

WHAT MARKETING CAN TEACH POLITICAL PARTIES ABOUT WINNING VOTES

# Of branding and relationship building

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While we often consider marketing as a discipline associated with consumer goods such as mobile phones and shampoos, its principles are just as relevant when it comes to political parties.

Marketing is an integral part of political campaigns as parties try to drum up public support for their candidates. The aim, of course, is for voters to choose the party at the ballot box.

Looking at the political landscape here, we can borrow concepts from what we call “brand architecture” to analyse the strategies pursued by the various political parties.

Brand architecture is the structure of brands, showing how one brand relates to and is differentiated from another.

Having a brand helps companies stand out and gives them a certain character or identity. As a result, companies build relations with consumers who grow an affinity for one brand over another.

Likewise, the same could be said for political parties and their relations with voters.

The local political scene is dominated by the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), which is fending off challenges from the main opposition Workers’ Party (WP) and several others, including new players such as the Singaporeans First (SingFirst) party



PAP MPs for Marine Parade GRC at a rally in 2011 (from left): Mr Seah Kian Peng, Mr Tan Chuan-Jin, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, Associate Professor Fatimah Lateef and Ms Tin Pei Ling. One may argue that the PAP follows a branded house strategy, where the party’s name is the masterbrand. TODAY FILE PHOTO

and People’s Power Party (PPP).

In a political party (parent company), how does each of its candidates (brands) complement one another to reinforce a party identity (brand positioning)?

To answer this, we should ask if each political party wants to be a “branded house” or a “house of brands”.

A “branded house” is one where the company is the masterbrand. Ap-

ple and Samsung take this approach. While individual products such as the iPhone and Galaxy mobile phones may have strong identities, they are still linked to the company’s overall brand during product marketing.

In contrast, a “house of brands” has different product lines, each with a unique identity.

Multinational consumer goods company Procter & Gamble takes this strategy with various products sold

under different names, such as Duracell (batteries), Gillette (shavers), and Pantene (shampoo).

## BRANDED HOUSE

One may argue that the PAP follows a branded house strategy, where the party’s name is the masterbrand.

The values it stands for are associated with and supported by each of the candidate it fields.

Thus, while Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and other ministers may be heavyweights in their own right, younger or new candidates can leverage on the recognition and reputation of the PAP to get the votes.

The branded house strategy offers this benefit of bringing together a diverse field of candidates under the umbrella of a single, strong brand called the PAP. The synergy of the different candidates may also strengthen the brand, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

To some extent, the WP also takes the same approach. During the Punggol East by-election in 2013, for instance, some may say that people voted for the party, rather than the candidate, for a variety of reasons.

However, while we can liken the PAP to Apple, the WP is not quite there yet. The latter is more like Xiaomi, an upstart with some hits and misses, but the trajectory is trending towards building a masterbrand.

Parties using the branded house strategy can rely on the bundling

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tactic. This is most evident in the Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), where senior candidates helm a team that invariably includes a fresh face so that under the banner of the party, the GRC is stronger than if each candidate were to run independently.

Telecommunications companies bundle their cable channels to include

a less popular one so that consumers are “forced” to buy that channel in the package. This strategy is a double-edged sword.

You can win big or lose big, as we saw in the previous General Election when the PAP lost Aljunied GRC, and with it two ministers and a potential new office-holder.

The outcome could have been dif-

ferent if the candidates had run in single-member constituencies.

### HOUSE OF BRANDS

Broadly speaking, most of the opposition parties here adopt the “house of brands” approach.

Each party operates with a different and not-very-strong identity, and

the parties have even cannibalised one another in multi-cornered contests in past elections.

Even within a party, there is usually a dominant candidate who is perceived to be head and shoulders above others fielded. So, voters tend to vote for the candidate rather than for the party.

However, the house of brands strategy is resource-sapping. Each party going its own way is a duplication of scarce resources.

For the Opposition to get its act together, it may do well for them to move towards a branded house strategy, at least for the initial few years, under an “Opposition” banner. Collectively, they should be seen as an opposition entity that has the common objective of providing checks and balances.

As a branded house, they will have to work more cohesively.

Over time, as the opposition parties mature, each party can be a sub-brand under the “Opposition” umbrella, distinctively positioned for different constituencies. Subsequently, when better established, each can then be an independent masterbrand, adopting the branded house strategy.

### NICHING

For newer parties such as SingFirst and PPP, however, an initial strategy to do well in a select and small segment is more viable as they are likely to have fewer resources. In other words, they should not spread themselves too thin by contesting several wards. Instead, focus on one with a slate of high-calibre candidates.

They can tie in with the house of brands strategy, but importantly, new parties should focus on few yet high-quality deliverables.

The problem, however, will be getting all the other opposition parties to band together. If they do, there could be three branded houses in the political scene — the PAP, WP, and the rest of the Opposition.

It would be interesting to see the results of this three-horse race in the upcoming election.



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