

TRUMP  
 MERKEL  
 MAY  
 STURGEON  
 FARAGE  
 CORBYN  
 DINTON

This article originally appeared in *PM* magazine. For further details go to [www.pmforum.co.uk](http://www.pmforum.co.uk)

# Which comes first – the leader or the brand?

Does politics have something to teach us about shaping an authentic brand? Geoff Dodds looks at recent events.

**B**ack in May this year, I wrote an article about ‘The authenticity deficit’. It posed the question as to whether authenticity was the ‘holy grail’ of branding and examined how service organisations might achieve it.

Amongst other points, the final one was about Leadership. It said:

“It is the leaders who set the tone, who define the culture. It is in the daily decisions they make and actions they take

that the brand comes to life. It is the role of leadership continually to question and challenge their actions and those of others against the agreed ‘brief’. That way lies authenticity.”

## Recent events

Since May, we have been witness to an unprecedented degree of political turmoil that has posed some fundamental questions about leadership and the political brand landscape.

In the UK...

- What now for the Labour party brand under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership?
- Might a new leader emerge to form a breakaway centre-left brand?
- Where is May’s premiership taking the Conservative brand?
- What future, if any, for a resurgent LibDem brand under Tim Farron?
- Can the UKIP brand survive without Farage at the helm?

And on the international stage...

- How will Donald Trump re-shape the Republican brand and, more widely, ‘brand USA’?
- Will his actions in power create a more moderate brand position than his campaign rhetoric would have us believe?
- Whatever the outcome, will he project a more authentic picture of the American nation, for better or worse, than his predecessor?

## The exam question

No doubt the answers to all these questions will emerge over time.

Meanwhile, there is one question that has arisen from all these political events which has been intriguing me for a while: *Whether it is the leader who shapes the brand or whether the brand determines the leader.*

## Learning from politics

Many people have expressed discomfort in the past at the idea that branding should play any role in politics. And some may feel, in any case, that politics is a very different kind of ‘industry’ from professional services, with a different set of rules. But bear with me for now, because I think there are lessons we can learn.

Especially interesting from a brand perspective has been the Labour leadership contest.

Putting aside the leadership issue for a moment and viewing Labour as one of two political ‘brand leaders’, one would probably argue that it is past its sell-by date. Having abandoned the positioning of New Labour, which made it electable, it is now increasingly divided, unclear as to whether it is appealing to the traditional working class or the liberal modernisers and unable to compete effectively against a potentially compassionate/centrist Conservatism, should that become a reality.

The situation cries out for a serious segmentation study and some difficult

strategic marketing choices. Which is, of course, what we would generally prescribe for a professional services firm facing similar dilemmas. That's what marketers do all the time.

### Leader first

But that's not the way politicians tend to operate. To them, it's all about electing the right leader and then letting the leader fashion the brand through their policies and actions. And who's to say they are wrong?

In marketing terms, Jeremy Corbyn is positioned as fundamentally different – a conviction politician with the utmost integrity. Will that positioning be strong enough to appeal to a sufficiently wide group of people disillusioned with politics and political leaders? Will the Labour 'product' (policies, actions, communications) reinforce or undermine his positioning over time?

In its early stages, New Labour was strongly shaped by Philip Gould's marketing strategy, supported by an almost obsessive reliance on focus groups. But it was Blair's subsequent clarity of vision and leadership that made the brand a reality, cemented his position as a moderniser (whatever your view of the outcomes) and led to three consecutive general election victories.

For the Conservatives, Theresa May appeared to set out a vision of compassionate Conservatism in her initial address outside No 10. She threatened to steal Labour's centre-left positioning.

But it was always going to be her actions that would define the brand. To date, the evidence suggests a Conservative brand more aligned to traditional, right wing Tory pragmatism – Hinkley, junior doctors, grammar schools, Saudi arms sales, Heathrow, Brexit ...

But it's still quite early days. What will the future hold? Every action she takes will either reinforce or undermine her initial stated brand position.

Trump provides perhaps the most extreme example of leadership branding.

His campaign positioning was masterful – bigoted, racist, misogynistic, nationalistic, successful man of the ordinary people. And white, working class, middle America lapped it up.

Will his brand in power be equally well defined, or will it be (of necessity) cloudier, more nuanced? And, if so, will he be forgiven by his core constituents for straying from the brand they voted for?

Whatever the answers to these ques-

tions, it does seem that, in politics at least, the leader precedes the brand. And in turn the brand only becomes a reality as a result of the leader's actions in power.

### But what about business?

Is this a model that can be applied to business? And what can we learn for professional services? Should branding be the outcome of thorough market positioning analysis and rigorous brand definition? Or should we begin by looking more closely at the leader of the organisation, recognising that it is they who will shape the brand?

It's easy to point to organisations where the founder has shaped the brand – Jobs, Branson, Dyson and so on. But what about a more run-of-the-mill situation where a new CEO/Senior Partner/Managing Partner takes charge and may wish to drive change? Or even where the leader is simply managing the status quo?

In my own experience, both approaches can work. At times, I have let the analysis lead the charge. At others, I have focused more on the leader. In hindsight, I have probably made a subconscious judgement about the strength of leadership and the likely influence of the leader on the brand.

But it now seems to me that, if we are really serious about authenticity (as we should be), we should always focus on the leader. The risk, if we don't, is that there will be a gap between the brand vision and the leadership reality. And that gap, however small, will be noticed by employees and clients.

So how do we make the link between the nature of a leader and the shape of the brand their leadership will define?

### The values connection

When people talk about their brand, they very often focus on what they do. In business, that takes the form of their products and services. In politics, it takes the form of election promises and policies.

In both cases, it runs the risk of being undifferentiated and easily copied.

In the words of Simon Sinek (author of *The power of WHY*), "people don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it". In other words, people are much more interested in your purpose and values than they are in what you produce.

Indeed, recent evidence of politics suggests that people are increasingly seeking 'conviction politicians' – leaders who believe in something rather than just

follow the will of the herd.

Nick Clegg, in his recent book *Politics – Between the extremes*, argues that voters fall into two groups. 'Interest' voters, who are on the lookout for what politicians can do for them. And 'Values' voters, who are looking for politicians who share their values. How much stronger and more sustainable is the relationship built on shared values?

So it is in business. Those leaders who are clear about their core purpose and values are the leaders who are most capable of shaping a coherent and authentic brand.

To that end, I have increasingly focused my brand work on Purpose and Values, recognising that this is generally where the real difference lies, where brand alignment begins and where leadership has most influence.

### In conclusion

So when it comes to defining a brand, I am inclined to look at it as a pyramid.



Leadership Actions are the reality of what we see/experience day to day. They tell us, more than anything else, what really counts in this organisation.

These actions arise from the leaders' core Purpose and Values and over time they, in turn, shape Brand Positioning and Personality.

It is, above all, the leader and his/her actions that define the brand. Not the other way round.

It may or may not be exactly the brand that you would have designed in a laboratory, but it is likely to be more real, more authentic and ultimately more sustainable...

...except perhaps in the case of The Donald.



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