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The marketing of political marketing

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Abstract *Has political marketing been over-marketed? This article – taking a definition of political marketing that (controversially) excludes news management and "spin" control – does not seek to "prove" that it has, merely to suggest that the impact of marketing in politics is not directly analogous to its effectiveness in business because of differences between a business context and a political one. We argue specifically that political marketing programmes can sometimes do harm, and two case studies – from Canada and Britain – are examined to illuminate this. The claim is that marketing is thus less relevant in politics, both at the level of description and prescription. The broader aim of the article is to sensitise students and researchers alike to the differences in commercial and political contexts, differences of which practitioners must be aware if they are to utilise political marketing to its best advantage.*

Has political marketing been over marketed?

To question whether the field of political marketing has itself been over-marketed may seem untimely, both since political marketing is far from being universally accepted among political scientists at the conceptual level, and because of its obvious attractions as a normative-rational model of what is occurring in electioneering to-day, particularly in the USA. But its advocates such as Kotler (1999) have a tendency to perceive the political and commercial contexts as essentially similar. We, however, seek to suggest that media and the press, with their own agendas of information manufacture, are often more influential on public opinion than political advertising and other communication techniques of commercial derivation. Marketing is a business discipline whose relevance lies primarily in business: we should not assume that political contexts are invariably analogous to business to the extent that methods can be imported and used with equal effect.

However, the genre "political marketing" may be seen to function at several levels, since it is both descriptive and prescriptive. Descriptive, in that political marketing analyses provide us with a structure of business derived labels to explain, map, nuance and condense the exchange dynamics of an election campaign; offering the possibility of new perspectives for interpreting elections. But it is also prescriptive. Implicitly or explicitly, many academics have been saying that this is something parties and candidates ought to do if they are to fulfil their mission of winning elections. "Political marketing" may now be a recognised sub-discipline, but it is also a recommendation.

It is this prescriptive status that this article questions, not in the sense of doubting that the application of political marketing has clear value as an organising concept, but rather to claim that this value has certain limitations. "Political marketing" is seldom, alone, a panacea. The claim of this article is

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that its proponents may sometimes downplay the fact that they advocate a volatile weapon that can on occasion harm those who employ it. The foundation, though not the proof, of such a claim is established through the use of two historically significant case studies, the British General Election of 1992 and the Canadian General Election of 1993.

Politics and the marketing concept

There are of course many apparent parallels between the selling of politicians and the selling of certain products. Most obviously, politics sell an abstract and intangible product; it is value laden; it embodies a certain level of promise about the future, some kind of attractive life vision, or anything whose satisfactions are not immediate but long-term, vague and uncertain. Vendors of products which share the above characteristics will have legitimate things to say to politicians and the analogies are with promise-based offers. Many of the methods used correlate with those used to sell products where information is complex or contradictory and not easily retained by the audience like insurance or finance. Thus Harrop (1990) sees political marketing as essentially a form of services marketing: marketing a party consists in projecting belief in its ability to govern (and political parties are service organisations). But there is scepticism about services and therefore parties need to reassure: they must eliminate all perception of risk. The ideal party, he claims, would be a political version of a Holiday Inn.

The rise of political marketing

Political marketing, using a definition of commercial marketing by Grönroos (1990) can be defined as "seeking to establish, maintain and enhance long-term voter relationships at a profit for society and political parties, so that the objectives of the individual political actors and organisations involved are met. This is done by mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises" (Henneberg, 1996). The political "product" is some amalgam of policy, leader image, inherited memory, promise, and it is also a referendum on past performance.

Political marketing would appear to be distinguished from propaganda by its conceptualisation of voters as customers and its consequent stress on market-research-driven policy. For consumer marketers, there is no value independent of what the customer determines. The ideological turnaround of the Clinton administration in his first term is an example: "Clinton gave people what they wanted to hear, with just the right language, words and phrases that would resonate with the American public" (Johnson, 1997). Nor is it something that is done just at election periods. Early in the Reagan years observers began to speak of a new political phenomenon, the permanent campaign (Blumenthal, 1982): that is, that the methods used to gain office would now be used to sustain it. Thus political marketing was accorded a new credibility: it was not merely the corpus of tricks that got government elected; it had become, in a sense, the government – the organising principle round which policy was constructed.

