

Political branding

SCOPE

The current UK electoral campaigns have stirred up new levels of interest in British politics, but how have the political parties tried to capture our covetable attention? Semiotician Dr Alex Gordon analyses the manifesto materials from each of the three main parties and notes how even the smallest details and inconsistencies can affect our overall perception of them as brands. He discusses visual stimuli as one of many touchpoints between a party and its potential voters in the same way that brands must consider everything they do as a potential swayer of consumer trust.

Considering this and the growing trend for transparency in business, the lesson is clear for brands and political parties alike. They must endeavour to keep their values consistent with both communications and behaviour, ensuring every touchpoint is thoughtfully considered.

KEY POINTS

As brands, political parties achieve actionable trust by behaving consistently, humanly and with a long-term vision of building genuine relationships.

In order for parties to build credibility and trust, they must have goals that are outlined and demonstrated through genuine action and communications, in the same way that brands do.

In a contentious media environment, someone will always spotlight the worst possible connotations of your message. As with brand messages, those of political parties must be acutely considered in terms of all contextual associations in which they may be viewed.

Ambiguity and conflicting messages create confusion, which leads to inertia. In this context, being the clearest, most transparent contender can increase your influence and help build trust.



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FOREWORD

Despite the fact that all three political parties kick-started their campaigns with their manifestos, those documents have been generally ignored by the electorate who have been more inclined to make judgements based on visual and audio engagement rather than literary.

But the visual element of those manifestos - the front covers - can offer us insight into the gap between the predictable aspirations of the parties, and the unpredictable differences in the way they project themselves. Crucially, the manifestos reveal the unintentional messages all three parties have communicated, which have damaged their campaigns.

As the campaign has moved from the launch to the finish, what's become clear is an essential need for consistent branding across all consumer - or electoral - touchpoints.

Arguably the reason why no one party has dominated and why there is the threat (or promise) of a hung parliament is because the internal contradictions in the branding of each party has undermined their ability to cut-through to the public's consciousness and gain the sort of brand and political traction they need to secure category leadership.

The lesson is clear - whether a political party, or an FMCG, consistent branding is essential. Indeed FMCG brands should take note - election campaigns are a bit like a CSR campaign and the manifestos set the tone of the campaign in precisely the same way that promotional literature or advertising for a CSR campaign do. In both instances - political and consumer - if the brand doesn't deliver what it promises it will be quickly found out and exposed. It will ultimately fail to gain, or maintain, the trust it needs to be a winner.

The front covers of the manifestos reveal a lot more about the three parties intentions than they would probably want to communicate. The contradictions between what the covers promise and what the leaders have said have had a subtle impact on electoral perception as people see them in their newsagents, on billboards and the television and compare them to the messages emerging from the leaders mouths and from the advertising alongside them.

LABOUR

Much has been made of the vision of the family staring into the horizon, viewing a rising sun across rolling hills. It is strikingly similar to visual renderings of old Soviet Socialist Realism and mid-20th Century Kibbutz utopia. They convey an idealised vision of teleological perfection - the supposed rosy future that lies waiting at the end of Labour's policy road. After thirteen years it surely connotes the Labour party extending an already long march to get there. It does beg the question of whether such a vision is ever achievable, and indeed given the symbolic similarity to Stalinist imagery, whether it is worth getting there(!)



Manifestos are propaganda documents - they can't pretend to be anything else but this image does convey a subtextual hint of the sinister... the Labour party's desire not to persuade but to dominate, with Gordon Brown as Stalin. Ask Mrs Duffy and she'll tell you about her experience of disagreeing with the glorious leader.

What this tells us is that Labour is concentrating on the imagined future not on the realist present as Gordon Brown indicated in his launch speech - primarily because the present Labour sun is not clearly rising, but arguably setting.

But what is most remarkable is that after thirteen years in office the Labour party has to employ an illustration to paint a portrait of a rosy future perhaps because it is difficult for them to show us a photograph of the post-recessionary present. If the 'future is fair for all', does that not imply that the present is unfair?

