The Importance of Image when Developing a Powerful Political Brand

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Abstract: A brand represents a name, a sign or a symbol that has the purpose of identifying goods (set to the disposal of customers) and to highlight them from the competitors. There are many similarities between the construction process of a brand in the commercial and political domain. The key elements of a successful brand, either commercial, personal or political, must fulfill the following qualities: to be authentic, to create an emotional bond between the brand and the customers or followers, to set well defined values and to be a step ahead other brands on the market. A political brand becomes powerful if it possesses good communication aptitudes with the electorate to expose the desired message. In the construction process of a brand, an essential role is the image, that needs to be a combination of qualities meant to put aside the other candidates. Popularity, prestige, authority and competence are key qualities to allure the attention and the interest of masses. The created image must be very closed to reality, so that the people don't lose their confidence in the candidate. Nowadays, new media and technology play a very important role in the construction of political people presenting both advantages and disadvantages for them.

Keywords: *brand; political brand; political communication; politician; image; media; social media.*

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Introduction

This paper attempts to show that there is a relation between the personal brand and the political one as well as the image is an important component in the political system, playing a key role for the success of a political campaign. I have chosen this topic because I wanted to bring more knowledge in this field and because I consider that in the political communication area there are so far too few studies that have been conducted to bring the phenomenon of political image and political brand into question.

1. From brand to personal brand

Brand is a marketing-specific notion, but nowadays knows a great rising in other areas, such as sports, culture, and politics. There are many similarities between the commercial brand and the personal brand, in terms of definition, traits or purpose. Political marketing shares much in common with marketing in the business world; candidates and parties can be compared to consumer products in terms of promotion. There are many definitions for the term, however none of them is unanimously accepted.

According to the *American Marketing Association* a brand represents "a term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from the competitors" (Kotler, 2008, p. 592). According to another definition a brand is a company's promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits, services and experiences consistently to buyers. The message communicated by a brand can have up to six types of meanings: attributes, advantages, value, cultural symbols, personality and use (Kotler, 2008, p. 593).

Another definition of the brand would be that a brand is nothing but a name that remains in the mind of the consumer as a result of creating an emotional bond between the product and the customer. A brand lives on in the mind of the consumer and is the sum of all the experiences, perceptions and expectations the customer has about a product, a service or a company (Manea, 2011, pp. 10-11).

If we consider the three definitions above, we observe that there is a common element in all attempts of defining it, namely the need to identify, to singularize a product or a service. The brand seems to be perceived as an empty concept that fills with meaning over time, along with the numerous and repeated experiences of the consumers (Corbu, 2013, p. 59). If we

expand the above-mentioned definitions to the personal brand, we can see that they are also valid in this area. The candidate or politician can be seen as a service provider and the parties can be compared to the companies that offer certain services.

Upon further examination, it becomes clear that for a brand to be successful, it must go through a complex developing process. As can be noted from Jean-Noël Kapferer's analysis, political communication uses mainly two brand building tools: brand identity, which mentions the brand's uniqueness and value, and brand positioning (Kapferer, 2012, p. 150). Brand identity is tangible so it appeals to the senses. Brand identity amplifies differentiation, takes disparate elements and unifies them into whole systems (Wheeler, 2013, p. 4). Investing in brand identity has its benefits, making it easier for the customer to buy and making the sales force bigger. Competition always creates innumerable options, so companies are looking for ways to connect emotionally with customers, become irreplaceable, as well as to create lifelong relationships with them. A strong brand stands out in a densely crowded marketplace. People fall in love with brands, trust them, and believe in their superiority. How a brand is perceived affects its success, regardless of whether it's a start-up, a nonprofit, or a product.

The brand identity process demands a combination of investigation, strategic thinking, design excellence, and project management skills. It requires an extraordinary amount of patience, an obsession with getting it right, and endpoints, which facilitate decision making at the appropriate intervals. In this process, ideals are an essential element; the ideals of a brand must be the following: vision, differentiation, flexibility, significance, sustainability, engagement, authenticity, consistency, value (Wheeler, 2013, p. 28). In the end, the brand strategies used by politicians are actually aimed at investigating and analyzing the wishes of the public, respectively of the voters, with the purpose of developing voter oriented public policies. That is why, all this structure considers the application of market research, segmentation targeting and positioning, but also the strengthening of relations with the voters.

