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THE IMC CONCEPT AND POLITICAL MARKETING: BUILDING A BRAND RELATIONSHIP WITH VOTERS

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ABSTRACT

There is a need to take a fresh look at the traditional application of the marketing concept to political marketing. As many businesses have learned, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) practices and principles will help them to build customer relationships and profitable brands. Political marketing must also change with the times and implement IMC practices towards building and nourishing brand relationships with voters and other important stakeholders. The nature of the contribution of this paper, is the identification of a gap in the political marketing literature – the stagnation of political marketing at the 4P's marketing concept, and to play a role in the future development of political marketing. In recent developments, it is seen that there is a gradual movement away from this traditional marketing theory. There are a growing number of academics who have approached very closely to the IMC concept or aspects of it, but have not however embraced or have been reluctant to, the prospect of applying it to political marketing. IMC is a practical, logical and ultimately inevitable future for political marketing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is a need to take a fresh look at the traditional application of the marketing concept to political marketing. As many businesses have learned, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) practices and principles will help them to build customer relationships and profitable brands. Political marketing must also change with the times and implement IMC practices towards building and nourishing brand relationships with voters and other important stakeholders. This article seeks to review briefly how and in what ways IMC differs and improves upon the traditional marketing concept of the four P's. It will then expand upon current political marketing literature by exploring the concept of IMC in terms of the political marketing arena, examining its potential uses and value. Discussing also in this article any potential obstacles to the implementation of the IMC concept in political marketing, as well as the myriad of benefits the IMC concept can provide to political marketers. The nature of the contribution of this paper, is the identification of a gap in the political marketing literature – the stagnation of political marketing at the 4P's marketing concept, and to play a role in the future development of political marketing.

This paper is based on the premise that voters and voting behaviour have changed and now, more than ever, vote on political 'brands' based on their 'total brand identities'. This is where IMC is a useful tool for political marketers and

politicians, as its focus is on building brands and building brand relationships. Integrated marketing is a process that manages all of a party's or brands interactions and messages with voters and other key stakeholders, such as party members. The basis of the IMC concept is that everything that a political party does, and sometimes what it doesn't do sends a message to the voter.

Political parties must realise that before they can build, improve or strengthen their brand relationships with voters, they must also concentrate on their own internal marketing and brand relationships. As political parties strengths and weaknesses lay with their volunteers. IMC has applications within political marketing that extends beyond brand image alone however; it is also a practical means for establishing stronger relationships internally and for establishing processes that allow political parties to have a greater degree of control of 'unplanned' messages to their public.

2. CURRENT POLITICAL MARKETING LITERATURE OVERVIEW

There is a distinct scarcity of political marketing literature available, a factor that has been widely commented upon in all of the literature. The majority of the literature is primarily anecdotal, based on case studies of political campaigns or elections and their political communications, or comparative in nature across cultures and nationalities. Much of the literature focuses also on the necessity of, ethical considerations of, and relative effectiveness of the marketing concept in politics. Recently debates in the literature on the differences between the contexts of commercial versus political arenas and its impact on the application of the marketing concept have arisen (Baines, 2001; Lock, 1996; O'Shaughnessy, 2001; Smith, 2001).

However, whilst this article will not be delving into these debates it will briefly outline its supporting viewpoints. Current popular belief is that marketing in politics is here to stay (Andrews, 1996; O'Cass, 2001b) and that even as there are still many who debate over the ethics of this matter, as well they should, it will not affect the eventual outcome of the continuing practice of marketing of politics. As Baines (2002) so aptly stated "The relevance of particular aspects of marketing theory for political entities has been well and truly illustrated". This is again made patently obvious as the major political parties in the developed world embrace marketing processes.

This article though, does propose the argument that in the matter of this ethical debate, consumers/voters are a more cynical and more media savvy than ever before. "In reality, politicians are dealing with highly-media literate audiences. As consumers we believe advertising to be inherently untrustworthy, and know that its purpose is to persuade (et al Friestad and Wright, 1994)... There is no reason to suppose that voters use a different set of critical judgements for political products as for their commercial equivalents" Dean (2001). Thus the average consumer/voter indeed not only expects marketing in politics but believes that it is an inherent part of political practice.