The cover though, is a cunning demagogic trick - "Don't look at what I am doing, listen to what I am saying" - or in this case "Look at the mythic vision I have created."

The Labour party have played a very dangerous semiotic game - usually the meaning (signified) must be clearly coded by the image/word (signifier). But this is an image with an unknown meaning, a vision of Britain without any tangible evidence - because that lies somewhere in the future. Is this what will happen or merely fable/fairy tale? This employs the semiotics of 'might' - the evidence of the last thirteen years does not provide us with clear guidance as to whether this perfect future will happen, but it 'might.'

The family are looking into the distance but what they see is hazy and unclear - is that the bright light of progress or the flame of conflagration they are looking at? Is this the sun rising or setting...? The ambiguity of the image is startling. A fairy tale image with a happy ever after subtext is not really coding total mastery and confidence after thirteen years in power. It certainly seems to conflict with the image of a heavyweight politician that Gordon Brown is trying to project, and of the party who changed Britain for the better in government for the last thirteen years. The manifesto cover doesn't signify the bold conviction of their achievements, but codes an effort to avoid reference to the present.

CONSERVATIVE

The Conservative manifesto connotes a formal invitation - the formal blue and the silver colouring of the font suggest the traditional symbolism of luxury and privilege. The Conservatives signify they will deliver a blue blooded, silver service government.

The message is a formal invitation sent out as an announcement. It follows the manners and social etiquette derived from the aristocratic classes and landed gentry, now copied by the aspirant middle classes. It codes the sensibilities of older-generation middle England, but not the social mobility of a 21st Century urban meritocracy.

It is startlingly opaque, signifying the very opposite values to those that the



Conservative party have desperately attempted to convey since David Cameron became leader. Where he speaks of transparency and openness, the manifesto codes secrecy and exclusivity. Where he offers partnership and relevance to ordinary citizens, the manifesto cover connotes a culture of deference and hierarchical values.

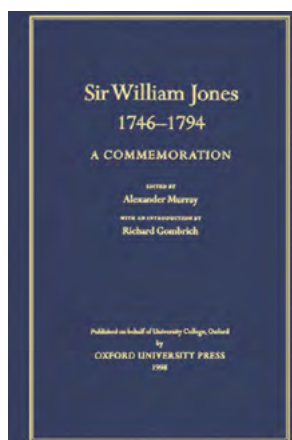
Critically though the opacity serves to undermine the virtues of 'invitation'. The stark blue livery does not permit any indication of what the reader is invited to join - thus a semiotic contradiction is in place between the word, which suggests welcoming permission, and the imagery, which connotes prohibition. Which of those values does the Conservative party really stand for?

The ambiguity makes it difficult for the reader to clearly decode the party's values.

The capitalised, serif font is a well-established signifier of ruling authority whose origins can be traced back to ancient Rome.

San Serif lower case lettering typically codes modesty, modernity and a conversational tonality between peers. Despite the efforts the Tories have made to convey themselves as the party of those values, the use of capitals undermines that and forces the reader to unconsciously read the cover as a traditional imperative from a top-down authority, not an empowering choice.

The blueness is not one of an open bright sky, signifying breathing in fresh-air, but the darker blue of Oxford, Cambridge and Eton.



Although the word 'join' is employed, the capitalised lettering codes a subpoena to attend an event and bear witness, but not participate.

Finally, its minimalism is suggestive of a tombstone - or indeed an invitation to a memorial service, not an exciting celebration of a marriage between the party and the electorate. Have they come to bury Cameron or to praise him?

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

The Liberal Democrats have chosen to decorate themselves in the design of bland corporatism. This is the semiotics of the Annual Company Report, not of an inspiring policy document for the party of social and political change they claim to stand for.

The image is of a hastily produced PowerPoint chart, with the front cover as executive summary for the CEO with little time to read the 200 charts that follow.