There are three main steps in developing a brand strategy. The first step is to ensure identification of the brand with customers, to create a brand based on emotion, this is a long-term perspective that summarizes what the brand means. The second step is to create a well-defined set of brand values, preferably framed as personality traits. This allows the brand to stand out and differentiate itself from competitors. The third step is to establish a market position that makes the brand stand out from its competitors. This involves identifying those elements that make that brand

better than the others (Temporal, 2015, p. 70). What is interesting in this regard is the external dimension of politicians, which is composed or created from a set of messages, emotional components or politico-democratic powers. In this sense, it is emphasized that both the external and internal development of the politicians is in fact a process by which the political life and the reality of the civil society must be compatible. Thus, personal branding and its use can increase the visibility and notoriety of politicians.

An effective brand strategy provides a central unifying idea around which all behavior, actions, and communications are aligned. It works beyond products and services and is effective over time. Brand strategy is based on a vision that aligns business strategy and reflects a deep understanding of customer needs and perceptions. A strong brand strategy must resonate with all stakeholders, with all the interested parties. Usually there is a team that develops it, no one does it on its own, some companies even bring specialists in this field. Companies often survive and prosper because they have a clear and effective brand strategy and some companies are not successful just because they do not have a good brand strategy (Wheeler, 2013, pp. 12-13). Therefore, regarding the above statement, the political brand is represented by all the signs and personality traits for the care of the media includes in the political audience.

In politics, in order to be successful, it is necessary for politicians to understand their market, meaning their voters, their needs and aspirations, in order to be able to represent them in an efficient way, but also to gain their trust. Market orientation requires a candidate to recognize the nature of the exchange process when asking for the vote. If the promises made before taking up the desired position are met, then the candidate will enjoy the sympathy and, most importantly, the confidence of the voters and the public. Also, another important feature of a successful political brand is its recognition by the public. Moreover, it is essential that the brand has what is called "equity", that is, a certain quality that the public regards as synonymous with the brand in question and which ensures trust.

Another concept worth mentioning when talking about brand is branding. Branding can be defined as a disciplined process used to build awareness and extend customer loyalty. Branding also means taking advantage of every opportunity to state why people should choose a brand over another (Wheeler, 2013, p. 6). In other words, branding is the process by which certain attributes and values, consistent, distinct and attractive to a brand-related consumer are developed and maintained. Branding creates identity, structures myths, because the brand is a myth performer and bearer of an identity myth (Corbu, 2013, p. 60). The overall purpose of the brand

management process is to increase its value over time. Management is a process that tries to take control over everything a brand does and says. Therefore, in order for people to see what the brand wishes to convey, it is necessary to influence the perceptions of the targeted target audience. One of the most difficult parts of brand management is achieving a balance between the short-term quantitative targets and long-term growth of the brand and its value (Temporal, 2015, pp. 147-148). This highlights the fact that every promise made by a political actor must reflect his desire and ability to meet the needs and wishes of voters at a certain time, but at the same time he must leave the impression that this is lasting.

In politics, branding refers to the way in which a political organization or a politician is perceived by the electorate. The frequent use of branding techniques is due to the professionalisation of electoral campaigns and voter behaviour, which can be likened to "consumers" in a political market. Considering that we live in a world where brands are everywhere we look, it is important that they use every opportunity to position themselves in the minds of customers, respectively of the voters.

2. The personal and political brand

Branding plays an increasingly important part in politics sports, culture, the public sector, or voluntary activities. Those who use branding know that a strong brand can impress people on an emotional level (Olins, 2010, p. 12). Public sector brands are found in every country of the world, whether intentionally created or not. Institutions and organizations in the public sector have relationships with individual consumers, companies, other countries and governments, and so on, all of which have images of a certain kind. Because stakeholder and customer perceptions are so important in achieving success for the public sector, the need to control, manage and develop a brand image is of fundamental importance. Not being able to undertake this activity could lead to negative perceptions and insignificant fruition of national targets. Public sector branding has become a necessity. The increased competition in every sector makes branding an imperative. From nations to non-profit organizations, from public services to cities, from sectors to services, there is no escape from the harsh demands of the need to create a differentiation point and a positive image. Competition is ubiquitous and every country or entity in the public sector is fighting for political support and funding. In an era when resources are scarce and insufficient and there is a constant change, the only way to persuade customers that any public sector or organization institution is different and

