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**Branding in Presidential Campaigns:  
How Candidates Deliver, and Reinforce  
Key Messages - Part 1**

**Interbrand IQ: The Political Issue**

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*Presidential candidates are brands that need to be sold to the American people like a product or service, and one of the most effective ways to do this is through carefully crafted and delivered messaging. Everything the candidates have done throughout their careers, everything about their approach to work and everything about who they are must be leveraged to build messages that drive a winning presidential campaign. Each election plays out*

*differently, but the core campaign messages boil down to policy, capability and character.*

From these three key themes, specific “proof points” that are differentiated for each candidate are then communicated to construct brand images. For example, the Obama campaign builds equity in policy talking about healthcare reform, in capability talking about the elimination of Osama bin Laden and in character talking about education opportunities. The Romney campaign builds equity in policy talking about balancing the Massachusetts state budget, in capability talking about managing the Salt Lake City Olympics and in character talking about family values. Both candidates will have strengths and weaknesses, impacting credibility in specific areas. It is the objective of the campaign to understand those strengths and weaknesses, building equity appropriately throughout the duration of the campaign.

If a challenger runs against an incumbent, as is the case in Election 2012, the challenger has the opportunity to criticize the sitting president’s record and suggest he or she will bring new ideas to the position if elected. Public perception of the president will define the strategy of the challenger, and if there are frustrations among the public, the challenger has an advantage.

Much of the Romney campaign, for example, has focused on public frustration with the state of the economy, suggesting growth has been too slow under Obama and Romney would bring business experience with new ideas to rejuvenate the economy. Yet, the incumbent has the opportunity to hear early messaging during the opposing party's primary cycle and prepare a strategy. President Obama has focused on improved jobs numbers and a message of continuing to take the nation "Forward."

Generally three approaches emerge on both sides of campaigns: a narrative based on past history, a vision of the future for the country and/or discrediting the opponent. We saw Romney and Obama testing their messages during the summer cycle at the county fair circuit, through stump speeches and early political advertising.

The constant flow of opposing communications can leave voters overwhelmed and yearning for relevance and clarity. Conventions then are an opportunity to hone messaging and reach new audiences.

### **THE CONVENTIONS**

Conventions are very unique campaign moments when each party gets the floor on the national stage to plead their brand's case as a party and for their candidate brand to the American consumer (voter) without interruption. What is also unique is the candidates' ability to borrow equity from other strong brands to help reinforce their messages. They can leverage their wives' likability as they talk about their husbands' character. Notable politicians can reinforce policy platforms. VP candidates are positioned as collaborators, speaking to the ticket's capability. Conventions are a chance to tell a cohesive story about accomplishments and future plans and, essentially, express why they're better than the other candidate.

### **POLICY**

There was a lot of talk about policy during this campaign season, but the difficulty in constructing messaging around it is that the impact of policy can be abstract. How long into a first presidential term does it take to see real policy impact? There's much disagreement.

Incumbents can have a handicap in messaging around policy,

while challengers can avoid specifics, talking instead, about party history. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie took the stage at the Republican National Convention to defend GOP policy on a greater scale, focusing on his own policy achievements and that of the party.

Why didn't Christie focus on Romney's policy history?

Romney's policy credentials come from his time as governor of Massachusetts. While Romney's campaign does highlight balancing the state budget as a proof point for effective policy, he was a more centrist governor than the candidate he is today. Facing this challenge, Christie chose to focus on the theme of making tough decisions, declaring, "We have no other option but to make the hard choices," believing in "demanding accountability, higher standards," and "We must all share in the sacrifice."

Christie constructed the narrative on his own proof points, a positive history of those policies in New Jersey. Christie balanced the New Jersey budget while lowering taxes and enacted teachers' tenure reform with bipartisan support. His accomplishments reinforced credibility in brand GOP. It also positioned governorship as a proof point for a presidential candidate.

Former President Bill Clinton took the stage at the Democratic National Convention with a much different approach. It was vital he focus on policy, speaking from his own experience in the White House, as a spokesperson for brand Democrat and brand Obama. Clinton has the credibility of two terms to say something like, "No president, not me or any of my predecessors, could have repaired all the damage in just four years."

Clinton had the challenge of spotlighting the incumbent's successes while the unemployment rate loomed above 8% and we'd hit a historic \$16T debt mark. Yet, Clinton, widely praised for his speech, has been dubbed "Secretary of Explaining Stuff" by many, including President Obama.

How did he do it? Clinton's delivery of key messages, whether one agrees with all of them or not, was clear, confident and human. His speech has also stood up to the post-speech fact-checking test.

“The Recovery Act saved and created millions of jobs and cut taxes for 95% of the American people. There are 250,000 more people working in the auto industry than the day the companies were restructured,” he declared. “For the last two years, health care spending has grown under 4% for the first time in 50 years.” It was the Clinton voice at its best, distilling a huge policy into simple, digestible pieces, positioning them as benefits to the average citizen. He highlighted positive effects of the president’s policies for the voters.

