

TOM

Understanding Brand Obama

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“[t]he word itself is a sloppy metaphor for a whole bunch of stuff (much of which isn't entirely true) with the power to distract you from precise thinking, expression and action.” — *Mark Earls on “brand,” January 4, 2009*

The title of this article is a bit misleading. I'm not about to compare a newly elected national leader, who inherited a complex and highly consequential set of issues, with a can of soda pop or a pair of running shoes. Sorry. That being said, and despite the fact that I typically eschew the idea of humans as brands, I do believe that President Obama's most recent history provides a valuable lesson on the concept of “brand;” that sloppy metaphor that confuses many and annoys the rest.

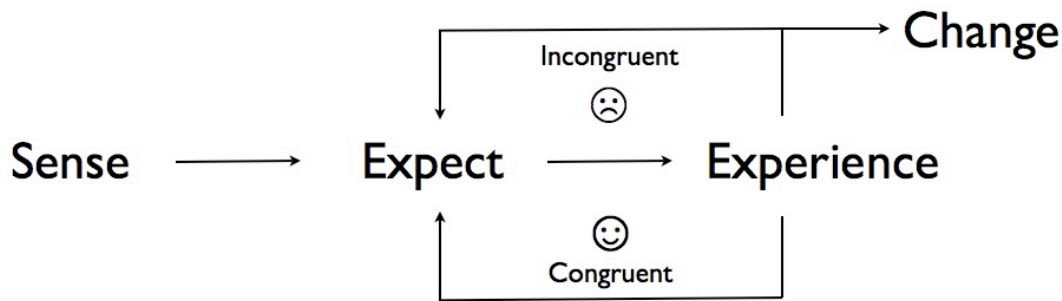
Fifteen weeks ago, Barack Obama was enthusiastically chosen by 62.98 million Americans (52 percent of the total number of people who both could, and did, choose). But what *precisely* did the ardent majority believe they were getting with their brand choice? What were they thinking and feeling at the time? Ask and they'll tell you “Change” (that was the brand “promise” after all). And change they got: the first African-American President; an intelligent, articulate and polished speaker; and a thoughtful, bipartisan bridge-builder. So you'd expect them all to be feeling pretty good about their brand choice, right? Hardly.

So much for good feelings

Environmentalists are concerned that Obama's requisite focus on the economic crisis will push back their green agenda. And they weren't happy to find out that President Obama, who has said that we can no longer keep “our homes at 72 degrees at all times,” has cranked up the thermostat in the Oval office. “You could grow orchids in there,” admitted advisor David Axelrod. “He's from Hawaii, okay? He likes it warm.”

Liberals are dispirited by the stimulus plan, which by all accounts contains the biggest tax cuts in history. Conservatives are troubled by the superfluous government spending and the soaring deficit, as well as the assertive plan to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq. Washington outsiders are dealing with the cognitive dissonance of their choice induced by Obama's problematic Cabinet picks, considering his promise to “change the ways of Washington.” And tech-savvy voters are dismayed by, of all things, the paucity of Twitters since Obama took office. What's going on?

Take a long, considered look at the following brand decision representation:



So here's what's going on: President Obama was chosen from essentially two options (duopolistic competition) based primarily on strategically crafted words and images. Voters created an *expectation* of brand Obama's actions based on those *sensory* inputs, and his subsequent performance is now creating the brand *experience* of each voter. Yes, Obama "promised" change. Unfortunately for him, and for those who suffer from this particular brand delusion, a brand is *not* a promise. It's a *personal* expectation and, ultimately, an experience measured against that expectation. And so, many people are now experiencing incongruity with their choice of the Obama brand. It was inevitable.

The bottom line

If the market for "Presidents" was not duopolistic and voters were not "locked in" with their brand choice, many would be actively searching for a more desirable alternative; one better aligned with their *particular* predilections. But they can't. And that's why the forced, mass market nature of politics, which is driven by words and images, is an inappropriate exemplar for anything to do with modern day brands. In today's marketplace of abundance, people will modify their brand choice in a heartbeat if they feel that doing so will better align with their sense of self and contribute more substantially to their pursuit of happiness. Hence the nichification of most markets.

Yes, words and images are important in influencing choice in that they can help create expectations; expectations of near term experiences. And if successfully rendered, they will compel people to investigate further or, in low risk decisions (or in duopolistic ones), to simply choose the brand with little consideration. Words and images can also be creatively employed to reinforce brand choice, but they are *not* the most important part of the brand story. That role on the stage belongs to the performance of the brand, which ultimately creates the reinforcing cognitive experience of the customer. And, as all great marketers know, how people feel about themselves and their decision to choose a brand—enlivened by the eventual realization of their unique expectations—is what creates the good feelings that endure over time.

So how will brand Obama fare? It all depends on his constituents' changing expectations, along with Obama's ability to both shape and enliven those expectations through improved experiences. In the end, only time will tell. But, unlike most other brand choices, his constituents will have no other option but to wait, hope and see.