better than others is through the development of a strong brand. Anything else, be it services, products, processes, systems or technologies, can be copied. The only thing that any public sector entity can create and cannot be copied is a strong image of the brand. Until recently, branding has been seen by many as a private sector activity, admiration for top brands in the world being a global phenomenon. But the public sector, including politicians, has now come to realize that the same techniques that have created successful brands of enormous financial value can be used in exactly the same way to achieve their own goals. Publicity in the public sector is a global trend in constant rise and growth (Temporal, 2015, pp. 7-8).

In his book, *Branding For The Public Sector*, author Paul Temporal lays out the reasons why the public sector needs branding. The same reasons can apply to politicians. These include the issue of differentiation; strong brands differ from common ones and draw people towards them. The public sector has entered the branding world with the aim of differentiation and uniqueness and attracting people towards it. A second reason for the public sector's interest in branding is represented by the survival in a changing world. Another reason is that the public sector has noticed that brands can bring both strength and financial rewards. Fourthly and most importantly, the public sector already has an image, whether it is a good one or not. Some of the perceptions that make up this image may be negative or positive, but it is better for the public sector to be one step ahead and to manage and control these images than to allow others to formulate opinions in a way that might be counterproductive (Temporal, 2015, pp. 10-11). The public sector has rapidly adopted the techniques of private sector brands worldwide to develop a strong brand vision that targets both the emotional and the rational side. Using emotion is essential for building public sector brands.

The concept of a political brand has not yet been defined in a clear and conclusive way. Although there is no universal definition of this concept, there are some partial definitions that cover different aspects of the problem. One of the starting points may be the claim that it identifies itself with "a name that has the power to influence" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 8). The fact that there is an ability to influence leads the brand into the sphere of political communication and, at the same time, turns it into a tool of persuasion.

In the political field, creating a brand is a specific process. This is because the product in this case is represented by a political man or the political ideas and conceptions he has. Thus, the product to be transformed into a brand already has a number of specific attributes: the voice stamp, the features of the face, the way of speaking, the style of clothing. Based on

these factors, the voters formulate an opinion on the political product. So, when creating a political brand, must first and foremost to focus on the existing attributes. At the same time, belonging to a certain political party can also automatically determine the target audience, meaning that segment of the electorate who is among the supporters of that party. However, it should also be borne in mind that the existing attributes and meanings can not be omitted, and in the process of creating the brand they must be taken into account. Nowadays the personal brand is a growing phenomenon due to factors such as new technologies and social networks. In a world dominated by a stunning and fierce competition where rational choice has become almost impossible, brands represent clarity, reassurance, consistency, belonging - everything that helps people define themselves. Brands represent identity (Wheeler, 2013, p. 90). But more interesting and useful to look at than a brand definition are its features and manifestations. As far as the process of instrumentalization is concerned, the brand becomes a complex construction that is used in, but also for persuasive communication.

Personal brands in the political sphere benefit primarily from a symbolic dimension in which religious or spiritual elements play an important role. Through the roles they have to assume, the personal brands are closest to the symbolic game brought by the persona that underlies the idea of a person. Political personalities must play a role in a script. Being the instrument of such a persuasive action, the brand becomes useful in situations where risk reduction is required. Finally, "perceived risk could be functional (performance-related), experience (related to our own self-concept) or social (related to our social image)" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 9). In this case, the symbolic interactionism call for research into the process of image construction, which has been neglected in the past.