As to the differences of contexts, commercial versus political, this article supports (Baines, 2001; Lock, 1996; O'Shaughnessy, 2001) in their conclusions that these apparent differences in contexts do not propose a major hindrance to the application of marketing processes in a political context. According to Baines (2001) "... although the political 'market' is different and restrictive, this does not negate the role of marketing in political marketing, marketing still has a significant role to play".

An examination of political marketing literature has noted stagnation in the development of marketing thoughts. Political marketing literature has not evolved

past the dominant thread of the traditional marketing concept of the four P's – Product, Place, Promotion and Price (Niffenegger, 1988; Wring, 1996). Although in recent developments, it can be seen that there is a gradual movement away from this traditional marketing concept, due to its insufficiency in taking into account such things as the growing new technologies available and a changing more media savvy voter.

There are a growing number of academics who have skated very close to the IMC concept or aspects of it, in their articles on political marketing but have not however embraced or have been reluctant to, the prospect of applying the IMC concept to political marketing. The most notable articles that identify the need for some of the various aspects of the IMC concept are (Baines, 2002; Dean, 2001; Ingram, 2002; O'Cass, 2001a; O'Shaughnessy, 2001; Smith, 2001; Sparrow, 2001).

Dean (2001) and O'Shaughnessy (2001) propose the use of relationship marketing, the need for long-term strategies to build brand loyalty and the concept of the 'life-time voter'. O'Cass (2001a) discussed the internal-external marketing orientations of political parties. Ingram (2002) noted that political marketing is much more than mere political communication, marketing applies to the whole behaviour of a political organisation, using the concepts not just the techniques. Grigsby (1996) extrapolated upon the potential use of interactive marketing, direct/personalised mail to voters, voter databases and the prediction that soon political parties will be able to track voters' preferences over time.

Baines (2002) and Smith (2001) amongst others, support a long term planning focus. Smith (2001) and Sparrow (2001) also discussed the usefulness and need for political parties to start building integrated political marketing strategies, reinforcing the idea of 'permanent campaign'. Whilst Sparrow (2001) and Dean (2001) focused

on image strengthening between campaigns, post election analyses, and the lack of consideration of the strategic components associated with political marketing campaigns. Butler (1994, 1996) supporting the suggestion that the simple application of a 'marketing orientation' is perhaps an oversimplification.

These academics in their articles all support some of the various aspects of the Integrated Marketing Communications concept. Whilst IMC is regarded as an emergent discipline (Kerr, 2002) its adoption by businesses is rapidly growing (Duncan, 2002). According to Grönroos (1996) the mass marketing and transaction orientation, as well as the adversarial approach to the customer and the functionalistic organisational solution inherent in the four P's approach, does not allow for a firm to adjust its market performance to the demands of today's customer.

Further to this, Duncan (2002) states that with the increasing emphasis on customer and stakeholder relationships, a variety of processes have been designed to help become 'customer-centric'. Coupled with IMC, is customer relationship management (CRM), one-to-one marketing, integrated marketing, strategic brand communication, and relationship marketing – which have gained popularity of late amongst political marketing literature (Dean, 2001; O'Shaughnessy, 2001). As Duncan (2002) clearly specifies each of the processes and concepts have their points of differences, but are all designed to do one essential thing – "... increase value of a company or brand by allowing the organisation to cost-effectively acquire, retain, and grow customer relationships". So why choose Integrated Marketing Communications if there are other processes that are designed to do the same thing? What differentiates IMC from the other customer-centric processes, according to Duncan (2002) is that its foundation is communication, 'the heart of all relationships', and that the IMC process is a circular rather than a linear process. Most importantly of all, states Schultz

(2003), IMC is about developing processes, an area that is most significantly lacking in most other marketing approaches.

