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## Branding for politicians

Anthea De Lima

POLITICIANS today must take care to brand themselves the right way or risk losing touch with their constituents. ANTHEA DE LIMA writes.

WE LIVE in a world constantly bombarded by products and their labels. Think of successful branding campaigns and you would undoubtedly come up with several that are as familiar to us as our own names: the famous Nike "whoosh" sign; Coke - the undisputed champion of cola drinks; the red tab of Levi-Strauss.

Advertising gurus will tell you that branding is a complicated game - one that the increasing sophistication of consumers has made even harder.

Successful branding needs a simple message that is clear about the brand's core values.

One must understand consumers' lifestyles in order to "connect" with them, and differentiate one brand from another - a critical factor when dealing with the subtle art of influencing public preferences.

In this brave new world, branding applies to nearly every value we have, including (perhaps especially) our politics. Indeed, the plethora of names that pop up during general elections often makes it difficult for us to distinguish one politician from another - despite the sterling work done by a candidate for his or her constituents.

"There is no significant difference between branding a person and branding a product. In the case of politicians, they can't be just 'packaged and sold'. The advantage of branding is that it can turn positive thought into positive action," a brand management expert said, adding that good branding can turn thinking well about a person into voting for that person.

So, how does one go about starting a political branding campaign for someone?

The approach should begin by interviewing the candidate to gauge his or her personality or vision in order to define a specific "trait" to promote. There is, however, a problem:

"The difficulty lies in the possibility that you may not be able to find either vision or personality," the brand management expert said.

With this in mind, a branding exercise can be conducted in a number of ways. Sometimes, "uniqueness" can be a massive asset.

Some politicians, for example, are recognised simply and exclusively by their immense community service and by the fact that they really are the voice of the rakyat they represent.

Think of Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye when he was Bukit Bintang MP. Think of the thousands he helped while serving his terms of office, and the thousands he helps still.

Another branding expert said: "Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil [the Women & Family Development Minister] is also loved by her constituents in Lembah Pantai because she is always on the ground listening to their concerns and helping in whatever way she can.

"Her brand identity is her cheerfulness and her untiring service."

She also cited the example of Culture, Arts & Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir: "He is never seen without his bow-tie and people remember him because of it as well as his responsibility of looking after the cultural interests of Malaysia. His bow-tie distinguishes him from the rest and that is undoubtedly his branding."

Those noted popularly for many traits should focus selectively on a

small number of strengths - branded correctly, these will have a greater impact on the voter.

"Datuk Samy Vellu, for example, is well-known for a number of things because of his portfolio as Works Minister," the expert said.

"But if you were to choose his brand identity, you should emphasise the fact that he is the voice of the Indian community and has been so for a long time. What you should emphasise is that when you think of the Indian community, you immediately think of Samy," she said.

Then there is former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who has evolved from what some say a radical Malay leader into a world statesman. Popularly believed to have been highly conservative at the start of his political career, Dr Mahathir was later celebrated for his economic liberalism.

Staying relevant is a factor shared by both product branding and branding politicians. This depends utterly on researching the lifestyles of one's target audience (read "grassroots" in political lingo).

"When you are planning strategies for clients, you have to be able to furnish them with information on how the product will fit into consumers' lifestyles, bearing in mind that you are no longer dealing with a homogenous target audience.

"The same thing would apply to politicians. They must go to the grassroots to find out the concerns of their constituents, once again bearing in mind that these needs may be varied," a marketing practitioner said.

On the foreign front, consider Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Terminator actor who reinvented himself and became Governor of California earlier this year. Californians voted for him despite his being a political unknown. They voted for him in spite of allegations of sexual harassment, drugs abuse, Nazism and - worst of all - not having a clear financial plan for the debt-ridden State.

Schwarzenegger's stuck, literally, to his guns and his brand identity worked wonders for his advantage over much more experienced opponents. Another thing that helped was his marriage to Maria Shriver, one of the Kennedy clan.

Branding can also assist entire governments - not just a single politician. The Indian Government recently commissioned the "India Shining" campaign for this purpose, ahead of elections later this year. It was an apolitical campaign that emphasised the nation's economic performance and rising standards of living.

An article in The Hindu Business Line, described India Shining as "possibly the ultimate recognition of the fact that the brand, as an important leverage mechanism, has arrived in India".

India Shining, like the branding of politicians throughout the world, is undoubtedly an idea whose time has come. Has it come to Malaysia too?

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