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Far from being universally accepted, some political scientists have treated the concept of political marketing with condescension, Philo (1993) dismissing what he calls a "shallow science of imagistics", while for Bowler and Farrel (1992) the marketing literature is "an exercise in rationalising success or failure in hindsight" rather than offering any theoretical insight. One does not have to embrace political marketing in every respect to notice that most criticism is grounded in normative models, in ideals of democratic behaviour (Jamieson, 1992; Franklin, 1994).These models sometimes seem out of touch with reality, for example the normative model of voting decision making based on objective information and full deliberation. Voters cannot follow this model because of the intrinsic complexity of the decision-making task; therefore they use cognitive short-cuts and cues in order to facilitate a decision (Newman and Sheth, 1987).

But a small group of political scientists have embraced the concept, arguing that its analyses bring distinctive strengths lacking in orthodox political science treatments. For Bartle and Griffith (2001), marketing's contribution lies in the broader theories of demand it introduces, such as voter aspiration, and applied tools like segmentation. They argue that consumer-behaviour related models seem to grasp the complexities of voter decision-making best, although other political scientists are hostile to this approach. Scammell (1999) echoes their further argument: "curiously, however, political science voting models seem reluctant to build in image/reputation as a major element. The standard voting model continues to rely on party identification, issue perceptions and to a lesser extent leader evaluations." Harrop (1990) also stresses the importance of image in marketing's potential contribution to political science: most studies of voting behaviour, such as Himmelweit's consumer model, stress policy and ideology. But Harrop has argued that image is also critical – such as competence or trustworthiness – and it is here that the tools of marketing analysis help. Scammell (1999) also believes, following on, that an even more important contribution is the strategic focus that marketing brings, "the prime distinctive contribution of the marketing literature … .it shifts the focus from the techniques of promotion to the overall strategic objectives of the party/ organisation."

Values and ethos

The work of these critics has value both in interpreting marketing to the political science profession and focusing our attention on what its special contribution to the study and practice of politics can be. Yet there remain differences between the political and consumer "product", which lead to distinctions in the content of their marketing. Politics is concerned with affirmation of values. Thus, a political issue is not merely a product to be merchandised, but a vibrant value symbol connecting with an individual's sense of who and what they are. In such cases, political views and decisions are part of the social self construction of the individual. Voting for a particular party can be, and certainly has been historically, a source of social identity.

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Indeed this is one reason why the emotional appeal to values can be more effective politically than almost any other kind of appeal (Etzioni, 1984).

Ultimately the proposition that values in the political "product" are more important than those in a manufactured product can neither be proved nor disproved. Buying a consumer product is not value neutral either: with the ascent of branding, values have become more important as products/brands cease (if ever they were) to be defined by their utility function alone, and became endowed with the symbolic meanings and lifestyle associations that advertising has poured into them. Values enter many purchase decisions – for example, environmental ones.

But it is possible nevertheless to argue that political debate today has become largely one of values. What we often mean by a political issue is a value symbol, and many such issues would not have an identity independent of what has been called the "civil war of values". "Issues" gain momentum because of their value symbolism. If political argument were simply about utilitarian appeals, most such debate would have been silenced long ago. The strength of this value orientation means that political partisanship is often affirmed by a moral ethos which is different from that of consumer marketing, which contains little for example that is really like negative advertising (so-called comparative advertising is a mere echo). Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) point out that in 1992, 50 US states with 62 per cent of the voting age population suffered full negative campaigns. And what is called political marketing sometimes goes beyond even attack and distortion to actual invention. Technological resources are being used to edit truth. A 1996 study found 28 per cent of the 188 commercials scrutinised contained questionable usage of technology: "news conferences that were never held, debates that never took place, use of audio or video to stereotype or ridicule opponents" (*USA Today*, 1996). In reality the phrase "political marketing" may appear to be used as a convenient shorthand for a host of loosely related activities.

Media, complexity and turbulence

Political marketing, and political communication phenomena, are distinguished from consumer marketing also by the arbitration of an independent communications power centre, the mass or "free" media which they may be able to influence but cannot control. Yet the availability of such free media is limited in most business situations: indeed many business schools do not even run courses on public relations. In politics, free media are more important. Thus political marketing has to be viewed as a complex two-step communication process that influences the consumer directly, but also indirectly through the medianship of the free media. Such media – as with the ad-watches which have become an institutionalised feature of the US press – comment on political marketing but in the process relay its imagery: in this dialogue between political marketing and the mainstream media the advertisements and such become political occurrences themselves. Political marketing texts may thus stand in their own right as autonomous historical events with political

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consequences of their own, such as the "Daisy" advertisement of 1964 (O'Shaughnessy, 1990).

