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“Brand Obama or Brand McCain ”

On November 4th which brand will the American people buy  
to navigate them through the next four years?

by Patt Cottingham

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## “Brand Obama or Brand McCain”

The sum total of images, words, style, body language, tone of voice, gestures, strengths, and weaknesses will be what people will buy, or not, when deciding on the Obama and McCain brand for the White House.

By Patt Cottingham

In the face of an unprecedented American economic crisis, the bale out of Wall Street at the price of \$700 billion from Main Street, looking at Obama and McCain as brands may appear to lack seriousness. However it is the very images and messages, served to us in the news, over the internet, on the radio, and by cell phones, that the voters will either buy, or not, that will decide who our next president will be. Considering the momentous challenges America will certainly face over these next four years choosing a brand has never been a more earnest or important decision.

Over the course of this long pre-election season the nominees have had to find ways to repackage their brand messages without losing their original brand formula. In Obama's case that brand formula was delivered in the three word phrase “Yes We Can”. Which is essentially a call for hope and change to the American people. Obama's challenge then became how to define this hope for change with “real meat”and answers that the American people are hungry for. How to take his gift for great oratory and bring the message home with bread and butter solutions to the challenges that people across the country are facing. McCain on the other hand had a harder time defining his core brand formula. Here are some phrases that the McCain brand has used so far “Change you can believe in”, “Country First”, “Reform Prosperity Peace”, “Don't Hope for a better life, vote for one”, “Courageous Service. Experienced Leadership. Bold Solutions”. The McCain challenge was to distance himself from the Bush administration while casting himself as the maverick ready to confront his party and Washington with new ideas and reforms. This has not been an easy balancing act and his numerous brand messages is evidence of just how difficult this has been.

This election has been like no other. On the Democratic stage Barack Obama, the first African American presidential candidate and Hillary Clinton the first woman to run for president. The stage itself is quite different than it was even four years ago. In a new media landscape everyday people define and increasingly have impact on campaigns rather than the news media giants. The campaigns have had to constantly keep their balance in a world of real time fact finding, live blogging, YouTube and Twitter. In the last election in 2004, there was no YouTube. The Obama brand's first great fire storm ignited when the video of Reverend Jeremiah Wright's sermon was posted on YouTube. Sound bites in or out of context can be very hard to manage in a virtual video medium like YouTube. At last count the Reverend Jeremiah Wright videos have numbered over 9,291,112 views, evidence the power the internet has in creating brand perceptions. The damage that this unending loop of Wright's videos caused could have totally derailed his campaign. Instead it inspired Obama to give a historical speech on race in America called, "A More Perfect Union", delivered on March 18 at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia. This in the end may of helped the Obama brand's perception that he had the mettle to stand up to adversity.

The McCain brand in spring of 2008 was having trouble competing with Obama's fundraising and crowds. In May in Oregon Obama drew a crowd of 75,000 people. Images of Obama his wife Michele and their daughters Malia and Sasha on stage waving out to the huge crowd gave the Obama brand a “Camelot”

video moment. However in today's campaigns brand images, words, and messages can shift and change direction due to our digital image, video, and audio recording technologies. Mayhill Fowler a 61 year old blogger at a fundraiser in San Francisco recorded Obama saying, " So it's not surprising then that they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations." She uploaded the recording on Huffington's Off The Bus blog thus giving Obama's opponents reason to call him an "elitist" Every hour spent deflecting and explaining is time taken away from delivering a candidates brand message.



