



# Finding and Measuring Your “Vision Thing”

Political branding:  
How to manage it and help your candidates win

By Michael Lieberman and Michael Barnhart

**C**ampaigns begin with a candidate. And in the beginning, each candidate, regardless of party, regardless of the office sought, must first consider some very basic questions: Who am I politically? What do I want to achieve? Why am I uniquely qualified?

The candidate's public profile or, if you will, political brand, starts with the answers to these questions.

Perhaps less personally profound for the candidate but operationally no less important to the campaign manager is the question: How does the political brand translate into key messages, stump speeches, a killer brochure, effective media, web-based mobilizations and all the other elements of a winning campaign?

What follows is a straightforward, researched-based approach to identifying and refining political brand, managing the brand, shaping campaign strategies and tactics and creating compelling messages that touch the hearts and minds of voters and motivate them to vote.

But again, campaigns begin with the candidate...

## **Political Brand = The Effective Communication of a Vision**

As Vice President George H.W. Bush prepared his 1988 presidential run, he bristled at suggestions that he lacked “the vision thing.” Although Bush never found his vision thing, he successfully exploited Ronald Reagan's vision of small government and low taxes. The “Read my lips, no new taxes” message helped Bush ride Reagan's visionary coattails into the Oval Office.

Let's face it; most of us are not visionaries. Even those with vision are often beaten down by practical political considerations and the lack of resources, power or influence to realize their vision. Thus, we look to political, social or business leaders with vision and who can define an actionable set of principles and goals around which to rally.

‘Vision’ gives hope, focus and meaning to our lives. It allows us a feeling that there is “something more” to life. In politics, a well-communicated vision wins. It excites partisans and nonpartisans alike

and may drive voter turnout. Clearly, President Obama and President Reagan are great examples of vision well communicated.

Vision is, in essence, an identity.

When we think about brand identity, what usually comes to mind is a name, logo, or perhaps its advertising jingle (It's the Real Thing). Identity, however, is a far more complex myriad of association that might include package design, brand voice, attitudes, brand personality, product utility, visual style, etc.

The most powerful brands, however, are those with a consistent brand voice and visual style that trades as equity when introducing brand extensions or new products.

In politics, brand extensions are the 'story' told to sell the campaign. Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" is the foremost example of a simple, yet effective story used to create what is basically coherent brand equity. President Obama's book "The Audacity of Hope" was a strong autobiographical component in the "Hope and Change" story.

The trend in corporate America is for powerful corporate players, such as Procter & Gamble, Pitney Bowes, General Electric and 3M to leverage a corporate brand equity that offers consumers quality assurance and name recognition; at the very least as an umbrella quality.

Gingrich's vision, "Contract for America," sparked a conservative Republican "revolution" mobilizing both fiscal and social conservatives. This "branding" of the Republican Party has been critical to the party's success in marketing itself as the fiscally disciplined, morally correct, small government, national security guardian of the free world—attributions that haven't necessarily been earned through actions. But that is the power of branding.

So, what are the most effective ways to introduce such a coherent brand strategy into a political campaign?

## Use Polling Data to Craft Your Message

The well-known axiom, "you can't manage what you can't measure" is as true for messaging as it is for anything else. Message development and measurement is rooted in research.

For example, consider an open congressional seat in New York. A local attorney, Ken Williamson, a longtime party activist, throws in his hat into the ring, ready to run in what will certainly be a crowded primary. Our strong recommendation to candidate Williamson, and every candidate similarly situated, is to conduct a poll to assess the political landscape, generally, and to shape messaging, specifically.

First, the initial research should seek to measure:

- *Campaign awareness (first mention, unaided awareness, top-of-mind and total recall)*
- *Campaign preference*
- *Issue importance/rank in consideration set*
- *Issue relevance*
- *Emotional connection*
- *Loyalty (what are the loyalists saying that is consistent with the undecideds?)*
- *Campaign imagery*

Next, survey questions should be asked that provide information necessary to distinguish candidate Williamson from the gaggle of others by measuring the most important aspects:

- *Unaided candidate awareness, particularly first recall*
- *Candidate experience*
- *Knowledge of campaign potential (what does the average voter have to gain by supporting this candidate)*
- *The perception of delivery against key campaign promises (All candidates promise the world during the race. What is important is that they are not perceived to be promising the world, when they have no intention, or potential to, deliver.)*
- *Accessibility*
- *Emotional connection (known as brand personality)*

Placing all this within an initial poll is quite easy. The survey itself is short. For example, among candidate experience, simply ask an open-ended question for those who are aware of Ken Williamson. Campaign potential and perception of delivery can be among a short list of attributes that either describes or rates the candidate. Emotional connection can be shown as a ranking of importance for local issues.

Ask those who are aware of Ken Williamson how likely they are to vote for Ken Williamson. Then, run a simple regression analysis to assess his brand "equity." That is those issues or attributes that pop out of the regressions make up the "why" those folks are supporting Ken Williamson.

## Comprehensively Integrate Research-Based Messages

Although campaign management and advertising are the more important and visible components of the race, message management is a much more holistic and interdependent specialty. Campaign discipline—relaying a consistent message—is tantamount.

Effective message integration and discipline for the Williamson campaign would be facilitated by:

- *Creating a well-communicated campaign position statement that includes the target audience, the campaign essence, promise, and personality.*
- *Forming a kitchen cabinet, that close circle of friends*

and advisers the candidate needs to surround him. The kitchen cabinet are those who can tell the candidate what he might not want to hear, what might be difficult for paid staff to bring up.