One feature of a strong political brand is that it has a distinct, different way of communication through which it effectively transmits the desired message, regardless of the medium in which it is transmitted: speeches, television appearances, press conferences etc. Communication must be memorable, identifiable and accessible to all the interested parties. Voice and tone play a very important role in transmitting the message to the audience; every word can be a source of information or inspiration. Messages sent by brands are effective if they become repetitive (Wheeler, 2013, p. 26). The repetition of the same message often has long-term effects, meaning acceptance of the message. Goebbels said that a repeated lie ends by becoming a great truth (Manea, 2011, p. 45). The language used must resonate with meaning. Receptors will complete the message with elements

of their own experiences. The goal must be clarity, accuracy and precision so people who are busy and have only a few free minutes can quickly understand what is relevant. Each sentence will reveal new and interesting aspects for those who listen (Wheeler, 2013, p. 27). In other words, the development of a strong political brand may represent the distinct element against the competition, while at the same time providing the most efficient and quick way to convey the message to the public. First of all, the personal brand is a promise to those with whom the political man interacts. Ensuring its qualities and conduct will help people understand it better. A personal brand creates expectations in people's minds, so promises must be respected so that voters are not disappointed and dissatisfied (Manea, 2011, pp. 29-30). On the same note it should be mentioned that in politics the electorate chooses not between simple individuals but between ideas and personalities. The ultimate goal of creating and promoting the political brand lies in the fact that voters must be able to identify themselves with the political product.

An effective strategy for creating a personal brand is to influence the public by talking about what they want to hear. However, it is not necessary to construct an unrealistic, overly positive self-image because this can generate very high expectations regarding future performances. The simplicity and quality of the information transmitted, the consistency with cultural norms, the consensual validation, the reputation and the persuasive qualities of the person are the variables that facilitate the acceptance of the information provided by the audience (Manea, 2011, pp. 45-46). Thus, we must also emphasize that is necessary to differentiate between the image projected by a political actor and the image perceived by the voters. One of the most effective tools for maintaining continuity between transmission and perception is the message.

Interaction with voters is a relationship based on meanings. The meanings are the result of a dialogue, they often involve a structure of reciprocity in which the political brand and electorate are continually enriched in the process of electoral communication. From the reflections on electoral communication, we can infer that this communication is not a mere transmission of messages from politician to possible voters. „ It is a rather complex connection in which the message once sent to voters returns to a transmitter enriched by the receiver's experience, and only then becomes a comprehensive message of authentic significance received from the perspective of the values that the receiver of the message embodies. At the basis of this reciprocity relationship lies a type of transfer that we find in the consumption of commercial brands, a transfer that is more visible to

political brands and is favored by the fact that the brand is in this situation either an organization composed of individuals or a person who can be the bearer of values, powers and experiences specific to building the brand" (Medveschi, Frunză, 2018, p. 144).

If for commercial brands, the actual purchasing decision tends to be taken at an emotional level in most cases, the decision to support a particular candidate is also taken at an emotional level. A brief incursion into medical science tells us why this happens. The idea that the rational, conscious part of the brain dominates the nonracial parts was rejected. Medical research has shown that making decisions is largely quick and emotional, often subconscious, and is more intuitive than previously thought. It is currently widely accepted among medical experts that emotion tends to drive reason rather than vice versa. This is mainly due to the fact that the emotional side of the brain is considerably higher than the rational side and it exceeds it in terms of intensity, sending ten times more signals to the rational brain (Temporal, 2015, p. 80). The goal of branding in the commercial field is to add value to an entity, be it a company, a product or an idea; Instead, the personal brand is aimed at achieving interests such as getting more fans, success and personal benefits (Bogdan, 2011, p. 149). On the other hand, regarding the political environment, the attributes of the candidates are used to outline a profile of a public person. The communication style of the politician which includes the use of the press and the skills of the speaker, as well as personal attributes such as honesty and credibility, are part of the stylistic role of the political actor. Both the speeches and slogans, as well as the electoral programs allow him to build an image as he wishes.

3. The role of the image in developing a strong political brand

The image plays a very important role in building a strong and effective political brand. The truth is that whenever political people come into contact with a target audience they want to influence and the image counts. Abraham Lincoln said that: "With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed" (Manea, 2011, p. 45). His statement remains valid today, the public being the one who decides to give or not to give credit to promises made by politicians. Image is very important in politics, but not because we live in a media age obsessed with it. The widespread idea that the issue replaces the substance in politics is not always valid. This has much more to do with professionalism than with aesthetic reasons. The image helps politicians to win the trust of the interlocutor. The ultimate goal of communication is not to win votes but to try to solve people's

problems. In this context, the first priority of the political people is to design a professional image so that voters will have confidence that the politicians will solve their problems (Archetti, 2014, pp. 43-44). In this sense, in the political environment it is assumed that some candidates assessments are based on the previous experience of voters in relation to the image of the candidates. Due to the fact that the image is a construct made by the people, the political actors can place and build their image so that it is molded according to the wishes of the electorate, but also with the purpose of changing the old preferences of the voters.