According to Duncan (2002) "IMC is a cross-functional process for creating and nourishing profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders by strategically controlling, or influencing all messages sent to these groups and encouraging data driven, purposeful dialogue with them". This working definition of IMC from Duncan (2002) will be used in this article. Although there are other definitions available, the author feels it is this definition that accurately defines the strategic importance of IMC.

3. BUILDING BRAND RELATIONSHIPS WITH VOTERS

"You do need to convey a simple essence to the electorate of what you believe in and what you stand for. And precisely because we live in a society where there are so many competing communications messages, it is very important. You only have an instant on any given issue to get a message across. And with a busy community, it is extremely difficult for you to establish a *brand identification* if you don't convey very simple and direct messages." Prime Minister John Howard (keynote speech to the International Democratic Union, Washington, June 10, 2002) (Farnsworth, 2003). Arguing that it was essential to establish 'brand identification', Howard stressed the importance of political leaders to promote their messages to voters who are less committed to traditional political parties than ever before. According to Winston (2000) political branding isn't very different from branding in the business world and this appears to be the case for PM John Howard.

Much emphasis has been placed on building brands and brand relationships as we move into the 21st Century, in fact it can even been suggested that in the future the

brand will be the only thing that is unique to a company or organisation and its customers, as processes, products and now, some might say, political parties, become even more homogeneous than ever. This is especially noticeable in politics, particularly as constituents are more ambivalent in their attitudes than ever before about politics and political parties.

―――Ass tated by Lock & Harris (1996) the political party or candidate is a complex intangible product which the voter cannot unbundle and as a consequence of this, the majority of voters have to vote just on the overall package, concept or brand image. This notion is again supported by current politicians, and again by Prime Minister John Howard as he further states in his keynote speech to the International Democratic Union, "… because in the end the public does make a judgement on the totality." Here Howard had talked about the importance of loyalty and unity within a political party, claiming that voters assessed the 'totality' of a party's performance as much as assessing the individuals.

According to Lock & Harris (1996) at the simplest level the political party name is the brand. This name becomes attached as a brand to a variety of different 'products', moving beyond the national party and the party leader. This brand is then applied to individual candidates, local parties, councils, organisations, and the party 'manifesto', all carry the party brand name. As Lock & Harris (1996) notes though, the control the party has over the presentation of these 'products' that carry the brand name is significantly more limited and constrained than in the commercial world.

The basic factors to be understood here, is that political branding and brand identity is not just theory or a marketing fad, it is a notion that is being actively used by politicians and their parties. However, it must not be forgotten that it is not nearly as simple as that, parties must come to terms with the fact that everything they do, and

the way they do everything sends a message to their publics, including everything they don't do.

However, normal marketing standards cannot be applied to politics; this is why the field of political marketing has evolved. Political parties are competing in an entirely different arena than that of commercial companies. Political parties are more vulnerable to exogenous factors and unplanned brand messages, their work is often carried out in front of the media and the party organisation is reliant on donations and volunteers, with job roles that are often indistinct and obfuscated, with much internal factional warring. Nevertheless basic marketing concepts such as brand identity and strategic consistency still have an integral role to play in the political field.

4. THE POLITICAL MARKETING CHALLENGE

Political marketing theory requires a significant amount of integration from many other fields of literature, and the relevance of certain select aspects of marketing theory to political parties had been demonstrated by a host of authors over time, from the marketing mix (O'Leary and Iredale, 1976; Baines, Harris and Lewis, 2001) and segmentation for voter targeting (Yorke and Meehan, 1986; Baines, Harris and Lewis, 2001). Every article that has added to the body of political marketing literature, has reiterated the same information about the evolution of political marketing, from Dwight Eisenhower's use of the Gallup Polls to Bill Clinton's 'War room', from the UK's Liberal parties use of Saatchi & Saatchi for advertising "Labour isn't working" to today's use of the internet and its relevance in political marketing.

