

Memo: Lessons learned from the Obama campaign
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For: Colleagues and peers of Louis Perron
People interested in winning elections
From: Dr. des. Louis Perron

Perron Campaigns Election Update: Lessons learned from the Obama campaign!

The longest, most expensive and most professional election campaign ever is over. The result is historic: the first African American will move into the White House. To use economic terms, a start-up with an exotic name (Obama) has beaten two market leaders (Clinton, McCain). There is a lot that campaigners, politicians, parties, companies and interest groups around the world can learn from the Obama campaign.

Sure, there are at least three circumstances that have little to do with the campaign but helped Obama enormously. President Bush has done such a lousy job that more than two thirds of Americans now have a negative opinion about his work. Also, after following Bush blindly during the war in Iraq, the U.S. media, this time around, was on the side of the Democrats. Finally, if Wall Street did not collapse, it probably would have been much closer (let's not forget that McCain was slightly ahead early September). Now, that's all correct. But what I am focusing on in this update are the factors that the campaign *could* control and how it did that.

Some observers think that the impressive thing about the Obama campaign is how it used the internet and other new technology. 8'000 internet groups, 50'000 local events and 1.5 million internet volunteers are indeed impressive. But that's only one part of the story. Politicians often think that a campaign means to produce things such as tv spots, leaflets or websites. In reality, however, a campaign can and should be seen as a series of decisions regarding the message, the strategy, fundraising and products. The Obama campaign has reached these decisions early on and based on extensive research including polling and focus group discussions.

In numerous updates, articles and speeches, I have emphasized the importance of a coherent and credible message. Politicians often think of a message as a slogan, in most cases nothing more than an empty motherhood statement. However, a good message is more than a slogan yet less than a party program. In the case of Obama, this was the message:



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“Barack Obama will bring the change that America desperately needs. He will get the economy going again, not only for Wall Street but also for Main Street. In concrete, this means tax cuts for 95% of Americans and expanded health-care. Unlike the other politicians, Obama has opposed the war in Iraq since the beginning. It’s time for a new hope and to leave the divisiveness behind us. Yes, we can!”

The message was then summarized in a catchy slogan: *change we can believe in* and *change we need*. There was probably no one left in the country who did not know what Obama stood for. These are not empty motherhood statements such as “your guy”, “your friend” or “fighting for you”. It is exactly what the targeted groups wanted to hear, a perfect and well researched match between the political demand and the political offer. According to the exit polls, 71% of those who were dissatisfied with Bush voted for Obama. 63% of the voters said that the economy was their top concern and they voted overwhelmingly for Obama. Obama’s position on the war in Iraq has helped in drawing clear differences between him and Hillary during the primary.

If you are planning a campaign right now, ask yourself the following questions: have you formulated such a coherent message and written it down in a campaign plan? Are you a credible messenger for that message? Is it matching the demand of your targeted group? Are there still people in the country/district who have not heard your message? If yes, what’s your plan to change that? Even better would be to use scientific public opinion research to get objective answers to these questions.

What’s impressive in the case of Obama is the coherence, with which he defined himself and the discipline, with which the message was communicated. Talking about discipline, the top candidate plays an extremely important role. Campaigns are very chaotic and there is always a potential for internal rivalries. The candidate chooses his team and only he/she can empower his people and demand discipline. In the campaigns of Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, John McCain (and one might add Fernando Poe Jr.), there were bitter internal rivalries and disagreement. In the case of Obama, the top candidate, the campaign manager David Plouffe, the chief strategist David Axelrod and all the thousand paid staff pushed and worked in one direction. It’s better to have a risky strategy but to have everybody on board moving in the same direction as opposed to having three clans with each pursuing its own great strategy.

There is another interesting detail: both Plouffe and Axelrod have experience in political campaigns but have never before run a Presidential campaign. This is yet another similarity between the Obama campaign and Bill Clinton’s run in 1992 (and a clear difference with the losing campaigns of Al Gore, John Kerry and Hillary Clinton): young, hungry people win Presidential campaigns.



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In my personal experience, European and Asian politicians focus too much on products and funds, and not enough about message, strategy and discipline. Especially in a bottom up, grassroots campaign, discipline is crucial. A movement with so many local layers and volunteers is only working if everybody believes enthusiastically in the same cause and if there is message discipline on top. The people who blogged for Obama, or those who went on facebook for Obama, did it for the same reason as the people who simply voted for him: they wanted change!

Another thing that campaigners can learn from the Obama campaign is how it carefully targeted specific groups of voters and put together its coalition of voters. From the very beginning, the Obama campaign wanted to expand its base by registering and turning out record numbers of young and black voters. And, it allocated the resources accordingly. The result: 96% of blacks voted for Obama; they made up 13% of the total electorate (+2% compared to 2004). 66% of the 18-29 year old voted for Obama. They formed 18% of the electorate (+1% compared to 2004).

From the very beginning, the campaign wanted to expand the electoral map of possible swing states so as to have multiple ways to reach the needed 270 electoral votes. Again, it allocated the resources accordingly and stayed loyal to the strategy even in difficult times. The result is a landslide win in the Electoral College.

In my opinion, a candidate running for President, Vice President or Senate in the Philippines should get a lot of inspiration from this strategy. All these elections will be multi-candidate fields where a minority of the vote will be enough to win. Hence, regional and socio-demographic targeting, the solidifying and expanding of a base will be crucial. Indeed, if one is to look at the latest SWS survey, at least five candidates seem to have a reasonable shot at winning the Presidency.

Linked to the message is also the messenger. Barack Obama is a once-in-a-generation talent in terms of communication and campaign skills. I simply don't know of anyone who has watched an Obama speech live and who was not deeply impressed. However, this did not fall from heaven. On the one hand, he strategically used his strength, namely giving speeches. Like other great speakers before him, he has in fact built his entire career around speeches. On the other hand, he invested a lot of time and resources into becoming a better candidate. The team did extensive focus group research to explore weaknesses and find out ways to neutralize them.

I have commented on the campaign and the outcome of the election several times on Bloomberg Television. If you want to get a free CD with the interviews, kindly contact us at info@perroncampaigns.com. I have also commented on the election on Swiss national television. For those who understand German, you can watch the interviews at:



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- <http://www.videoportal.sf.tv/video?id=43a3b1a5-c1f5-4857-a61e-1245147e5bb4>: the name of the show is „Der Club“. It's an expert discussion on the U.S. campaign.
- <http://www.videoportal.sf.tv/video?id=f90530f2-a9b5-4db8-875f-0dcfc0e4cc85>: the name of the show is "Die Rundschau". It's a political show entirely dedicated to the U.S. elections the day after Election Day.

Do you want to discuss with me the lessons learned from the Obama campaign? Email me (lperron@perroncampaigns.com) or call me at: 0041 43 488 37 20 (Switzerland).

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Best Regards

Louis Perron