In political and electoral marketing, the political image of a candidate does not relate to the totality of the elements that give the perfect image of a personality, but to the combination of those elements that achieve the symbolic profile of the candidate. Success consists in adapting the image to the wishes of the public, meaning to symbolically identify it with the role of the politician. Advertising techniques aim to adapt the product to basic human needs so that potential customers would have the impression that the product meets these needs. The political image resembles that of a factory brand, that is, it helps to individualize the product for its promotion and sale under more advanced conditions. In our case, politicians need to have a well-defined picture to differentiate themselves from others because this image, once formed, will accompany the politician further. The continuity of the created image can only be made by adapting political behavior to the electorate's expectations (Frigioiu, 2013, pp. 24-25). The need for exemplary models and, in particular, the need to imitate and follow them, fuel the way in which the dynamics of the political brand can be perceived. Thus, first of all, we must note that in the electoral campaigns, the communication process focuses on building the image in a complex approach. Both the characteristics of the personality that embodies the political brand and those built to enhance the already existing qualities are taken into account. Secondly, communication and brand building and developing must respond to a personal ideal that is close to potential voters. The image of the politician must correspond with the voters' expectations. Thirdly, we need to take into account the fact that it is necessary to harmonize the politician's personal qualities with his own brand and, on the other hand, to reduce the distance between what the politician represents as a personal presence and as a public presence " (Medveschi, Frunză, 2018, pp. 143-144). Thus, if we look in more detail, we can see that the political arena is driven by a tendency to personalize the vote and also to underline the importance of the personal image of the political actor.

Among the qualities that a personality has to have to capture people's attention and interest include popularity, prestige, authority and competence. Competence means a general ability to predict, negotiate, temporize or dare. For the electorate, the first levels of image creation techniques in political marketing, civil and professional identity, are more interesting. What matters to humans is the outer and superficial form of the image, not the deep and profound one. Based on information such as family life, completed studies, and titles obtained, the electorate forms an opinion on the candidates and decides whether or not to give them their vote (Frigioiu, 2014, pp. 25-26). The personal brand is the mental image of others when they think of a certain political personality. The values, personality and qualities that offer uniqueness compared to others. That is why it's very important to keep authenticity after creating your own brand. People do not want to see an artificially created marketing image, so the outlined image must reflect reality as much as possible (Manea, 2011, p. 30). The image, in fact, must reach a certain balance: on the one hand, the politician must look professional enough to inspire confidence in his ability to address a problem; on the other hand he wants to avoid intimidation (Archetti, 2014, p. 46). Nowadays, it is necessary that the specialists in political communication, together with the political leaders, find a way to best combine the strategies of development of the political brand with three important elements: the political candidate, the political organization and the political environment.

There are some mistakes that politicians do when developing a brand. Identifying can sometimes be more difficult in the political field, because it has not only a personal but also a party ideology; this can greatly dilute the authenticity of a political character. As we have already mentioned, communication has a very important role to play in building the brand, so it is important for politicians to have qualities in this respect. Another disadvantage that may arise is the party's image, which may or may not help in building the brand. Authenticity and charisma matter a great deal. A common mistake for Romanian politicians is the projection of a rich man image at the helm of a poor country. They display their cars, watches and expensive shoes while they are sending messages about the economic precariousness of the country they are leading. These situations are characteristic of undeveloped countries, where a small group of people seize the wealth of a country and the rest of the population live in poverty (Bogdan, 2011, pp. 154-155). An image can be preserved and fixed in public memory by positioning and consolidating it, which means reducing the image to a few essential features, easy to be perceived by the public, and focusing the public attention on this image (Frigioiu, 2014, p. 27).

