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**The President as a Spokesperson  
for Brand America**

**Interbrand IQ: The Political Issue**

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*Never has the role of brand been so important in how business objectives are unlocked, executed, and delivered upon in the marketplace than it is today. With an excess of choice and abundance of communication relentlessly complicating the decision making process, consumers look to brands for clarity, understanding, and personal connections that drive choice and loyalty. This interaction is made possible by the brand's expression. How the*

*brand is represented visually, verbally, and through other forms of expression becomes the direct line to reach consumers. It's a logo, a spokesperson, a voice, a message, or an experience that comes from a brand that allows the business behind it to function in the marketplace.*

In that same spirit, branding is how America unlocks its objectives and delivers its 'products' (governance, aid, stimulus, trade, etc.) to its 'audiences' (Citizens, elected officials, businesses, foreign governments, etc.). In order to do this, the President acts as a spokesperson for the brand of America by embodying the expression through which the historical position of America, the objectives of the current administration and its ruling political party, and the immediate goals of the President as an individual are delivered. Let's unpack the branding of America, and look at it through the lenses of consumer branding and political strategy.

## BUILDING A NEW BRAND

During the primaries a candidate builds a unique brand for him/herself that stems from political party, but is also infused with his/her own unique elements. This brand is typically defined enough to have clear differentiation, but vague enough to leave room for evolution. This year we saw this in full-color during the Republican primaries as Rick Santorum, Ron Paul, Newt Gingrich, and Mitt Romney competed to win the support of their party while vigorously latching on to key differentiators that could be used to elevate their brands over the competition.

Once a party chooses its candidate (aka the party's spokesperson), the candidate's unique brand is essentially merged with the party's brand to create a new brand. Assuming this is not a mid-term election, you now have two major new brands (candidates) competing for the presidency.

Exactly what happens to these brands after the election is tricky, because they are becoming the spokesperson for America, and America already has a brand. I like to think of this like two companies who are competing to be acquired by a larger company.

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The core equities of each brand would typically need to be integrated with the brand that is acquiring them, but in this case we know that the brand doing the acquiring will be more dominant than the brand being acquired (think AT&T/Cingular). The brand of America has a legacy, core equities, and brand positioning that exist irrespective of political parties and Presidential brands.



Visual branding differentiates the brand of President Obama from the brand of 'candidate Obama'.

## ENGAGING AUDIENCES

Presidents traditionally were not scrutinized the way they have been since the invention of TV. This condition has given rise to the 'permanent campaign' that is imposed on (or as I like to think, inflicted on) all modern presidents.

As the first President in the era of social media, George W. Bush perfected the execution of the permanent campaign – constantly engaging his audiences, communicating his positions, protecting against competitive threats, and gearing up for the next election. Simultaneously, only since the emergence of social media have consumer brands been put in the same situation. Brands are now fully in the public space, easier to engage with, seen as co-owned entities with customers, and are likewise becoming their own spokespeople on a permanent campaign with their audiences.

Like most brands, America also has many audiences. As with consumer brands, it is crucial for the President to deliver the right message to the right audience in the right way. In order to do that the President must have the variety and complexity that comes from the core of America's brand.

## SIGNALING CHANGE

With that said, there still must be a signal that a new brand has emerged. With consumer brands it may be a new way of looking and speaking, a change in products and services, or a shift in business strategy to new market areas. With the brand of America, it's done through cabinet assignments, policy changes, diplomatic relations, and legislative policy.

We saw this with the 'day one' promises from President Obama during the 2008 election to close Guantanamo Bay, and now with Mitt Romney pledging to officially list China as a currency manipulator. With these changes, there is a need for communication and storytelling in order to avoid misunderstanding and distrust – giving other brands new opportunities to compete.

The general public may support a new candidate in the same way consumers buy new products. Foreign leaders may build new alliances in the same way industry peers and competitors manage strategic relationships. Industries may become less cooperative in the same way supply chains become less accommodating.

As we have seen, every brand has a story. When there is no brand story being told, one will be told in its place, which often creates gaps between a brand's perception and performance in the eyes of its audiences.

President Obama has actually cited storytelling as one of the most important missed opportunities so far in his presidency. In a clear effort to correct that we saw an immense focus on story telling during the Democratic National Convention about President Obama's personal brand, the brand of the Democratic Party, and President Obama's vision for the brand of America. The DNC was sort of like an annual report. Now it's time to see how the market reacts.

At Interbrand we believe that brands have the power to change the world. They shape our everyday lives by influencing our decisions, changing our behaviors, and setting new expectations for what we believe is possible.

No brand has such a far-reaching and deeply embedded impact on the world than the brand of America. America shapes our lives



President Reagan at the Berlin Wall in one of his defining moments as a 'world changing' brand.

in ways that consumer brands cannot, and thusly has a greater level of risk and vulnerability.

Moreover, America is a brand that is in a constant state of change. Leadership changes every 4 to 8 years not only with a new President, but also with a new political party (usually). I would argue that this creates a lack of clarity, commitment, authenticity, consistency, and understanding that negatively impacts the strength of America's brand.

As leader of the country it is the President's responsibility to keep America's brand strong. As spokesperson for the brand the President must also ensure that brand perceptions align with brand performance

