

THE ROLE AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE EVENT BASED COMMUNICATION IN THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

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The electoral campaigns are considered to be among the most delicate challenges for a marketer due to the limited time available, the sensible margin for error, the high impact of each statement and the condensation of a quite large amount of resources in a 30 day period. While the ultimate goal for the campaign staff is to bring the global electoral package closer to the electorate and earn their votes most, of the time various competitors use disappointingly similar tactics that create confusion among the electorate. The campaign related events turned out to be one of the tactics that allows for a pin-point targeting of the electorate and a better control on the receivers of the message. This paper focuses on the types of events used that can be used in an electoral campaign reinforced with their particularities and effects registered in previous campaigns.

Keywords: electoral marketing, communication, events, targeting, global electoral package

Cod JEL lucrare: M39

The history of the Romanian electorate and its behavior

Over the past 21 years the Romanian electorate experienced the “to do list” types of electoral campaigns, due to the fact that the dominant political factions relied mostly on identifying and exploiting the weaknesses of their competitors and less on conceiving a proper global electoral package.

This odd behavior has his origins in the budgetary restrictions and the lack of marketing implementation especially in the first 10 to 15 years, conditions reflected by the business environment also in that period.

The campaign strategy was based on promises extracted from the problems specific to every local community at a specific moment without little if any perspective on the entire country or concern about the availability of the resources needed to fulfill the promises being made.

This strategy turned out, as expected, to be disastrous for all the major factions with a chance to win the elections as their less ethical battle for supremacy generated a bad image for the entire political environment and the confidence of the electorate in a certain faction, candidate or doctrine plunged to an all-time low.

The disappointed and troubled electorate “rewarded” the superficial approach of the political environment with their lack of confidence in all future promises materialized in a strong indifference towards the campaign efforts and the “confidence” vote reaching an alarming low in the last 5 to 10 years.

One of the main problems in reaching the electorate and designing a winner national strategy is the unequal development of different areas of the country, a major factor that influences the needs and desires of the local inhabitants.

While a campaign template can be considered proper for various types of localities (cities over 50.000 inhabitants, cities with 10.000 to 50.000 inhabitants, big and small villages...) a very

strong influence comes from the local specific. Some former industrial cities are reduced to a big pile of rusted closed factories and their inhabitants are barely holding on while other agricultural communities have their own desires and so on. Even in the last campaigns no faction proved to have a solid campaign strategy based on clearly identified segments of electors.

The society is becoming indifferent towards the generic “crowd baths” and continue to mind their own business remaining neutral to the electoral efforts or even reacting negative to the constant communicational harassment specific to the 30 day electoral campaign.

Another major problem of the Romanian society is the generation distribution. Older generations conceived in the industrial development boom in the '70s and '80s are up to three times bigger than the ones conceived after 1990 and this is just a part of the problem. The percentage of people over 50 years of age in the total population is alarming and accordingly to the evolution of the birth statistics is only going to be worse as the average number of children for family dropped from 3.4 to 0.8 and the economic crisis is not going to help the improvement of this indicator.

The fall of the huge industrial system rendered most of the people over 50 years of age professionally useless as their position disappeared and they were forced to take on another profession or go to inadequate jobs turning to disappointed reminiscences of an over ambitious, unsustainable industrial dream.

Unfortunately the majority of Romanians with the right to vote is composed of people past the age of 50 mostly living in the rural areas that together with the former industrial workers have become to rely on social allowances and retirement fees.

It is because of this financial weakness of the majority of the electorate that the political factions are focusing their efforts on the sensible areas of the country where the return on the investment is greater than the one in the major cities.

The principle of equality that is a fundamental constitutional right makes no difference between the vote of an uninformed 80 years old from the rural area and a proper informed 30 years old from a major city and this should not be a problem in a country with equal distributions on each generation. In the past years rumors have appeared regarding the uselessness of going to the polls in the major cities due to the fact that the results of the polls will not reflect the voter's opinion. Why the results can be different from the options of some electors this difference is due to the fact that the capitol city has less than 10% of the country's population and less than 50% of its inhabitants with the right to vote choose to go to the polls on Election Day. By comparison in the rural areas, especially in the small localities people see the polls as some kind of celebration and go to the sections in large numbers reaching even 80% or more.