Whilst the implementation of the IMC concept into politics is not an entirely 'fresh' idea, as stated previously, political marketing literature is already beginning to embrace the reality of relationship marketing in politics (Dean and Robin, 2001;

O'Shaughnessy, 2001), integration is however, the next logical step. This paper will attempt to examine some of the more pressing issues and challenges facing political marketing today. Firstly, how does one apply structured marketing processes to largely free form unstructured political organisations, which are reliant on part time volunteers and campaign donations? Can marketing practices apply structure to political organisations? IMC by its very nature of integrating all party communications and having processes in place to ensure this flow of information applies some basic structure to the organisation.

The second challenge facing marketers is how one can have a unified approach to the public when many parties have difficulty with unity amongst themselves, having strong internal political warring. Can political organisations unite to form a party consensus on marketing and communication activities? IMC aims to provide the party with a greater control over all marketing communications and brand messages that the party emits. By having greater control of planned messages the party can decrease most unplanned messages that are communicated. A political entity has only a very limited control over its messages and this control only lasts a short period of time until someone distorts the message ahead of personal or party agendas. This consequently means that messages are skewed or misinterpreted by the media and the public, thus leaving voters confused about the political system and issues of the day. An inherent part of IMC processes is to provide a greater control and flow of internal communication within the party.

Thirdly, how to distribute distinct roles when political roles inside a party are often ambiguous and obfuscated, unlike in the corporate and commercial world, where job roles and duties are clearly delineated, an advertiser is an advertiser is an advertiser. A political party member can play many different roles and have many

different duties. Can organisational structure be applied to political parties? Are political parties utilising their dedicated volunteer base to their full potential? These are questions that can only be answered by the party itself.

The fourth and perhaps the biggest problem challenging political marketers in the implementation of marketing frameworks though is gaining commitment and support from management (candidates, party leaders) and all members of the party for these frameworks. The implementation of IMC principles and practices is particularly affected by this factor, without this commitment it would simply not work. Can the political party leaders understand and give full support, lending their full weight and influence to these marketing concepts?

The fifth concern is how to use efficiently and effectively modern communication technologies to enhance their public 'brand' image, and create relationships with their constituents. Can political marketers fully utilise the opportunities of relationship marketing, and modern technologies, in the form of databases and the internet? Carefully co-ordinating their actions, so as to present a unified message to their voters, that strengthens their brand image and effectively delivers a personalised message to each voter?

The final challenge is time and a rapidly changing environment, political parties do not plan for the long term, they find that they cannot. The ease and rapidity with which September 11, changed the American political scene could not have been foreseen or predicted. This too remains true for the commercial world although businesses are not as subject to the publics' scrutiny as political parties are, nor are they under the media spotlight to such an extent.

5. POLITICAL MARKETING AND THE IMC CONCEPT

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has received considerable coverage in marketing literature since its development, and as Eagle (2000) demonstrates, even IMCs most ardent supporters have noted problems in translating the concept into reality. Fam (2000) suggests that this may be due to a lack of understanding of the concept.

Schultz (2003) illustrates that the viewpoints of IMC has expanded since its beginnings in 1990, in five major ways. Firstly, it is not just about communicating with customers, but communicating with stakeholders. Secondly, it is not just communication about product brands, but how to manage the corporate brand. Thirdly, it involves internal communications not just external communications. Fourthly, it is not just the sale of the product, but the development of the brand and brand equity. Lastly, IMC is about building long-term shareholder value not just short-term returns.

Some of the current trends driving integration in the political marketplace are a *proliferation and homogeneity of political parties*, policies and candidates. Thus it can easily be seen the value of distinctiveness. There is *decreasing brand/party loyalty* amongst voters, as discovered in research on political voting behaviour according to (Dalton, 1996) "For most people, political interest and involvement barely extended beyond casting an occasional vote in national or local elections". Furthermore, Dalton (1996) states that the voting public apparently brought little understanding to their participation in politics. "In any rigorous or narrow sense the voters are not highly rational" (Berelson et al, 1954, 307-10 as quoted in (Dalton, 1996).

