

Donald Trump: Marketing Genius

By Jeff Josephson



If you can set aside your feelings about the content of his message and his politics, an argument could be made that what Donald Trump did in order to get elected was straight out of the Marketing 101 textbook. And he got an “A” in the course.

For example:

1. He created a compelling and viscerally appealing tag line / value proposition “Make America Great Again” that people could relate to, one that reminded them of how secure they felt in their childhood homes. This is as opposed to “Stronger Together” which implies that you have to share your home with people who aren’t like you, and who you may not like.
2. He used the Repetition Effect, and reinforced his message constantly (MAGA hats everywhere). And he got way more than 6 touches per person.
3. He leveraged free media such as Twitter to get his message out. He also gained additional free exposure (e.g. on news stations and in newspapers) by giving away click bait to the media that was highly profitable for them to repeat.
4. He understood the decision process. He knew exactly how the decision process (i.e. the Electoral College) worked, and focused on the decision makers (e.g. middle class whites who were actually going to vote), rather than on people (e.g. minorities, the young, etc.) who needed to be persuaded to go to the polls.
5. He created a great story (i.e. We’re going to bring back jobs, We’re going to build a wall and get Mexico to pay for it, etc.,), and invited his audience to revel in it.

6. He focused on Benefits, and used Benefit Selling (e.g. we're going to get rid of that bad Obamacare, and replace it with something really great! We're going to make great deals!)
7. He got people to overlook his flaws (e.g. misogyny, multiple bankruptcies, stiffing contractors, etc.), and turned them into something they wanted to hear (e.g. he has power, and can get things done / make deals).
8. He bypassed media intermediaries, ignored the influencers (pundits), and took his story straight to the decision makers, giving him better control of his message.
9. He turned his competitors' strengths (e.g. experience) into weaknesses (e.g. stuck in old ways of thinking.)
10. He successfully positioned himself as a kindred spirit of middle-class white Americans (despite his wealth), and positioned his competitors as out-of-touch elites, enjoining his followers in an “us-versus-them” battle.
11. He leveraged an unmet market need (i.e. the desire for change).
12. He understood very well his customers' Willingness-to-Pay (i.e. what he had to promise them in return for their vote). In particular, he showed that all the costs (e.g. deportations, paying for the wall, loss of health insurance) were externalities (paid by immigrants, Mexicans, sick people), while all the benefits (more jobs, a better future, lower taxes) would accrue to his voters.
13. He flooded the market with content. And he published faster than the fact-checkers could check it, enabling him to manage the news cycle.
14. And he took advantage of the marketing mistakes made by his competitors, who were also hurt by an underground smear campaign.

Of course, one could argue that his success was as much the result of good salesmanship as it was of marketing expertise. And I would agree, up to a point. For example:

1. Trump's question, “What have you got to lose?” is a classic take-it-away close, straight out of Zig Zigler's “Secrets of Closing the Sale.”
2. He handled objections very well. Rather than wince when confronting an objection, he counterpunched, and turned every objection into a criticism of his competition.
3. And he worked his audience, and used humor, as well as any used car salesman or real estate agent.

The problem is that there's no a training message here for aspiring salespeople where Trump's personal style was so important, while there are clear lessons for the marketing expert for whom “Know Your Market” is gospel. To wit:

- Segment your market, and understand the unique needs of each segment, developing your message to address each of them uniquely
- Understand the decision process, and play into it – don't fight it
- Understand your competition, and don't be afraid to talk about their weaknesses
- Leverage free media whenever possible, but make sure your message gets through
- Control your channel partners
- Manage willingness-to-pay instead of lowering your price
- And focus on decision makers; don't waste resources on people who can't buy.

What to Look Forward To

As to the question of what we can expect in the future, this being written in early February, 2017, I believe that there is a decent chance that Donald Trump may back off from marketing to his domestic audience for a while. This is because, arguably, he has already made the sale (i.e. gained the White House), and there is nothing left for him to sell until he has to run for re-election. And instead he may become "more Presidential."

But I'm not so sure.

One option is that he may turn his energies to selling his programs to congress, or to the American people directly. But this pre-supposes that Trump actually is committed to his programs. As a casual observer of Mr. Trump over the past thirty years, I would suggest that his politics are too chimerical to warrant such a conclusion. He's just not that committed to making the sausage.

Rather, it seems more likely that Trump's marketing genius will actually continue to be applied towards the same goal as it has always been, and for which his Presidential run has been only a step along the way – that being his desire to be The Richest Man in the World.

At this point, it's only speculation. But being President puts Trump in a position to make huge deals that could benefit him enormously through his continued ownership of the Trump Organization. And its opacity enables it. And so whether one believes the rumor that Trump has made a deal with the Russians to remove sanctions in return for a share of Rosneft (the Russian oil giant) or not, what does Marketing 201 tell us that might reveal the truth?

In short, Marketing 101 is all about creating awareness in the market, and gaining a toehold. Marketing 201, on the other hand, is all about radical growth, leveraging that toehold and gaining market share in order to become the dominant player. To do this requires a few simple strategies.

1. Pit your competitors against one another so that they don't come after you. In Trump's case encouraging the breakup of the EU, and weakening alliances, makes it less likely that EU rules will be able to prevent the Trump Organization from expanding throughout Europe. Same with NAFTA, TPP and defense agreements.
2. Focus on joint interests (i.e. the Win-Win) in order to gain sales, rather than benefits. Make relationships transactional instead of being for any broader good. This enables you to increase your prices, since the customer benefits are more tangible.
3. Diversify your product line so that you have more things to sell to your current customers, and are less vulnerable to a segment decline. It's hard to know what deals the Trump Organization will make, but it is likely to be in areas other than hotels and golf courses. Commodities seem like probable candidates.
4. Go after new market segments with these new products and services, noting that there are almost 200 countries in the world, and people need to eat.

We may never know how much new wealth will flow to the Trump Organization, but we do know that Donald Trump will benefit from it. And we now know that convincing America to let him keep it may well turn out to be the best example of his marketing genius.