The Romanian political factions and their campaign strategy

As the electorate adapted to the classic view over how things should be done in a campaign by avoiding and disregarding the efforts done in the 30 day campaign the political factions saw that something must be done in order to increase the efficiency of the faction-electoral communication and this is where the science of marketing comes into the game.

Various faction from western Europe and the United States have been using the marketing instruments in their campaigns for a few decades now with such good results that a new branch of the marketing science appeared: the electoral marketing.

When dealing with a tough and divers audience such as the Romanian electorate the implementation of the electoral marketing was the proverbial “breath of fresh air” needed to revitalize the electoral campaigns and get the factions closer to the society for which they fight to represent.

For the moment a big percent of the factions present on the Romanian stage have chosen to implement only a couple of elements from the electoral marketing tool bag selecting mostly tactical elements that are being applied without unity and little to no strategic planning.

As the number and variety of tools being used evolved there is still a major problem due to the campaign fever: the lack of interest for the final beneficiaries, for the status and opinion Romanian society. It is obvious the importing a successful tactic from an over the seas campaign cannot and will not have the desired effects when implemented on a significant market by another faction without testing its potential first.

This campaign rush combined with the hibernation of the electoral machine between the legal campaigns puts the marketing research on one of the last position of the faction's to do list. Without relevant and fresh data from the market the short term strategy is mostly based on promising more than the competitors do and trying to get some of them down from their tall horse before they try to do the same. Various electoral research results still fill the news bulletins with contrasting results and a "staggering" one hundred respondents believed to be representative at a national level.

While some of the major factions have their own confidential market research done, with results that stay with the top end staff members even in their case there is little or no uniformity on all the regional and local agencies. More concerning is the fact that, as some party representatives divulged in the media, some strategies failed because in some local agencies the faction members completed the questionnaires "in house" in order to send good reports towards the central campaign office and make a good impression managing to render the national strategy or at least the regional campaign strategy useless.

The fanatic supporters of any faction combined with some local leaders hung up on getting good reports are sabotaging their own party from the inside doing more harm than any other competitor can. This is the main reason why some faction leaders and campaign staff members with experience consider a proper marketing approach useless and choose to limit their marketing efforts on the tactical level and base their decisions mostly on their experience and intuition.

The inefficient communication between the headquarters of the faction and its local branches combined with the overwhelming workload specific to the electoral campaign (compared to the passive activity in the rest of the time) motivates the faction leaders to go for a sales oriented vision for their campaign instead of a modern more efficient one oriented towards satisfying the need of the electorate better than the competitors do.

In these conditions the political faction choose the replace the electoral marketing approach with a more simple approach that focuses its attention towards the communication component of the marketing mix.

The advertising industry is getting ready for a feast each time an electoral campaign is getting close but over the past years the electorate had become immune to both indoor and outdoor advertising, BTL and ATL, avoiding all of them with the same tenacity.

As it turns out, especially in the big cities where the advertising machine is at its best, the people are willingly avoiding everything that smells like electoral advertising as long as there's nothing in it for them. Some minor promotional gifts like small personalized objects (lighters, balloons, caps and so on) usually get away unnoticed there's a limit on the value of the object that can be given as a present in the electoral campaign and there were numerous conflicts over the time as the political factions accused one another of trying to buy the votes of the people by giving products that ranged from buckets to cell phones.

In order to play it safe some factions decided to go for events ranging from a small on the block party for kids to large concerts as a technique perfect for gathering respectable numbers of potential voters willing to endure a couple of messages from a certain candidate in order to enjoy the show.

This tolerance from the behalf of the electorate as well as the low costs per participant and the superior success rate made the events one of the most powerful and efficient electoral

communication instrument and is being widely used by all factions no matter their size, financial strength or hope to achieve victory.

