

PR WEEK

November 13, 2000

THINK PIECE

There's a PR lesson to be learned from election 2000. Branding wins big, regardless of facts



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I have a friend who is such a staunch Republican that he would vote for Nixon again if he could, and even *he* will admit two things about this presidential election.

First, George W. Bush has not achieved the quantitative career success needed to be president. Second, the Clinton administration has enjoyed enough collective prosperity to end its tenure in a much better place than where it began.

So why did George W. make the race such a race? The answer is simple: In its current mindset, this country buys brands, not products. And the Republicans branded better.

What marketers should take from this election is that once again branding is beating actual assets.

Al Gore comes from one of the most successful peacetime administrations ever. George W. couldn't remember the names of five leaders in key world hot spots. The economy is three times better off than when a Republican sat in the Oval Office. Bush couldn't pronounce subliminal.

The point is that the Republican Party was successful at creating a brand that superceded the facts. This shows that brands are now more powerful than ever.

Think back to the debates. They were a brand war won by

Bush. The Republicans marketed him as such an underdog, that all he had to do to win was have his fly zippered.

On the other hand, Al Gore committed brand suicide. His brand was to leverage democratic success, and to play the "judge me on who I am" card. The goal was take the good part of the Clinton brand and leave the libido part behind. But when Gore said things that weren't true, he produced the opposite effect.

This has been an election campaign based solely on brands, which explains why the candidates often chose to appear on *Oprah* and *Regis* instead of *Meet The Press*, a show that focuses almost entirely on the facts. The GOP's branding strategy worked. Position George W. as a come-from-behind candidate, make all his shortcomings seem quaint and never let facts enter the picture. It was brilliant.

The point is that, as marketers, we are always trying to decide: should we brand or should we focus on assets? Do we talk about the experience of sharing a pizza, or wax poetic about the quality of the ingredients?

Well, my friends, look to the Oval Office for your answer. If my theory holds true, in it will sit a man with access to a button that could blow up the world, and in the background will play "Hail to the Chief Brand".

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