

Contributed by Trina Chiara

LESSONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS FROM THE PRESIDENTIAL TRAIL



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In 1988, I traveled on a 747 airplane; Seat 24B. I packed light: a reporter's notebook and pen, a tape recorder, and a couple of "snap-py" mix-and-match articles of clothing.

As a journalist for National Public Radio and part of the press covering presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, my mission was to extract "news" from every move the candidate made in the embattled race for the White House.

Interestingly, there are striking similarities between the 1988 and the 2004 elections; and, surprisingly, these campaigns also offer clues to addressing some public-relations and communications challenges. In 1988, like in the 2004 presidential election, two factors played a significant role in turning the election: strategy development and media relations. The candidate's organization that best understood how to create an effective, broad-based communications strategy, while simultaneously managing media relations effectively, made its way to the White House — both in 1988 and in 2004.

FLASHBACK TO 1988

Mr. Dukakis believed the issues he embraced resonated more deeply with the American public than those of his competitor, George H. Walker Bush. People cared deeply about the economy, healthcare, and social security. Despite the popularity of the Reagan dynasty from which President Bush benefited, many people felt left behind. And it was this disenfranchised population on which Mr. Dukakis hedged his bets on the White House.

In addition to issues, the Dukakis camp felt emboldened by an insurgence of enthusiastic young voters. This "new blood," which clearly aligned with the Democratic Party, was expected to play a significant role in giving Mr. Dukakis a win.

Then there was the media. Many believed, as they do today, in the "bias" of a "liberal" media. As a result, coverage seemed to favor the Dukakis platform of ideas. While this may have been more the result of interest in a new player on the scene as opposed to a genuine allegiance to Mr. Dukakis, it nonetheless reinforced the notion that he was leading even when poll numbers didn't support it. For most of the summer in 1988, many political commentators gave the nod to Mr. Dukakis.

SIMILARITIES TO 2004

With skepticism over the war in Iraq growing, a spate of lost jobs, and the perception by many that the president had "broken promises" on domestic issues, John Kerry had a solid opening to unseat George W. Bush. Like the Dukakis camp in 1988, the Kerry camp believed the "issues" were theirs to lose.

Déjà vu: younger voters were gaining momentum all across the country and were expected to propel Mr. Kerry to the White House.

And lastly, media coverage, while more diverse than in 1988, was solidly behind Mr. Kerry. Right up to election day, coverage depicted judgment lapses in Iraq, "new Democratic blood" poised to unseat President Bush, and a general dismay among many Americans in general toward the Bush agenda.

In both the 1988 and the 2004 elections, many people were surprised at the outcome. Ironically, in each election, the candidate who owned the issues, ignited interest among his base, as well as with first-time, young voter entrants, and attracted favorable media coverage lost.

LESSONS LEARNED ON THE PRESIDENTIAL TRAIL

There are times when all of us believe we have the right pieces to the puzzle and they fit, and yet the outcome falls short of our desired goals. I am not talking about a crisis, such as the withdrawal of a product because of patient deaths, or the many others that may loom.

Instead, I am talking about two common missteps that lead to less successful outcomes than we may have been able to engineer. Firstly, inadequate analysis of a situation that can lead to faulty strategy development, and secondly, a less skillful understanding and handling of the media can lead to a lack of significant impact on the target audiences.

Teams that are adept at developing broad-based communications strategies, as well as understanding and handling the media, are those that can go beyond expected outcomes. Seldom are they caught by surprise at the outcome.

Many argued even during the campaign that the Dukakis and Kerry camps failed at two important factors in winning. First, they developed strategies based on a less than comprehensive assessment of the varied perspectives: those of voting Americans beyond their base.

Yes, the issues may have been on their side, and yes, young voters were passionate about their cause and yes, the media coverage was impressive. But they inadequately assessed "their" issues through the eyes of people outside their party or in between both parties. They also put too many eggs in the "young voter" basket, which historically don't go to the polls.

Second, they overestimated their skill at understanding and handling the media. Of course, they did generate good coverage but most often in the areas where they were preaching to the converted. In both cases, the media that covered them so favorably did not resonate with most of America.

In 1988 and 2004, these two missteps, a lack of a successful communications strategy and media relations, were factors that cost the candidates the election.

