

# Brand it and They Will Come

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*Addressing the Association of Democratic State Chairs*

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Did anyone hear what Karl Rove said right after the 2006 election about how the democrats didn't win, that the republicans *lost* it? Did that come up on anyone else's radar? Well, it did on mine. And while I was obviously insulted because I know how much hard work our party put into this election, I didn't get too upset because it's the least of what these guys have done and said about our party over the past decade. But when a smart, liberal friend of mine parroted the exact same thing to me a few days later, it really bothered me. Even after a big loss, the republicans are *still* getting America to sign off on *their* version of *our* story.

Now the reason I mention this is because it speaks directly to a very important recognition, and that is the recognition that the republicans have become very adept at telling *our* story for us. Have you noticed that? They are continually finishing our sentences. When we ask for a demonstrable strategy for Iraq, we're "cut and run". When we protest the wiretapping of American citizens without a warrant, we're "aiding the terrorists." When we want to keep church and state separate, we're "godless." And now that we've won the election they never thought we could, it's not really because we won, it's because *they lost*. And I guess the reason it really sticks in my craw is that they've really done some damage with this tactic over the past decade or so.

After I gently enlightened my liberal friend to the dangers of regurgitating republican propaganda in my presence, I asked myself why? *Why* have the republicans been so effective in turning *their* lies, *their* incompetence, into a story about *our* bias and *our* weakness?

The answer is very important and has everything to do with success or failure in 2008.

The reason the republicans keep telling our story so effectively is because, as democrats, we have done a very poor job of telling our *own* story. And from an advertising point of view we have done something even worse—by failing to communicate a clear narrative for our brand, *we have broken the golden rule of branding by allowing our competition to define our brand for us*. We have allowed the republicans make liberal a dirty word and it has forced us to euphamise our core identity. And if you believe I'm overstating the case, just think about how many people you have met since 1994 who have switched their brand from "liberal" to "progressive" because it goes over better at cocktail parties. Maybe you're one of them. I know I am.

So the first thing we have to accept is that if we want our brand back, *we're going to have to start defining it for ourselves*. Because if we're really honest with each other, we know that there is a kernel of truth in Karl Rove's lie and we must pull it like a bad tooth before we can move on as a party. And the truth of the 2006 election is that while we did indeed win this election with a lot of hard work, we accomplished it on the back of a perfect storm of anti-incumbency. To rely on it for 2008 would be a grave mistake.

In 2008, being efficiently anti-republican will not be enough to win again and it is definitely not a successful, long-term strategy for the Democratic Party brand. But if we can change our strategy and begin to promote a clear, affirmative vision of the Democratic Party that Americans can put into their pocket, I think the Democratic Party could have another tsunami in 2008 and not only take The White House but also significantly increase our majority in the Senate.

So how do we do this? How do we begin to tell our own story as democrats? Well, when companies want to tell their product stories, they develop a brand. We don't have a product, *per se*, but *we do have an idea of ourselves as democrats and that idea can be constructed and advertised using the exact same principles we use to sell products*.

And it isn't all that complicated. People love to mystify the concept of a brand these days because it makes them sound smart, but a *brand* is a very simple thing—a *brand is an opinion of who you are and what you stand for*. It's that simple. It doesn't matter if you're a political party or selling ice cream off the back of truck, the people who know you, have an opinion of who you are how you conduct yourself. *That opinion is a brand* and it will determine the course and customer base of your business.

Granted, it's a lot more complicated if you're a political party as opposed to a an ice-cream-truck-guy, but in the end even the most successful commercial brands are nothing more than expensive, well-managed opinions put into your head by guys like me. And the way guys like me get inside your head is by engaging you at *the feeling level*.

People buy things for emotional reasons. This is scientific fact. They, in turn, build identity and long-term loyalties around these emotions. It's not cynical, it just the way people use brands. That's why when we build brands, we start by identifying the principles first, not the attributes. The emotional center of any successful brand is always a *principle* because a principle is something customers *feel* and that feeling inspires them to make a choice.

And so I'm at the doorstep of the Democratic Party brand with these ideas because I want to take what I know about selling people crap they don't need, and start selling them something that they desperately *do* need—like a genuine stake in their democracy, their country, their world.