Moreover, just as in the commercial world, there is *more demand and less trust*. Customers in industrialised countries are sophisticated selectors of brands, and at the same time customers are smarter, more demanding and much less trusting (Duncan, 2002). This can be directly related to the political arena, constituents are more demanding, politicians, political parties and their policies are subject to the publics', via the media, intense scrutinisation. Distrust, is evident in their suspicion, and once let down, they are quick to let their disappointment known, take ex US President Bill Clinton as a prime example, he lied to American public about his involvement with Ms Lewinsky. According to Bauer (1996) there is a relationship with between voters and parties/politicians, if the relationship of mutual trust is violated, it can take a very long time to rebuild.

One of the most important trends driving this integration is the *misuse of new technologies*, or not using these new technologies to their advantage. The net as a political weapon is still a 'fairly blunt instrument' as used by most parties and politicians (Bogle, 2001). Its potential to break down barriers and its interactive nature is only just beginning to be explored (Bogle, 2001). Australian parties have taken a fairly cautious approach to this new medium, using it primarily as an information storehouse rather than putting it to more innovative use (Gibson, 2002).

The appropriateness of IMC practices to political marketing is evident in the political rediscovery of the concept of the Life Time Voter (Dean, 2001), the need for long term strategic planning, the development of a brand relationship with voters, the effective use of new technologies and the 'integrity' of the political party brand. The IMC concept and practices are designed to meet these needs and the needs of a changing market.

Life time voter concept as discussed in (Dean, 2001) states that political parties may already be turning to this ideal, going beyond such concepts as designated target groups, credible positioning statements and brand awareness. Customer retention versus customer acquisition has been the subject of numerous marketing articles, with the rather obvious conclusion that it costs less to retain a customer than to acquire a new one and that, current customers are more likely to be heavy brand users and brand advocates (Duncan, 2002). This makes sense in the political voting arena too, going back to the old ideal of staying a party voter for life (Dean, 2001).

Long term strategic planning, is oft discussed in political marketing literature; it is the ideal of having planning to help build brand loyalty after and between election and campaigns. Andrews (1996) posed the necessity for planning, monitoring and evaluation. This plays a principal part of long term strategic planning, evaluating where and how the last campaign succeeded, and making the necessary corrections so as not to make the same mistakes. As discussed by Baines (2002) marketing planning for political parties has been neglected in the literature and there appears to be a lack of consideration of the strategic components associated with political marketing campaigns. One of the core principles of IMC is long term planning, monitoring and evaluation of all marketing communications.

Brand and image building of the political party is the core focus of IMC, O'Shaughnessy (2001) suggests that brand loyalty could be of benefit also, politicians must realise that their parties, indeed themselves, function as brands. Lock (1996) proposes that in regards to political brand image, voters perceptions of the party characteristics can be blurred, and that the vast majority of voters therefore choose on the basis of the overall political package, concept or image. As noted in (Dean, 2001) political campaigning is intrinsically linked to the development of brand identity or

image and that thinking goes further than a mere transactional focus of Niffenegger (1988).

Furthermore IMC fills a gap in current political marketing needs is in the *co-ordination of communications*. This has been seen as a major problem in current political marketing efforts. Baines (2002) discusses the need for co-ordination and integration of the political marketing process in order to strengthen their image among key citizen and voter groups. This strengthens a united image and most importantly, aids in increasing the integrity of the political brand image. The concept of integration is in tune with that of integrity. It is useful to note that integrity and integration come from the same Latin roots, *integritas*, which means "honesty, completeness, soundness" (Duncan, 2002). Integration produces integrity because an organisation that is seen as 'whole' rather than as a collection of autonomous pieces and parts is perceived as being more sound and trustworthy, a prerequisite for sustaining relationships (Duncan, 2002).

