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**Branding in Presidential Campaigns:
How Candidates Deliver, and Reinforce
Key Messages - Part 2**

Interbrand IQ: The Political Issue

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As David Trahan and Tom Shanahan analyzed in Part 1 of this piece, the presidential candidates and their campaigns have been working throughout the summer, conventions and debates to build strong brands with messaging focusing on policy, capability and character. As only days remain, and the race between brand Obama and brand Romney are neck and neck, much of Election 2012 may come down to the branding in the candidates' political ads.

While many consumers may be feeling campaign exhaustion with the onslaught of advertisements on the air in the last stretch of the campaign, particularly in swing states such as Ohio, ads can be a key component for candidates to build on the messaging from stump speeches, convention speakers and debate performances. For example, as David and Tom noted in their convention coverage, both candidates leveraged the brand equity of their wives through Mrs. Obama and Mrs. Romney's speeches, and this can be seen in the candidates' ads as well.

The Romney campaign's political ads work to establish Romney's proof points with testimonials from others who have worked with him, leveraging the brand equity of executives from such national brands as Staples, Sports Authority and Steel Dynamics. The overall narrative of these ads portrays brand Romney as "rock solid" and a "proven business leader" who is "devoted" to family, work and his values.

The Clear Path opens with Romney seeking to discredit the first term of the incumbent and differentiate himself, criticizing Obama and portraying him as failing to support small business. The ad contrasts this perception with Romney's record of balancing a state budget while governor of Massachusetts and his tenure as a business leader. Romney adds an interesting element, playing on what did work for Obama in 2008, the idea of "Hope," working to position Romney as "the hope of the Earth."

Two ads are both on brand for the Romney narrative and highlight Romney's position as a seasoned CEO with strong business success. The Message to the WalMart Community is less clearly on brand.

While the WalMart ad leverages the equity of brand Ann Romney established at the Republican National Convention, as the overall messaging throughout the ad is muddled. When Romney's son comments if the kids wanted money they went to their mother because their father "was too cheap" and points out Romney's problem solving skills in the example of installing the incorrect lightbulb in the kitchen and then masking the problem with tape and foil rather than solving the problem, the messaging of the campaign is weakened.

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The Staples executive who spoke on brand in Uniquely Qualified returns in the *Message to the WalMart Community*, commenting "Why would anybody want to save on envelopes and file folders? Mitt is a cheap son of a gun. And if he can save \$0.50 on paper clips, he'd drive a mile to do it. Wicked grin." This moves the messaging from building a brand image of a rock solid, caring leader into what might be a negative image of a businessman nickeling and diming while the public struggles, although it may appeal to the fiscal conservatives of the GOP base, invigorating core supporters.

The Obama campaign's ads seek to position the president as a leader with solid accomplishments during difficult times. The messaging seeks to eliminate the perception gap that the Romney campaign has leveraged between the Obama record and the lack of strong campaign messaging touting accomplishments in the

early stages of the campaign. Building on President Bill Clinton's "Secretary of Explaining Stuff" role at the Democratic National Convention, Obama's ads work to position Obama as guiding the nation "Forward."

Determination builds on the Clinton convention narrative of an economy that was a monumental mess that needed rebuilding and is a work in progress, heading in the right direction under Obama's stewardship. This ad is clearly on brand for the Obama campaign, focusing on Obama as a CEO of brand America with victories along the way and the experience to lead the nation.

Rebuilding struggles to find its place in the overall brand messaging. The ad highlights a conflict within the Obama narrative. To appeal to the base, or brand Democratic Party, the message is we brought soldiers home. This could be an issue for the wider consumer or voter pool in a general election. The Romney campaign has worked to portray the Obama administration as having mishandled the crisis in the Middle East, and while some of this messaging was mitigated during the third presidential debate on foreign policy by the president, this aspect of the Obama ad may not sit well with voters concerned about bolstering our military presence in the region.

One ad fails to connect bringing troops home with the idea that this is possible because of strong leadership as Commander in Chief, bringing down bin Laden and through strong foreign policy. The ad misses an opportunity to further spotlight policy and capability, although it does speak to the president's character, committing himself to the values expressed during his 2008 campaign, promising to bring the troops home.

The Obama campaign's *Message to the WalMart Community*, however, leverages the First Lady's appeal and experience, delivering the brand narrative clearly. Obama has "been there" she notes. When Mrs. Obama says, "I know you're working hard" and assures the voter consumer) that her husband is working hard for us, she builds on and reinforces the campaign theme of rebuilding and "Forward."

In speaking of the opportunities that were available, enabling her success and her husband's, she differentiates the success theme within brand Obama's messaging. Romney used "hope" to

suggest a broken brand promise from Obama and that he would deliver. Here Mrs. Obama uses “success,” a core piece of the Romney brand narrative of a successful businessman, to suggest that she and her husband are successful because of opportunities that opened doors and brand Obama’s commitment to strategic policies that will grow opportunities for all. She paints a picture of democratizing success.

This ad is solidly on brand and seeks to differentiate the Obama campaign from perceptions that Romney’s campaign hasn’t shared enough details with Mrs. Obama’s invitation to read the Obama plan and make an informed choice. President Obama also invited people to read details of his future plans at the end of Determination, building cohesive messaging.

Both brand Romney and brand Obama play to their strengths in their ads, but suffer from complicated narratives that highlight challenges for both campaigns in the last days before the election. Both focus on caring about people, working to humanize their brands and position their candidates as the most qualified CEO of Brand America.