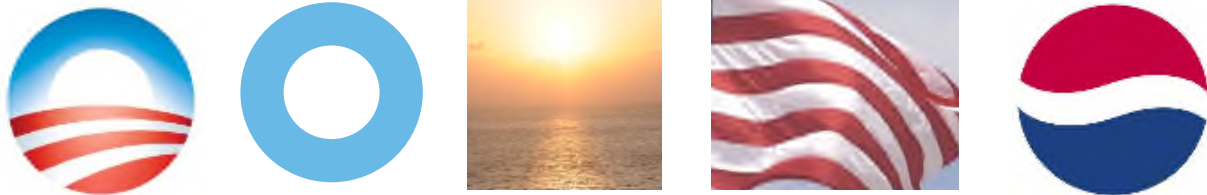
For the McCain brand the announcement of Sarah Palin, the largely unknown governor of Alaska, to be his vice presidential running mate gave his candidacy the surge that it needed. This shock and awe was followed by a evangelical love that had illuded McCain's campaign's so far. Images of Palin a mother of 5 speaking in populist "real speak" drew Obama sized crowds. These images again reinforced the new life that the Palin ticket gave the McCain brand. It was a political move that no one saw coming as David Gergen, a CNN consultant said "You could have knocked me over with a feather" Taking risks, going against the tide, and doing the unexpected is part of the McCain brand DNA. This gamble may or may not pay off on election day.



The following is a look at some of what has gone into the making of the Obama and McCain brand perceptions. Beginning with the very first thing that identifies the brand attitude, style, and beliefs – the logos.

## Logos

**OBAMA LOGO:** The Obama Campaign chose an icon that captured the feeling of sunrise over a field of red and white stripes. There is also a subtle “O” for Obama that is in play here though the name Obama is not used in the icon. This makes it a universal logo/icon that anyone can attach their own meaning to. The Obama and Pepsi (far right) logos are both round, youthful, and use the colors red, white, and blue.



**MCCAIN LOGO:** The McCain Campaign chose a logo that comes directly out of his family heritage of 3 generations in the US Navy, as well as his war hero status political leader. The colors of blue and gold are the US Navy colors, the star icon comes directly out a military reference found on many uniforms indicating rank. The McCain and US Army logos (far right) are traditional, proud, and derived from the military.



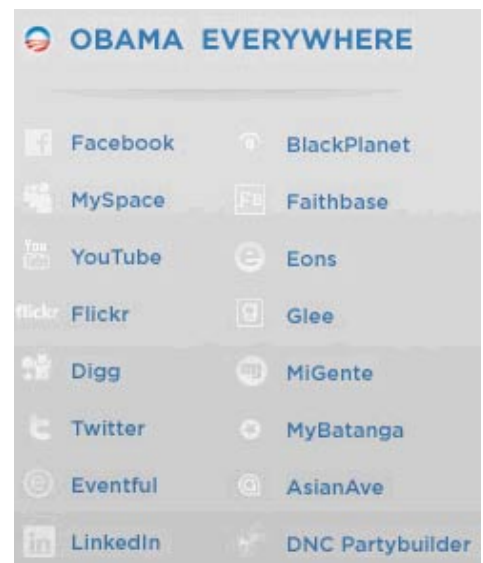
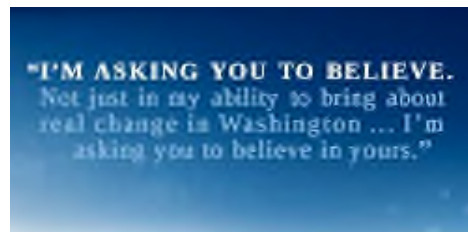
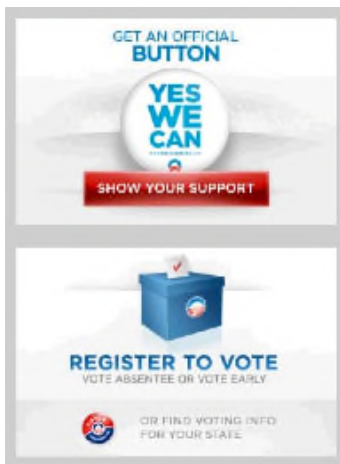


## Websites

The use of the internet to build a brand presence for campaigns has grown. Nearly a quarter of Americans (24%) say they regularly learn something about a campaign from the internet, almost double the percentage from a comparable point in the 2004 campaign (13%). In general Republicans were more likely to have campaign blogs and multimedia sections, while Democrats were more likely to have team building tools.