If this election says anything, it says that America is eager to have this new conversation about who they are and what they stand for. They are hungry for a new brand story, a new idea of themselves that they can use to look toward the future. And I believe history will show that in 2006 *the People* of this country passed a talking stick to the Democratic Party with the secret hope that we would say something important and

meaningful and inspired. So...what is it going to be? What are we going to say?

This is the most important question we can be asking ourselves as democrats right now. And I'm not talking about answering with policy papers and plan outlines. Those things are very important. America needs honest policies and a clear plan. But as we craft those plans and policies we must also remember to craft the *inspiration* that gives them breath and life. If we do this, we will not only help the democratic base to express themselves better, we might also open up a whole new market to honest, sensible conservatives who just figured out their party was hijacked by a bunch of war profiteers.

However, to gain the allegiance of this demographic, or any demographic for that matter, *it takes a real commitment to develop and promote the party identity*. Our goal should be create a comprehensive brand image of the Democratic Party that is so affirmative, so visionary, *so easy to use*, that it not only becomes an asset to our democratic candidates but also ensures that even when a democratic candidate loses an election, the party will be sure to have won market share.

What then might happen to relationship between the Candidate and the Democratic Party? They could become a kind of *sales force* for a larger Democratic Party message that helps them win elections at the same time that it recruits new members and builds consensus within our own ranks. So to our candidates we might say: *Ask not what your Democratic State Party can do for you, ask what you can do for your Democratic State Party*.

And I don't mean any disrespect to our candidates because I know it is their faces out there, their reputations, they're sacrifices. I'm simply suggesting that while our democratic candidates are out the world, they could and should be helping to build an idea of the Democratic Party that is bigger than their individual candidacy; something like the Brand Gospel According the Democratic Party.

I get calls all the time from people asking to help them refine their bullet points. Some of them are out there literally pounding the pavement and all they have to represent the party is *bullet points*. No national media message, no branding support, no visual materials, certainly no video support. I don't know how they do it!

But imagine if they had just some of the supporting materials I mentioned. Imagine if every organizer in your state had a few professionally produced television commercials on a five-dollar DVD that they could use to open every new field meeting they held. Imagine a democratic candidate rally that opens with an inspiring, ninety-second preview of the Democratic Party platform. Imagine that same rally populated with print ads and branded words and buttons so that the cumulative effect of this political event was that each supporter leaves a smarter, clearer, more articulate democrat. She leaves better able to talk about herself as a democrat. He *feels* the party message in his pocket as he walks out the door. Maybe she even buys a hat and a t-shirt and a DVD of the commercial that makes her feel proud again to be a democrat. He is excited about what has come alive in him, and he is anxious to tell his friends about this new discovery.

So what does all of this have to do with me? Well I'm here to show you something I've made based on all of the ideas. It's called an animatic and it's not really a television commercial--not yet. It's more like a *model* of a television commercial. Animatics are used in advertising as a way of testing the message of a commercial without having to actually produce it. And that's what I've done here. It will all be pretty self-explanatory, but before I show it to you I need to add one more thing. When you watch this, please strike from your mind any idea of a national, top-down campaign with a 25 million dollar media buy. I am not saying this wouldn't be a good thing, but I am suggesting it is not where we start. We begin this campaign by putting top-notch media assets into the best possible hands, of all of you, the Democratic State Parties, and making it available as part of a comprehensive, grass roots, media branding strategy.

## **Roll Commercial**

So, I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that I need to raise money to get this campaign started. The good news is that I am not here to ask for your money. But I *am* going to ask for a form of currency--your endorsements. There is a manila envelope on your table and inside of it is a letter of endorsement I am asking you to sign. I will then take those endorsements and use them to raise the funds necessary to make and launch this campaign. As we all know, the 2008 Presidential race started the day after the 2006 mid-terms elections were over. If this campaign is to succeed, we need to get started right away.

So, if you are ready to sign it, please do so and return it to me after lunch. If you are not comfortable signing it yet, if you want to know more, if you totally disagree with everything I just said, I have made myself an easy target. The big blue booth in the lobby is hard to miss and I will be there for the rest of the weekend. Please come by and tell me what you think. I made this for you and I really want to hear from you all.

I know I've said and suggested a lot today, but if you take away only one thing, let it be this: *brand it and they will come.*

Thank you for your time.

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