What is inscribed in a piece of political communication is merely the beginning of a journey which could end anywhere, even having the reverse consequences to those anticipated. This degree of turbulence in the political environment – especially during elections, the primary focus of political marketers – make the problem of control greater than in the business environment. In this sense, consumer marketing as an analogy may be overly static, since a business can control its image, as a party cannot: one only has to study the conservative administration of John Major in Britain (1992-1997) with its circa 50 scandals (of very varying degrees of magnitude). The fluidity of political situations is enhanced also by new communications media that have energised political pace, particularly in the condensed space of an election, so that parties and politicians can post immediate replies on the Web site when once there would have a one or two day delay for a measured response (Johnson, 1997).

Spin, rhetoric and symbolism

The British (Labour) Government has often been cited in debates on the practice, and the ethics, of political marketing. But the phenomenon of the Blairite regime also offers us the chance to seek to define the parameters of political marketing. Here we have chosen to operate a definition that places it in the realm of primarily commercially derived persuasion techniques and concepts, an organising paradigm immigrated from commerce. The term "political marketing" can be used too loosely, to refer to anything from rhetoric to spin doctoring, or simply to every kind of political communication that has its genesis in public opinion research. It has become a useful hold-all for disparate entities which at an earlier phase in history would have been termed "populism" or "propaganda", or, when used in the strictly business context, would go under headings like "corporate communications" or public relations.

But what is being done to communicate the policies of the British government actually bears limited resemblance to anything which would be described by the textbooks of consumer marketing, or inscribed in its practice. Labour are specialists, certainly, in the manipulation of free media or "spin", the art of affixing a desirable interpretation on to a still mobile situation, and the rhetorical and symbolic strategies that might further such manipulation. But it is comparatively rare that a business will need the arts of "spin" in communicating with its public. What I think critics really mean by calling this marketing is "political corporatism", with its associated activities of co-ordinating party spokespersons to be " on message", the clearing of ministerial speeches with communications officers, the issuing of MPs with pagers, etc.

The suggestion in this article that news management and "spin" cannot properly be called political marketing is bound to be a controversial one. For critics they are a clear part of conventional marketing, either subsumed under the category of positioning or in the related conceptual domain of public

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relations. In one respect in particular they have a case. To wear a contemporary brand is to make a public announcement of affiliation and therefore of trust, and when the brand seems to betray that trust – as in the case of Nike, Gap and others who were accused of exploiting under-age labour in the third world – public disenchantment has ultimately entailed, at least for the CEOs of some companies, the kind of public pressures and visibility more naturally associated with politics. But the level of press interrogation facing a senior politician to-day on an almost daily basis, is generally less apparent in business. To survive, a politician must also exploit the public visibility of his office by organised appeals to the media. It is those appeals that matter in terms of the political impact made, more so than the more ritualised political marketing effort: to call them the same thing is to stretch conceptual elasticity .

Participation

Marketing may not help the politicians. It may be argued that reliance on commercially derived political marketing techniques to win elections helps undermine the role of active participation in politics to-day, to the future detriment of those who employ them. Britain's "new" Labour Party, which created a substantial "credit card" membership through advertising – their membership telephone number was showcased in all its communications (O'Shaughnessy, 1999) – was later to discover the fickleness of its new membership base. Under this argument, the virtues of political marketing for a party could be more short term than long term. Marketing may fail to engender the kind of proselytising organisation which Ellul (1973) reckons to be central to the successful working of propaganda. A part of the theory of persuasion is that we internalise our adherence by working for a cause, therefore engaging in self-persuasion and retrospectively justifying our actions. The lack of active participation in politics today (Richardson, 1995) makes for a superficiality of support, and less direct link between governors and governed. An extreme case of this was Forza Italia.