Unlike either of the other two parties, the Liberal Democrats' cover offers a clear declaration of their principles - they wear their heart on their sleeve - they are on a full disclosure contract and their open white background stands in marked contrast to the dark blue of the Tories.

The livery of the foregrounded principles is elemental - this is a clear attempt to signal the party's naturalness to the British nation and the electorate. They are not the colours of ideological entrenchment but of pragmatic and organic idealism. They help the Liberal Democrats imply that they are to the nation what water; fire, earth and air are to the world - basic, essential natural and healthy building blocks upon which we all rely.

This softer approach is complimented by the lower case font, which speaks to the reader, not at us. In this way it contrasts strongly with the tonality of the Conservative manifesto.

However, this energetic and emotional appeal is undermined by both the blockiness of the text boxes, and the solidity of the overall rectangle. There is an uncomfortable clash between the gentle humanity of the promise and the corporate PowerPoint of the delivery.

Is this juxtaposition meant to code such a mixture - to promote virtue with organisation or managerial competence? Or does it actually code the inevitable bureaucratic stifling of grand ideals which will never be realised under the stolid weight of government policy making in the 21st century.

The logo and sign-off banner in the top left and bottom right

corners signify dynamism and energy. But this vibrancy is contradicted by the flatness of the fonts and the stasis of the squared-off text boxes.

The Liberal Democrats promise a radical ideal and employ the new McDonald's 'healthy naturalness' colour scheme. But like McDonald's is it really "change that works for you", or are they merely selling the same product, which is no better for us than it's ever been?



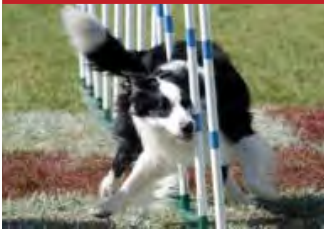
INSIGHT

All of the manifesto covers betray the deep confusion and ambiguity at the heart of all three parties which have been repeatedly exposed during this election campaign. On the one hand the manifesto covers - like the politicians themselves - aspire to signal basic human values, but on the other, code a subtext of control, entrenchment and detachment.

The manifesto covers published at the beginning of the campaign signposted the promise of vitality, energy, change and renewal that the leaders speak about, but also undermined the electorate's absolute belief and trust that the parties and their leaders can deliver on that promise. It is no wonder that they have had difficulty getting their messages across to the electorate more clearly, when they encode such obvious confusion in their brand communications.

Consistency is everything in branding, without it you can't be a winner. A hung parliament would reveal the public's belief that the three parties are essentially inconsistent.

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REPORT 06/04/2010

Agile business, agile planning, agile marketing

The world of business used to be about gathering requirements, designing, building, then testing and releasing products. Now everything moves that bit faster and it's all about speed and responsiveness. Welcome to agility business.



REPORT 15/03/2010

Engaging a fragmented audience: immersion and paratexts

How can brands use the essential human capacity for drama and story to engage increasingly fragmented audiences?



LEADERS 17/02/2010

What are the triggers for mobilising people?

To understand the forces at work in mobilising large groups it is important to recognise the human triggers for joining them in the first place. How can brands mobilise groups to their benefit and engage people with their brand?



REPORT 24/02/2010

Neuromarketing: the science of reading consumer minds

Neuroscience has been evolving and the application to market research is more useful now than it has ever been. What can looking into the brain of consumers teach us? Stats from the Super Bowl analysed and what's coming in the future.



REPORT 08/02/2010

Public by default

Attitudes to privacy have evolved along with the explosion in social media, and the resulting interplay reflects the maturation of a new, informed kind of trust that rests on mutual exchange of information between consumers and brands.



FOCUS 19/01/2010

Picture the Impossible

In the face of flailing news sales, the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle launched a hyperlocal game with major brand sponsorship aimed at strengthening community bonds and encouraging creativity and charity.



FOCUS 22/04/2010

Pedro & Maria

Pedro & Maria is an interactive branded entertainment telenovela which will enable fans to vote on plot direction through social media channels. It will be co-produced by MTV and Procter & Gamble.