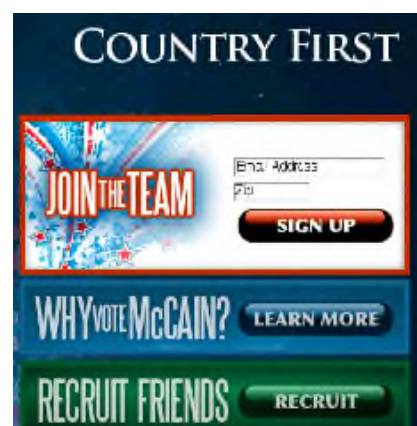
BARACK OBAMA'S WEBSITE [www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com)

Barack Obama drew from years as a Chicago community activists in building a social network community based website. The Obama brand's savvy understanding of the internet has kept a constant flow of money with contributions a low as \$5 the site has helped raise to date \$80,256,247. This has paid for Obama's advertising, registration of new voters, built a volunteer network throughout the country that and delivered the Obama brand to communities in every state. Additionally, the powerful anti-war, political action website Move On.org [www.moveon.org](http://www.moveon.org) supports the Obama brand and is very active in communicating to their members initiatives to amplify and support the Obama brand in their towns and communities.



JOHN MCCAIN WEBSITE [www.johnmccain.com](http://www.johnmccain.com)

John McCain's inability to type on a keyboard from injuries that he sustained in captivity makes him not a user of computer technology. Thus making him an outsider when it comes to understanding the internet. The digitally connected world of the internet is not something you can explain it is only something you can experience. While the McCain website content covers news, issues, biographies, team building, online donations, and contact information, it does not have nearly as much social networking built into it as the Obama site. Also, it is interesting to note that one of the McCain Issues page there is a call out to Download, Print, and Share. In a digital, carbon footprint world this could be seen as outdated behavior. Digital information is shared but less and less in paper form. Also many green conscious websites have the caution Think Before You Print call outs on them. The McCain brand could have benefited from bringing in a young internet guru to make sure that the McCain brand was timely and using the internet to the maximum.



## First Ladies



Are first ladies important in creating brand impressions? Yes, they can contribute significantly by reinforcing the brand's beliefs and messages. Both Michele Obama and Cindy McCain offer communication styles that are very different. Michele Obama would clearly be a first lady that would be active on the national and international fronts. She states her views and has had to learn quickly the power that words have in creating misinterpretations. Her innate sense of contemporary style has been compared to Jackie Kennedy. Also as a young mother of Malia and Sasha the Obama family will bring youth to the White House.



Cindy McCain would be a much more reserved first lady. Many people watching the Republican National Convention may have gotten their first real knowledge of Cindy McCain from a well produced visual biography. She has been involved in many charitable works around the world. Cindy McCain founded the American Voluntary Medical Team, is actively involved with Operation Smile, and is on the board of directors of CARE. More than likely she would continue her charitable work along side of her role as first lady.



## Suspect Satire, Sickly Green Screens, Cartoons, Gaffs, and SNL

The New Yorker was one of Obama's favorite reads until it defended its cover as a satirical statement on the Obama misperceptions. When does art and satire go too far, when does it cross the line and lend reality to the mistruths? All campaigns run into the inevitable mistakes and gaffs. When McCain gave the uneasy speech in front of a sickly green screen it just enhanced the awkwardness of his oddly timed laughs and smiles. Obama's graphics department showed hubris when they created a seal that mirrored the presidential seal with the phrase "vero possumus" on it, a latin phrase roughly translated as "Yes we can". Someone should have told the designers that it could appear to mean "very pompous" McCain's continued efforts to escape the Bush administration despite the Democrat's unrelenting push to connect McCain to Bush. Tina Fey's spoof of Sara Palin on Saturday Night Live. All become part of the Obama and McCain brand perceptions



## The Conventions

There Republican and Democratic conventions chose very different strategies to communicate their brands. Starting with the stage itself both campaigns put used visual impact to deliver the brand message.

