materials, a candidate begins to become a brand, marketed to voters in a time-sensitive package. In essence, the quicker the candidate becomes a celebrity in the eyes of the media and the voters, the more media attention and name recognition the candidate receives. This increased attention leads to branding; in the eyes of many political campaigns, negative attention is still attention, and the candidate's sales pitch continues, with the purpose of being elected closer to realization. While campaign yards signs are designed to draw attention, promote name recognition, and emphasize the candidate as a brand, even campaign yard signs that have been defaced in some manner generate attention from passersby. Many campaigns have faced problems with yard signs as signs are vandalized, stolen, or removed.

Despite these challenges, campaign yard signs help candidates gain and maintain the attention of constituents while still marketing the candidate as a brand.

Artifacts for Analysis

In order to examine how campaigning has changed over the last fifteen years with a focus on “branding” and name recognition because of yard signs, I must analyze artifacts and methods from the specific campaigns. I will use a visual rhetorical analysis to examine the 2010 campaign promotional materials, especially yard signs, for the U.S. House of Representatives race in Minnesota’s 6th district between incumbent Rep. Michelle Bachmann (R) and challenger Tarryl Clark (D).

Jim Fleming and Steve Hunt argued that the way a candidate’s logo is designed and packaged can “make or break the image” being conveyed about the candidate to the public (50). John Witherspoon expanded on the same concept, claiming that “[a] well-designed, well-produced logo ... can significantly increase name awareness” (Fleming and Hunt 50). However, Fleming and Hunt caution that the geographic placement of signs is also important, just as varying the size of signs in order to create repetition and better name recognition (65). Before the physical details of signs are determined, candidates’ logos must be created. When it comes to logo and campaign sign designs, specific design elements have been used in order to gain some kind of rhetorical advantage and help sell the candidate. The 2010 U.S. House race in Minnesota’s 6th district continued this tradition.

Rep. Michele Bachmann used blue signs with a white border and white lettering. The signs read “Michele Bachmann U.S. Congress” with “Bachmann” in large block letters in the center of the sign. “Michele” was smaller in size and not in block letters, with the “e” at the end

lining up with the left side of the “h” in Bachmann. “U.S. Congress” was in the same size letters as “Michele” and was in block letters, looking bolder and standing out more than “Michele” but less than “Bachmann.” “U.S. Congress” took up almost the same length as “Bachmann,” which was almost the length of the sign. The white border on the bottom of the sign was double the size of the border on the other three sides; this was to accommodate “www.michelebachmann.com” in blue lettering. All words except “Bachmann” were in capital letters. “Bachmann” seemed to be the focus of the sign because of the size and centering of the word.

Challenger Tarryl Clark used red signs with a white border and mostly white lettering. The signs read “Tarryl Clark Congress www.tarrylclark.com” with all words in white except “Clark,” which was instead outlined in white and filled in with light blue. “Clark” and “Congress” were in all capital letters, but “Tarryl” and “www.tarrylclark.com” were not. “Tarryl” was aligned to sit mostly over the “L” and “A” in “Clark,” with the word “Congress” lined up below the “LAR” of “Clark.” “Congress” appeared much smaller than on Bachmann’s sign with the word “Clark” as the focus of the sign because of the coloring, lettering, size, and spatial orientation.

Specific features of both signs were placed for rhetorical advantage, keeping in mind the needs of the audience, the context in which the signs would be placed, and the purpose of the signs. One feature found on both signs was the use of white space. Using white space through white borders on both candidate’s yard signs is significant, as Pracejus, Olsen, and O’Guinn claimed that white space conveys elegance, power, leadership, honesty, and trustworthiness (82); however, Fleming and Hunt argue against white space, calling borders “an unnecessary design element” that restricts space and can clutter the message (55). Spatial relations can also be an important feature. On Bachmann’s signs, her name seemed more symmetrically aligned than

Clark's name was on her signs. This possibly created the illusion of more positive associate relationships for Bachmann (Schilperoord, Maes, and Ferdinandusse 155), giving her an advantage over Clark. However, Clark used a third color on her sign to highlight her last name, giving her a possible advantage over Bachmann.

Fleming and Hunt explained that bolder type is better in a campaign logo (53), possibly because it will make the text and logo stand out more and gain the attention of voters better. Both candidates had bold block letters on their signs, but for the Bachmann signs, it is possible that kerning, or condensing the space between letters (Fleming and Hunt 54), was also used because of the length of Bachmann's last name. Despite the bold typeface, the letters don't appear squished, and adding a slant to the logo to fit her entire last name was not necessary. In a move highlighting the technological differences between the race in 2010 and those races before the 2008 Presidential race that changed campaigning, both signs advertised the websites corresponding to their candidates, enabling voters to easily visit their websites to find more information about them along with their positions on various issues.

On their signs, both candidates used sans serif fonts. This made the text on both signs appear cleaner (Brumberger 208). The argument that sans serif fonts are easier to read, especially from distances, has been made by Brumberger (208), but others, such as Fleming and Hunt, claim the opposite, explaining that serif fonts connect letters together, creating more ease in reading (52). No matter the type of font used, people are used to reading using upper and lower case combinations (Fleming and Hunt 52). The text on both Bachmann's and Clark's signs contain these combinations and are therefore easier to read than all lowercase or all uppercase letters.

Another feature typical of political yard signs is having “reverse messages,” or reversing the typical colors of what people read by having white letters on a darker background (Fleming and Hunt 54). Both Bachmann’s and Clark’s signs were reverse messages, probably because the Outdoor Advertising Institute has explained that reverse messages are “up to [forty] percent more visible,” especially at night (Fleming and Hunt 54). Ease of reading, visibility, and having the ability to grab the attention of voters are characteristics that candidates like Bachmann and Clark want from their campaign logos.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1

Introduction: Campaign Yard Signs

- Significance of yard signs over other promotional materials
- Effects of campaign yard signs on voters' attention and political participation
- Promotional materials and changes over time

Chapter 2

Analysis: Name Recognition and Building a Brand

- How candidates are packaged and sold to voters
- Benefits and consequences of media coverage and oversaturation
- Marketing through professionalized campaigns
- Appealing to emotion: using rhetoric to win votes

Chapter 3

The 2010 Election: Bachmann versus Clark

- Background of the candidates
- Money raised and spent
- Impact of yard signs

Chapter 4

Conclusion: A Winning Combination

- How yard signs sell candidates
- Yard signs and name recognition help build a brand
- Branding candidates successfully to win elections

Work Schedule

Work to Be Completed	Date
Draft of Chapter 1	December 2011
Draft of Chapter 2	February 2012
Draft of Chapter 3 Begin revisions	March 2012
Draft of Chapter 4 Continue Revisions	April 2012
Complete Revisions Submit Thesis Thesis Defense	May 2012

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