The event based marketing communication

Regardless of the size, age, doctrine and odds of success all political factions make good use of the people's desire to have a good time for free and to gather in masses celebrating a more or less famous date.

Due to the communicational versatility of an event various types have been used over the last campaigns depending on the available budget, their purpose and the category of electorate targeted. Few other markets have such a great diversity of profiles for their beneficiaries as the electoral market and this is only making the segmentation and positioning process tougher.

Every segment of electorate has its own needs, preferences and taste so, as far as event planning goes, the marketer will either go for a general mega artistic event in regional centers or for a series of smaller micro events focused on the segments sensible to a more consumer oriented approach.

An experienced marketer will always choose a personalized approach over the standard "one size fits all" view but this is close to impossible when there are close to 18 million potential customers (citizens with the right to vote) out there spread across 238 thousand square kilometers.

This is where the extensive network of branches comes in allowing the political faction to go from macro campaign management, done from the headquarters for the entire country, to the medium level conducted from the 41 county branches, and finally to the micro campaign management usually done at the smallest local faction branch.

The power, influence, financial power and effectiveness of the branches vary drastically from one to another and while, in normal circumstances, the lower representatives have the advantage of knowing the terrain and local communities in details the actual know-how and marketing vision is mostly restricted to the headquarters and some local agencies based in the major cities.

In most cases the advantages of the three hierarchic levels are not combined practically due to some differences in style of management and/or vision between the strategic department from the headquarters and the manager of the local agency.

At the macro level the most commonly used events target the general public and, as a PR campaign wish to promote the image of the faction and/or its candidates, to improve awareness and public acceptance through different types of gatherings as:

- Public outdoor concerts (free access)
- Sport events, amateur competitions
- Fund raisers
- Exhibitions and other art manifestations
- National/regional gatherings of party members and followers
- Festivities celebrating various holy days (if any)
- Sponsorship announcement parties
- The official candidate proposal ceremony

As our interviews reflect respondents from all social classes see most of these events as "try hard" campaign efforts gone over the edge, that only the faction's followers will like and believe in while others are a success to the general public due to the free entertainment. If for our respondents the first category of events is on the black "to avoid at all costs" list the last one is mentioned as being acceptable and they're willing to tolerate the public speech during several hours if the weather is fine and the show is worth waiting for.

Even so the message being transmitted will most likely be received with a certain degree of distortion and most of the cases stored in the short term memory due to the multiple influences

generated by the crowd interaction. Less than 10% of our respondents changed their opinion about a certain faction or candidate after participating at such an event.

These gatherings attract, as some of the participants remember, mainly teenagers and young people in their twenties. This is to be expected as entertainment usually focuses on young people but, as national particularity, a noticeable number of retirees and older adults participate as they are used to receiving gifts every time there is some noise in the electoral campaign.

No measurable or noticeable positive change in the behavior of our respondents was recorded but, as it turns out, they slightly remember some interesting embarrassing situation that the candidates were drawn into by the response of a hard to control crowd when its patience was forced out.

The acceptable amount of “propaganda” in the total length of the event was around the average of 15 to 20 minutes in a 2 hour concert divided into 4 interventions. If before the concert the crowd is energetic and eager to witness the performance and will resist to maximum 1- minutes of showing off at the end of the concert our respondents did not specify a maximum length of the speech because their only concern at that time will be how to escape from the crowd and get back home.

Understanding the behavior of the masses in large gathering is more than a useful skill, it is an essential guideline that can make the difference between a splendid waste of limited campaign time and money and an efficient event whose effects can make the difference on that most important Election Day.

The marketing vision is highly oriented towards the customer by definition but in this particular atypical market the marketer should take into consideration the problematic of identifying the customer and the rapid shift in political options during the critical last 48 hours of the electoral campaign.

The only affordable approach here will be to target the followers of the faction/candidate but also at least ensure a tranquil climate with the fast shifters, non-voters and most importantly the followers of the competition. This is of major importance due to the fact that if the election gets to the second stage where the number of finalist factions goes down to three or less an acceptance relation with the voters of the completion might go a long way and make that fine difference.