**CAPABILITY**

Capability is something that’s hard to prove. Can the candidate handle daily requirements of the presidency? Will he/she work with others to get things done? Does the candidate have good judgment? Is she/he knowledgeable enough to make informed decisions?

Vice President Joe Biden’s convention speech focused on Obama’s experience, painting a picture of a capable leader, making tough choices. Biden took the audience directly into the White House, creating images of the rooms where Obama leads the nation, connecting them to the person Obama is and not just the decisions he makes.

Biden spoke of Obama’s decisions as “smart” and “right.” He described Obama as “a strong president with a steady hand.” The most frequently mentioned proof points in Biden’s message were the auto industry bailout and bringing down Osama bin Laden.

The benefit of connecting the Obama brand and the end of bin Laden crosses party lines and translates across all 50 states. Republicans and Democrats alike shared the same sentiment toward Osama bin Laden. The auto rescue is a bit more complicated. Not everyone outside of the Midwest feel a direct impact. It’s also an achievement often referenced as a “government bailout,” which makes it harder to position as a brand Obama success. The catch phrase “Osama bin Laden is dead and General Motors is alive” ties the Obama brand and these important proof points together.

The Romney campaign’s main capability proof points are his tenure as CEO of Bain Capital, as governor and as president

and CEO of the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympic Games. Despite missteps during Romney’s visit to London for the start of London 2012, drawing the ire of London’s mayor and the British press, his campaign leveraged the buzz around the London Games to refresh his narrative of successful leadership at the helm in 2002. Once London 2012 ended, though, the topic lost steam.

During the course of the campaign Romney’s experience as a business leader, drawing on his tenure at Bain Capital. Unfortunately for the campaign, this messaging has become complicated as Bain’s practices and investments have become the subject of controversy. The Obama campaign has been able to leverage to some extent an opposing narrative of Bain and brand Romney as disconnected from voters (consumers).

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Vice Presidential Candidate Paul Ryan needed to focus on capability, but in a different way, from the perspective of his role in Congress. Ryan, having worked with Obama and other Democrats in Congress, focused his speech on weakening the image of Obama as a leader. Capitalizing on the gridlock in Congress, Ryan sought to portray the president as unwilling to work with the other side. “He created a bipartisan debt commission. They came back with an urgent report. He thanked them, sent them on their way, and then did exactly nothing.”

**CHARACTER**

Romney’s brand still needed to be introduced to many consumers (voters), making Ann Romney’s speech at the convention vital for the campaign. The video about the Romney family that

played at the Convention set the stage for Mrs. Romney's speech. Largely unknown herself, Ann Romney addressed any negative perceptions that had emerged during the GOP primaries and summer campaign season. That would be a tough challenge for anyone, but the warmth and congeniality of her brand made it possible. Mrs. Romney was able to build brand equity where it was needed.

Ann Romney also used storytelling to paint a portrait of when she and her husband first met in high school. She described the quirky things she likes about him, what their relationship was like in college and starting a family. This was largely an unknown story and the Romney brand image that emerged from these stories was a relatable one.

Romney's message around family values was strengthened. While family values can be a tricky issue in a general election, being a private subject and there being so many different kinds of families in America, a benefit of this messaging is an invigoration of the base.

Mrs. Obama spoke at the convention saying the presidency hasn't changed her husband's morals, convictions and values. She talked about how they didn't want their family to change when they moved to Washington and the president is still "the same man I fell in love with all those years ago."

The first lady focused on how the president achieved what many see as the American Dream. She noted he hadn't forgotten that and hadn't given up on "Hope and Change." She was able to leverage her own brand to spotlight specific issues as well, such as women's rights. She highlighted this proof point for the president, speaking of his support of policies that support equality and individual rights. The connection between women's health rights and healthcare reform was drawn in a narrative of Obama's values and character.

## **THE DEBATES**

The first round of presidential debates went to Mitt Romney. Even President Obama has joked about his lackluster performance in the first debate, agreeing he "had a bad night." Romney stood strong and on brand during the night, building on the narrative from the conventions and the campaign trail

of a caring leader who would bring new ideas to Washington. The victory boosted Romney's poll numbers, changing some undecided voters' minds, leading them to express support for brand Romney.

President Obama was declared the victor of the next and final two debates in the press and court of public opinion. The focus on these debates on specific policies and approaches to domestic and foreign issues afforded Obama the opportunity to build on Bill Clinton's convention speech, confidently promoting the message that brand Obama has a history of policies, capabilities and character that have helped America in trying times and can move the nation forward.

While the victory of the last two debated helped the Obama brand recover some of the ground lost from the stumble in the first debate, it has left the campaign in a neck and neck race. Much of the final days of this election have come down to the avalanche of messaging in political advertising.