What marketers neglect

It is possible to argue that political marketers have tended to neglect some relevant concepts and techniques on offer from consumer marketing. "Relationship marketing", for example, is a useful concept: it is not that politicians do not seek to build relationships with party members, or with voters, merely that the concept of relationship marketing and the literature on it would both sensitise political practitioners to the importance of that dimension and educate them with a litany of procedures and ideas for its implementation. Politicians might realise that their parties, indeed they themselves, function as brands. Again, the writings on brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) could be of benefit – how are brands, essentially a form of condensed meaning, sustained and how is loyalty to them kept alive?

Political marketing is offered not only as an analytic framework but also as a problem-solving tool. But its evangelists should be aware of generic criticisms

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of consumer marketing, for example, that research-led marketing is constricted by the limitations of the consumer's imagination and may not surface their latent, unarticulated wants. Yet some original products, such as the Sony Walkman under the leadership of Akito Mori, were actually created in defiance of market research findings. Research convergence and producer bureaucracy may tend to make for a uniformity in product forms and functions: the political equivalency would be unadventurous leadership and bland policies, and both are perhaps based on an economist's image of the consumer as having complete self-knowledge and an established and stable hierarchy of preferences.

Political marketing methodologies may also tempt us to use communication to fill the space vacated by ideas and ideology (Sherman, 1987) as with the Tories in Canada 1993: but the combination of marketing acumen and intellectual vacuity is one voters might recognise.

Two case studies: control and interpretation

Two case studies have been chosen to illuminate the potential problems of political marketing. In the first place political marketing always carries a risk factor. We cannot control the destination of a communication text but merely initiate that voyage, for what is encoded is not necessarily what is decoded. Political marketing can provide material for a party's enemies, including its enemies in the media, who can fix an interpretation on a text which is quite different to that which the party intended. It is through the media's role as self-appointed election referee that much political advertising is viewed. But when, say, television news shows a slice of a political advertisement, it is framed by a comment; as, of course, are the multiple "ad watches" orchestrated by the American press. It may be the case then that we can speak not of political marketing but of a media-arbitered image of political marketing.

A political marketing text can also receive unintentional readings; a message will give a content, but it can also give off a tone which undermines intent. Thus a projection of "slickness" may be persuasive in a commercial context: but in politics it might suggest manipulation. In the environment of another culture the meaning might be different again – in Peru, for example the polished, American style campaign advertisements made for Vargas Llosa were interpreted by Peruvians (most of them poor) as an index of a rich, out-of-touch candidate (Siegel, 1991). A political context complicates the interpretation of a message: a "bold" attack ad might be seen not as courageous but as desperate, for example. Political advertising may be viewed as an index of a party's corporate personality, but in the process providing unintentional reinforcement of people's half-articulated fears about candidate or party. A text can act as a symbol to trigger inconvenient memories: thus the rejection of the Canadian Tory advertising in the case described below occurred partly because it was perceived as symbolic of the uncaring political ethos of the 1980s: the Tories were viewed as part of an era and an ethos Canadians felt they had outgrown.

The aim of the Canadian Tory advertising in their general election of 1993 was to stigmatise the leadership qualities of Liberal leader Jean Chretien: a

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sequence of photographs depicted him becoming increasingly confused, with the comment "I personally would be very embarrassed if (Chretien) were to become the Prime Minister of Canada" (Whyte, 1994). One of these images revealed the right side of Chretien's face, his mouth crooked from nerve injury sustained in youth. Yet the media chose to affix an interpretation on the text that said the advertisement was an attack on physical disability; thus, to be Tory was to hate people with disabilities. Television reports chose the ugliest parts of the images and the script. For most voters, their only exposure to the advertisements was through the interpretative framework attached by television. An experiment at Simon Fraser University found people reacted far more negatively to the broadcasts than to the advertisements themselves. The result of this election was devastating (*Globe*, 1993), and the Tories were left with just two parliamentary seats. It had become "politically incorrect to be a Tory" (Whyte, 1994).

Our second case is "Jennifer's ear", an advertisement that used the story of a sick child to attack the British Conservative Government's NHS policy, and was shown in the second week of the 1992 UK general election campaign. Again the strategy seemed to make sense. The Conservatives were probably at their least believable when they claimed that "the NHS is safe in our hands", and it was natural for Labour to seek to exploit their area of perceived greatest vulnerability. A powerful "attack" advertisement at the start of the campaign would put them on the defensive where they had least to defend. Such an advertisement should not be rational but emotional, seeking to achieve the kind of resonance with viewers and media reduplication that the sinister "Willie Horton" had achieved in the USA. This resonance would be gained by a human story and not abstract argument. If the story was also true, grounded in fact, the power of its symbolism could sustain the entire Labour campaign.