Large group gatherings specific to the “mega-events” category specially done in neutral public places are perfect because the crowd is grouped on communal non-political interests and can be addressed as a group and the messages are being delivered using non-targeted approaches.

The specific characteristic that differentiates the event base communication from every other communicational channel consists in a more subtle link to the faction and/or candidate and the fact that the individuals in the gathering will resist electoral messages as a small fee due in exchange for the entertainment received.

Mega-events: from mass communication to quiet segmentation

The art of marketing is based on satisfying the customer in better condition compared to other competitors but there’s no such thing as “good quality”. The ever consuming paradigm between standardization and personalization is specific to the event based communication and things are only changing for the worst when the event turns into a mega-event.

Every large crowd has an issue: the large number of subgroups, everyone with its distinctive preferences and behaviors. It is this difference that sometimes causes conflicts when various subgroups interact. From small localized distortions that are quickly being suppressed to more disturbing conflicts that go all the way to physical injuries any kind of disturbance affects the image of the event and the overall utility of the event.

Tighter security is never the answer. If extensive law enforcement is necessary than the communication strategy is wrong and the political faction is risking an image crisis if the electorate makes a link between it and large gatherings of aggressive crowds.

The main idea is to use segmentation in order to determine at first the groups of potential electorate being targeted and characterize them all in order to identify every little thing they have in common regardless of their political color, history or temporary preference.

The main idea is to integrate non-voters and people with superficial preferences into a large group centered on a common interest and make them enjoy a pleasant experience. The purpose of the exercise is to make these relative non-voters see that the faction and the candidate are supported by people just like them, with interests similar to theirs increasing the individual's acceptance towards the eminent of the message.

For a big faction with real chances in winning the elections or at least make it to the second poll these passive followers are quite important. The past experiences are full with last minute negative news that drastically change the opinion of less devoted followers and leaves them disappointed. In this case their second option comes into action as they wish to teach their initial favorite faction a lesson.

Bigger events usually use general audience subjects and attract bigger crowds constructed from a larger number of segments, some desirable, some less desirable. The wellbeing of all participants along with a lesser negative press impact is more than a preference of the organizer but it is its obligation.

In past electoral campaigns the press widely promotes events with potential gone bad due to the unethical conduct of some undesirable groups of participants. Some call them "militia" subgroups sent by the competition to destroy the events, others refer to them as groups of local hooligans that might of been "motivated" by the adversaries but regardless of their origin or intent the results of their actions speak for themselves.

In order to prevent such behaviors the theme of the event must avoid subjects specific to uneducated, violent people and the strategy chosen for the message distribution should be well thought at. The main issue here is to present facts, to propose an alternative, to show consideration and appreciation, care and personal involvement things that cannot cause a dispute between people attending the event and, at the same time, true facts, new facts that should capture the attention of the people with a strong long term memory effect.

It is all right to generate debate themes and involve the people in the cause but anything close to generate a competition between the participants should be avoided at all costs. The idea is to make them think and act as a group, as a part of the society with common concerns and desires and not to divide them into arguing subgroups.

Personalization is nice but it doesn't mean to use "divide et impera" one very group. Therefore is more efficient to make the individual from a certain gathering to feel as a part of a large group and think of himself as being different at the same time. People participating at various events are usually from a certain area and can easily be addressed as a group different from any other one in the territory

Every individual have two major social needs: to be part of a larger group and to feel special, apart from every other individual. Using an event to send electoral messages is quite inspired because the needs and desires of the group are more general, easier to satisfy and hard to deny by certain individual due to the group interaction. Being aware of the power of the group and unwillingly to contest the needs of the majority the individual will incorporate the mass euphoria and remain with a good impression about the plans presented to him.

Large scale events offer the marketer involved in an electoral campaign the advantage of using the appurtenance groups to address individual without being forced to invest the limited resources available into personalization and segment identification.