In current politics, the media has become omnipresent. Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz call this phenomenon the "mediatization" of politics and explains that "politics has lost its autonomy, has become dependent on the media and is continuously modeled by interacting with the media" (Archetti, 2014, p. 10). Such a vision affects the perspective of the political actors, the communication techniques used and the content of the political discourse." These aspects seem to materialize in the mask of the politicians who turn themselves into artists who often recite repeated scripts on a skillfully arranged stage" (Archetti, 2014, p. 11).

It is not difficult to see how personal image becomes crucial in a context where direct contact with a politician is lost, voters are more volatile, and parties have to rely on the media, mainly television, to convey their message. This trend leads to a personalization of policy where the campaign is centered on candidates. „The personal image of the politician can be seen as a reflection of the identity of the elected representative. His image can be built by face to face relationships or mediated ones (through communication or mediation technologies) " (Archetti, 2014, p. 83). Rulers are using the new media to promote their policies and decisions they take and give them a positive image. The growing and increasingly massive use of the internet and its services, especially social media, has had a major impact on branding in the public sector, especially in terms of risk management and communications crisis. Global boundaries have disappeared and everyone can now be both a reporter and a commentator, which may be useful or, on the contrary, totally useless for governments and public sector organizations. Of course, there is a strong need for any public sector brand to develop a solid online communication strategy that must be permanently working. The emergence of social media has brought many challenges for both the public and the private sector. Companies such as Facebook, which had more than 1.3 billion monthly active users on January 1, 2014, have become very important in this area. Brand managers need to understand that they can no longer rely on one-way communication, such as advertising to get into contact with customers (Temporal, 2015, p. 189).

4. Personal contributions

The main purpose of this research was to add value to the area of political communication, presenting several conceptual approaches to political branding and political image. Through this study I support the idea that the brand is an extremely powerful tool when we talk about the meaning and the role of the political image, the brand being formed by a

combination of aesthetic, cultural values and rational choices. Also, this topic that I have approached brings new informations and increase knowledge even in the field of political marketing, the last one mentioned normally omitting the sphere of political communication, and abstracting the personal traits in politics.

Scientifically speaking, the chosen topic is a relatively new one, and this is due to the fact that at present, regarding the political brand, the activity of political communication is focusing exclusively on filtering the political brand through the perspective of political marketing.

5. In lieu of a conclusion

Nowadays, branding seems unstoppable. Irrespective of the field, brands have become a social and cultural phenomenon with extremely high power. The power of brands and branding will continue to grow, so it is important for us to understand how we can manage and control them.

Political communication was guided by a series of theoretical-ideological directions that were universally valid until the mid-20th century, and then attempted to target the use of instruments with a greater and faster range of action among the masses. For this reason, the political man of today understood that in order to be remarked, to distinguish himself in any action of political communication, he must say things simple and plain, so that everyone understands what he says, easily, in order to consume as little effort as possible in transmitting information. The brand itself can be considered as the measure of the success of a campaign by which a politician can build and develop his image. At its foundation, the notion of brand refers to the image and reputation a product has, and this notion appears in many contexts today. Whether we talk about products, celebrities, cities, companies or even politicians, we are always urged to consider them as a brand.

Certainly, trade brands have evolved in consumers' minds much faster than political brands, but the idea of expanding branding to areas other than commercial is quite recent. Political branding bases its foundation on people and their personality. This makes it much harder to control it than service or commercial branding. Today it is relatively easy to control the image and standard of a product, but as far as the branding of a political personality is concerned, it is practically impossible to control your mind and soul.

In a context represented by a complexity of the political space and political offers present in the electoral campaign, the voters will have to

identify and choose their favorite rather easily. Clearly, the completion of the process of building the political image, but also its consolidation until the moment of the achievement of the political brand effect, is strictly related to the use of the persuasive instrument. One of the decisive factors of the persuasive dimension in this relational process is precisely the political branding. By addressing this article, we have tried to highlight the premises and circumstances in which a political leader gradually turns into a political brand. Identity, in its most different forms of manifestation, has captured our minds and hearts, because we are keen to express our need to belong, but also to separate ourselves and our aspirations from those around us. If identity is the one that marks the 21st century, branding can pass it on. However, the fundamental idea of the political brand is that, through everything it does and what it produces, the political man has to project a very clear picture of himself and his goals.

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