Communication is the foundation of relationships. IMC is about maximising the positive messages and minimising the negative messages that are communicated about a brand, with the objective of creating and sustaining brand relationships. So IMC is a vehicle with which to build upon communications with voters, into a sustainable relationship, the ideal of this communication would be to make voters part of the policy development, a truly democratic process.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL PARTIES AND CANDIDATES

Political parties must understand the importance of providing a united brand image to their constituents, to accomplish this, communication barriers must be

broken down within the organisation at all levels. They must also carefully examine their own past actions and strategies, realising where there have been differences between their party promises and policies to their actual performance. Before a political party can be seen as integrated in the eyes of voters and other stakeholders, it must have an integrated process for developing its marketing communications and brand relationships. Basically that is, a party culture and organisational focus that encourages and facilitates cross-functional management. Just as importantly it must have leaders and members that have a basic understanding and respect for the strengths of the various marketing communication functions (Duncan, 2000).

Internal communication systems are, above all, essential in cross-functional management. If marketing communication processes are not directed and carried out by those who are in constant contact with each other, the result will be confusion rather than communication, resulting in brand 'fuzziness'. There should not be any inconsistency within the party, particularly in regards to their strategic marketing communications. Information must be available internally, and party members should have knowledge of annual planning. Technology should also be used more effectively for internal networking and constituent databases as these are not being used to their full potential. Not only do political organisations need to increase their levels of internal marketing, but also their internal relationship building, by illustrating to their volunteer base how important they are to the party, which will in turn, increase their commitment to the party and its policies.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many suggestions for future research, for this is at the embryonic stage in its development, that is, the application of the IMC concept to political

marketing. Further testing and adaptation of IMC process models is needed, beyond what this paper has put forth. Ideally also, a long term study of the IMC concept and processes adopted into a political party and the evaluation of its performance, following the translation from conceptual theory to political practicality.

This paper, whilst attempting to elucidate the suitability of the IMC concept to political marketing also raised with it many questions. Can marketing practices apply structure to political organisations? Can political organisations unite to form a party consensus on marketing and communication activities? Can organisational structure be applied to political parties? Can the political party leaders understand and give full support, lending their full weight and influence to these marketing concepts? Can political marketers fully utilise the opportunities of relationship marketing, and modern technologies, in the form of databases and the internet?

The answering of some of these questions can only be done by the political organisation alone, and some of these questions are already in the process of being researched in marketing literature, there are some that are new areas of investigation in marketing and will need to be answered before any real progress can be made, not just for the implementation of IMC, but for the implementation of any marketing processes in the political arena.

8. CONCLUSION

Clearly there is a need to take a fresh look at political marketing; this is highly evident in the struggles currently being faced. The IMC concept in this article is being put forth as a possible solution to the current difficulties faced in political marketing and as a way to progress and adapt to changing times. If implemented with care, with understanding, with forethought and most importantly with support and commitment

from management (candidates, party leaders) then the success of IMC principles and practices in political marketing can be envisioned easily. Without these behind it however, any new concept/process will surely not succeed in any industry. As society evolves, as marketing evolves, political marketing must also evolve, IMC is a practical, logical, ultimately inevitable, and natural evolution for political marketing.

There is criticism of IMC in marketing literature, as it is one of the most controversial areas marketing education during the past decade (Kerr, 2002). However, despite any criticism, IMC has penetrated the marketing discipline in a variety of meaningful ways, there are now two journals that are solely dedicated to advancing the area (Kerr, 2002). Furthermore, entire academic programs are built around IMC at the post-graduate area. Without doubt, for IMC principles and processes to be successfully implemented into the political marketing literature, adaptation is necessary.

It must also be considered that there should be more future emphasis required by political parties on internal marketing to their volunteers, so as to make better use of them as a resource and a solid foundation upon which every strong brand is built on. Volunteers are a party's strength and a potential source of vulnerability and weakness. Political organisations need to build a relationship with them as well as with their constituents and repay the involvement and commitment that is given wholeheartedly by their volunteers, as they are the backbone and heart of any political organisation.

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