As with the anti-Chretien advertisement in Canada, the broadcast further alienated an already suspicious media that was determinedly fault-finding. They criticised "Jennifer" for accuracy, undermining that claim to truthfulness that was central to its power to persuade. Moreover the charge of "exploitation" of a sick child was what actually resounded with the public, not the attack on the NHS: the child's vulnerability worked against, not for, Labour's advocacy. Two child actresses portrayed the allegedly true story of two little girls with "glue ear", one immediately treated privately, the other repeatedly delayed on the NHS. But newspapers discovered the identity of the real child and pursued the family: nor was it clear whether the failure to treat was due to lack of resources or incompetence (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992). That week, "Jennifer" constituted nearly 20 per cent of stories on both main television news programmes. "Jennifer Bennett and her glue ear received more coverage than housing, transport, pensions, law and order, defence, foreign affairs or Europe – indeed, than several of those put together" (Harrison, 1992). Harrison further argues that "before the election the NHS had seemed Labour's strongest suit. However, the momentum the party had built up by the middle of the campaign was never regained after the Jennifer Bennett affair broke on 25 March".

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Thus in 1992 a political campaign that was to some observers impressive in orthodox marketing terms failed against one that appeared almost to embrace a species of anti-marketing. In particular, an apparently uncontrived gesture by Tory leader John Major, where he addressed voters in one town by standing on a soapbox, did appear to achieve that critical connectedness with the public. The soap box was conscripted as his symbol.

These cases suggest that television and the press are still potentially more powerful agents of political influence than political marketing via the paid or free media. At times even a free press can conspire to present a powerful "dominant view" against which all other opinion is perceived as deviant. When opinion becomes universal among major press protagonists like this, no quantity of shrewd political marketing can probably rectify the situation. In 1992 the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock was leading at the polls. The British press "decided to crucify him". From December 1991-April 1992 the relatively apolitical *Sun* readers registered an 8.5 per cent swing to the Tories (Mckie, 1995). Techniques used by the press to demonise the Labour Party and its leader Neil Kinnock (Seymour-Ure, 1995) included the *Sun* newpaper's eight page pre-election special "Nightmare on Kinnock Street", where, for example, readers were warned that loft conversions would need the approval of lesbian and gay groups on left wing councils: on election day itself the front page featured Mr Kinnock's head within a light bulb and the headline "If Kinnock wins to-day will the last person to leave Britain please turn out the lights" (Harrop and Scammell, 1992). Propaganda-like distortions were the order of the day. For example, *The Sun* in the critical "Jennifer's Ear" case presented Jennifer's father as being opposed to Labour's use of the story when the reverse was true.

Thus the press had become direct participants in the creation of partisan information and not mere conduits of it. The demonstrable impact of this kind of news manufacture may seem to transcend any attempts of parties to "market" themselves. Under this argument, political marketing may be seen as the junior relative of press activism: this would not negate its importance, merely that its impact must be seen in the context of often more significant drivers of political influence.

Conclusion

Case studies, of course, "prove" nothing, merely establish a foundation for further argument. What this article has sought to achieve is a sensitising – for both researchers and students alike – of the differences between contexts in which political and business managers operate. They are separate ecologies, and the aim of this piece has been to challenge notions of political marketing as universal panacea: there is no one simple, easy transport from a business context, where social values are one of a number of considerations, to the political one, where values are the core of the process. Important conceptual similarities do of course exist and the same techniques criss-cross the two domains, but this makes them related, not identical. These points are not

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irrelevant, since while language directs perception it also limits it. Political marketing is not exactly like commodity marketing. When we use the term "political marketing" as a convenient shorthand, we see as a result some things in political exchange relationships with great clarity, but perhaps miss other significant features in the complex environment of political communication, since perception is directed only to those areas common to political and consumer marketing. The phrase is an analogy rather than an accurate scientific term, and perhaps this has been somewhat overlooked in the enthusiasm to create a new field.

Has political marketing been over-marketed? The question cannot be proven and is perhaps trivial. What is ultimately important is perhaps less the establishment of the stature of political marketing along some hierarchy, than an understanding of the contexts in which it succeeds and fails, and why.

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