- Conducting campaign communications workshops with the kitchen cabinet.
- Appointing a message czar at the top, or near the top, of the campaign. It is normal, as Election Day nears, for the campaign to become bogged down with the day-to-day tasks. The message czar ensures that Williamson remains on message.
- Setting specific message objectives. These often come from polling. For example, a clear strategy of how to move ‘undecideds’ into the ‘probably’ category. There is a simple way, and good research will find it.
- Creating a message, program and segment plans. What speaks to the African-American Protestant ministers might not sway, say, working soccer moms.
- Developing integrated media plans.

### Leverage Campaign Equity in Communication with Voters on Issues

A textbook definition of brand is “the sum total of all that is known, thought, felt and perceived about your company, service or product.” In a political sense, a candidate’s brand equity is the sum total of reasons a voter has to pull the lever for a candidate.

In polling for a campaign, we at Multivariate Solutions often use a technique called “Driving the Vote Analysis,” which is essentially a regression analysis. This analysis shows, statistically, which issues significantly contribute to the sum total of reasons and are highly related to voting patterns for a candidate—in essence, the candidate’s brand equity.

Once conducted, “Driving the Vote Analysis” will give the tools for the following steps:

- **Promote** your guy
- **Defend** your turf
- **Attack** your opponent

The chart on this page assists in analyzing issue association in our hypothetical congressional district in New York where Ken Williamson is running. He has won the primary and now facing Sandra Holland in the general election.

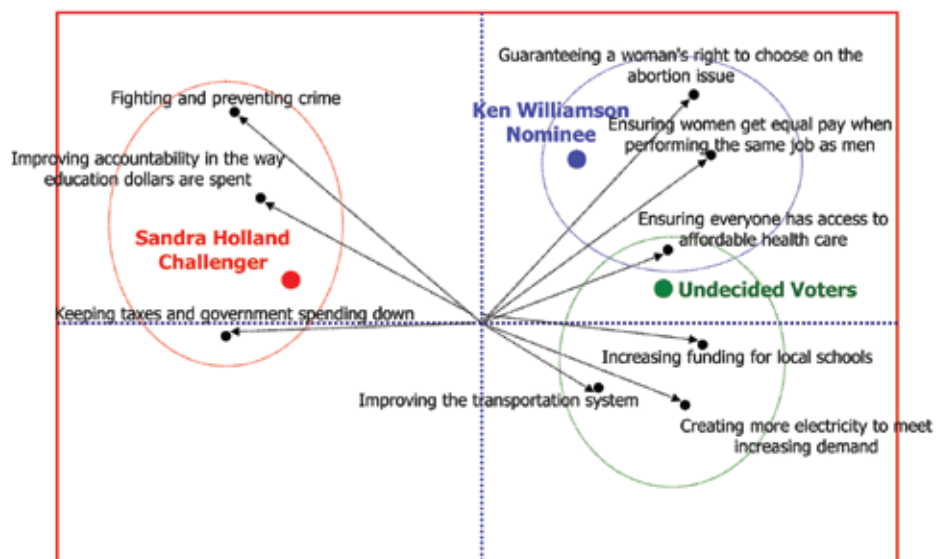
Examining the candidate drivers, there are no surprises. Ken Williamson’s key attributes are in line with his base. Sandra Holland, his

challenger, is running on her party’s standards.

The most intriguing analysis is those of undecided voters, who plainly show that their interests are decidedly local. Our advice to our client Ken Williamson in summary is to leverage his brand and campaign equity and to:

- **Defend:** Keep the base happy
  - Guaranteeing a woman’s right to choose on the abortion issue
  - Ensuring women get equal pay when performing the same job as men
  - Ensuring everyone has access to affordable health care
- **Promote:** Sway the undecideds
  - Improving the transportation system
  - Ensuring everyone has access to affordable health care
  - Increasing funding for local schools
  - Creating more electricity to meet increasing demand
- **Attack:** Undermine the opponent
  - Keeping taxes and government spending down
  - Improving accountability in the way education dollars are spent

Each of these messages are important elements for inclusion in the Williamson stump speech and all other communications vehicles so that the base, the undecideds—and even those inclined to vote for the opponent—might be won over. For example, a prime avenue of attack for Williamson on the his opponent may be to repeat early and often, “My opponent says that she intends to keep taxes and the size of government down and improve accountability in the way education dollars are spent, but she has no record of that. And how does she explain how she will improve the transportation system, provide affordable health care and electricity and improve local schools when her biggest concern is cutting taxes?”



## Live the Brand

Finally, campaigns do indeed begin with the candidate. But, campaigns, not to mention careers, can end with the candidate, too.

In the business world of branding there is a concept called “product performance.” Ultimately, establishing a strong brand is subject to the consumer proof point of product performance. A well-established position such as “Quality is Job One” does not survive the consumer experience that Honda manufactures higher quality automobiles than does Ford.

Likewise, the political graveyard is overflowing with politicians and elected officials who could not live their brand. The first President Bush lost his bid for reelection after he betrayed his “Read my lips, no new taxes” pledge. Just like a southern, socially conservative Republican governor cannot tryst with an Argentine mistress, nor can a crime busting Democratic governor of a very large northeastern state cannot frequent prostitutes—no matter how strong their brands.

Quality polling, crafting strategic messaging, comprehensive integration can help candidates establish an effective political brand. But ultimately,

candidates and officeholders must be able to live the brand.

The truly successful political brand is a brand that communicates authentically. Woe to the candidate who cannot or will not live the brand. In the end, the most important advice anyone can give a candidate is: Be who you say you are. ■

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