These missteps, which are sometimes difficult to avoid, can adversely affect public relations in all industries. But, by addressing them in the appropriate way, we in public relations can better our chances of avoiding disappointment at the end of a campaign or program.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Leverage, maximize, utilize — these are familiar words that begin most strategy descriptors. But what do they mean? And, most importantly, what are the questions to ask in developing a communications strategy that has the potential to work for the long-term?

Developing a communications strategy should be a time-consuming exercise. Before putting pen to paper, soul-searching needs to be done, and lots of it. Sometimes, strategies are "developed" for the sake of mak-

ing a “decision,” as opposed to successfully navigating through the process of finding the right direction in which to proceed. Strategies may also come about because the team developing them came to a “quick consensus” or “created” strategies team members know they can “sell” to their bosses or their clients.

But effective strategies cannot be made in a vacuum. For instance, in the political campaigns we use as examples, the ideas were sound for some audiences but not for the majority of audiences. Strategies need to take into consideration the varied audiences a company or organization seeks to serve and the way in which those audiences make decisions.

Accomplishing all of this entails a process that is long and arduous, but yields a better chance of success than simply “brainstorming” to come up with a strategy.

Here are some questions to ask as part of the strategy-development process:

1. What is the conventional thinking, and how can we successfully challenge it?
2. What is the corporate context of the strategy we want to develop?
3. What do we want to accomplish with this strategy, i.e., what are the goals?
4. Who do we want to hear us?
5. What would be our best broad-based strategy? What about a narrow-based strategy?
6. What strategies would be effective for the short term? Will these be adaptable to a long-term strategy?
7. How do the people we want to reach listen?
8. What would we consider “success?”
9. What mechanism can we put in place to determine success or failure?
10. What trends exist that may have a future effect on the strategy we develop today?

Answering these questions requires input from various perspectives. As arduous as the process may be, it will be the best defense against one-sided or unsuccessful strategy development.

MANAGING MEDIA RELATIONS

Perhaps the best advice a media specialist can offer a client is to challenge the status quo. Reporters — broadcast and print — aim to do that every day and consider it the foundation of their journalistic mission. This cuts across conservative, liberal, and any other labels we put on journalists. They consider it their job to question, challenge, and nudge.

As a result, the most effective way to handle media relations is to “beat” journalists at their own game, or at least stand shoulder to shoulder. This does not mean a company has to change course dramatically, nor does it have to be controversial. But a company has to offer some-

thing reporters want to cover. And reporters want to cover “breaking” news.

What is breaking news? People most often understand it as time-sensitive news, and in part it is. But the other kind of “breaking” news, which is less often used by communications, yet highly effective, is information that is ahead of a moving curve or trend. This is what the teams of both Bush campaigns understood better than their counterparts. Once they had a handle on this, they maneuvered media relations effectively.

Being ahead of the curve from a media relations standpoint aims to answer some of the following questions:

1. How can we challenge the status quo?
2. What trends are emerging that we can become part of?
3. What are the new ideas?
4. Who are the new players?
5. What is wrong?
6. How can we solve the problem in new ways?
7. To whom can we tell our story?
8. How can we tell the story to skeptical listeners?

We need to challenge ourselves to develop new ideas and not respond to ideas the media put before us. Again, this does not mean we need to change the world in one press release; but it does mean that if we do not create new ideas, new ways to use products, new reasons to develop therapies, or new ways to manage, we will consistently be reacting to situations instead of driving the bus.

Once we engage in the paradigm of “new ideas,” we can be prepared to start and sustain a dialogue with the media that will be refreshing and worthy of coverage. It will also begin a domino effect, in that the media will look to us as innovators.

Too often, people view media relations as picking up the phone and “pitching” a reporter or “knowing” reporters to call. While it includes both of these, it is more important that a communications professional aiming to capitalize on media relations understand the issues at hand, from varied and multiple perspectives, and understand how to “sell” these issues to the media. To do that, they need to know how to manufacture new and innovative ideas, because “new” and innovative ideas typically can be sold.

Whether on behalf of a political campaign, organizational goal, or company policy, this paradigm leads to the successful development of a communications strategy and effective handling of the media.

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