### DEMOCRATIC NATION CONVENTION

Barack Obama's stage was round which signifies unity and wholeness. It was raised only slightly higher than ground level and planted in the middle of his audience. This was done so that when he spoke the camera would give the feeling that he was speaking directly to the people all around him. The Democratic convention used "contrast" to clearly define the difference they saw in a Democratic vs. a Republican administration over the next four years. Having Ted Kennedy, the ailing lion from the Senate, deliver a speech gave the Obama campaign a historical legacy to rise to. When Barack Obama gave his speech the words that he chose couldn't have been more clear about the stakes he saw the election will have in the outcome for America's future. He contrasted again and again the failed policies of the Bush administration and tethered John McCain directly to Bush.



### REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION

John McCain's stage used the backdrop of a huge American flag to set a patriotic and moving visual tribute to "service". The Republican convention chose to use "emotion" from beautifully produced visual biographies narrated by Robert Duvall. Through the power of images McCain's story was told his, naval family heritage, his war hero status, his family, and years in the Senate. Cindy McCain's biography was equally as moving and for many it may have filled in the gaps of who Cindy McCain really is. Illustrated for visual impact were her family history, her life with John McCain and their children, her many good works that she has done around the world participating in many numerous charitable organizations. They say the emotion more than anything else can make a sale. The McCain brand used this appeal to emotions to heighten the audiences feelings and connections to John McCain.

Of course it was in the Democrats advantage to draw great "contrasts" and connect McCain with Bush. For the Republicans there was less of an advantage talking the issues so they chose "emotion" to sweep over the audience to sell the McCain brand.

## The Debates

Brand messages delivered through body language, gestures, facial expressions, and words.

### MCCAIN/OBAMA PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE - ONE

First there is the visual stature of these two men. McCain is shorter than Obama. Studies have shown that in business tall men are perceived to be smarter, more successful, and command more attention than shorter men. In our society we perceive tall men as the alpha male. Obama smiles more he appears more open and agreeable. His body language and gestures tend to be more fluid and in general more relaxed. When McCain smiles it often looks as if he is doing so to cover his anger. His body language is rigid and his gestures jerky at times. Part of this McCain cannot control as raising his arms causes him discomfort thanks to the years of torture he sustained. Obama has a way with words, McCain does not. On the other hand McCain does better in small crowds and town hall size venues. Obama can sometimes talk over people's heads, seem too professorial, and has messages that are too nuanced. This has not helped him connect to the working class. Think of these two men as broadcast channels for their brand messages. The channel will broadcast their brand messages through their strengths and weakness.



### PALIN/BIDEN VICE-PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

In the most anticipated vice-presidential debate of Joe Biden and Sarah Palin some 52 million people tuned in to watch. Governor Palin's first words to Joe Biden as she greeted him as "Can I call you Joe?" The debate stayed in this cordial tone throughout, neither Biden or Palin chose to go into attack mode. Palin spoke in very familiar terms almost sounding like someone's favorite country cousin when speaking about Washington, taxes, foreign affairs, energy policies. This style of real "down home speak" seems to be how she communicates that she is not of the Washington crowd and is proud of it. Biden on the other hand never confronted Palin directly though he did correct her on several occasions when she misrepresented facts about Obama's policies. He did however hammer away at McCain's fundamental lack of difference between John McCain and the Bush Administration. He questioned McCain as being a maverick when he continuously said again and again that he hasn't heard anything different that McCain would do that would be different from Bush. Biden represented the part of the Obama brand with deep international experience able to knowledgeably draw clear contrasts between the Obama and McCain.

## Which Brand Will America Buy?

After the last presidential debate on October 15th at Hofstra University America will have twenty days to decide which brand they will buy to carry the nation through the next four years.



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Patt Cottingham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a prominent loop at the end of the last name.

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