



CAN DO HAS BEEN CANNED...AND OTHER POLITICAL BRANDING TALES FROM THE 2015 QUEENSLAND ELECTION

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The Can Do brand has been canned. The carefully crafted and skilfully marketed personal brand that carried Campbell Newman into the job of Brisbane Lord Mayor, and then catapulted him into the position of Queensland Premier, is no more. Progressively tarnished during three years in office, the brand was rejected by voters at the state election on January 31, 2015. The voters' choices also had consequences for other political brands. The Liberal National Party brand was badly battered. The Labor Party brand was significantly revitalised. And Anastacia Palaszczuk's brand proved to be both a surprise packet and a work in progress.

Political brands and branding work in similar ways to commercial brands and branding. At a fundamental level, a brand is a name, symbol or design that is attached to a product.¹ A brand identifies the products of one producer and differentiates from those of their competitors. In politics, for example, the name and symbol 'LNP' is used to identify candidates of the Liberal National Party, and differentiate from those of the Labor Party. At a deeper level, a brand can also "take on special meaning for consumers".² This is because consumers can connect with brands emotionally, as well as rationally. Brands differentiate between products by highlighting differences that are "rational and tangible - related to the performance of the brand - or more symbolic, emotional and intangible - related to what the brand represents".³ In politics, functional appeal might include delivering competent economic management⁴, or improved health and education policies.⁵ Emotional

¹ Keller, Kevin Lane. 2008. *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring and Managing Brand Equity*, 3rd ed. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc. p. 2.

² Keller 2008. op. cit., p. 6.

³ Keller 2008. op. cit., p. 5.

⁴ Scammell, Margaret. 2007. 'Political Brands and Consumer Citizens: The Rebranding of Tony Blair'. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 611(May): 176-192. p. 187.

⁵ O'Cass, Aron and Ranjit Voola. 2011. 'Explications of political market orientation and political brand orientation using the resource-based view of the political party'. *Journal of Marketing* 27(5-6): 627-645. p. 636.

appeal might include “authenticity, approachability”,⁶ a vision for the future⁷ or reassurance that the party has changed⁸. Both the leader and the party can carry brands. In Australian politics, the leader and the party are often co-branded but one will always dominate. In the 2007 federal election campaign, for example, Kevin Rudd’s personal brand, Kevin07, was more prominent than the Labor party brand in media conferences, advertising and the like. In Queensland, with its tradition of big political personalities, we generally see the leader dominating the party.

This is what happened in Queensland on the conservative side during the past few years. The Can Do brand dominated the LNP brand. Initially, this made sense because Can Do was a strong and successful brand. The Can Do brand emerged during Newman’s successful run for Brisbane Lord Mayor in 2004. The brand name was catchy, memorable and meaningful. It perfectly positioned Newman against the then Lord Mayor, Tim Quinn, who led a long-term Labor administration that was widely perceived to have run its course. The brand name was also the brand promise; that action-man Newman would get things done. During the campaign, the brand promise was cleverly brought to life with images of Newman energetically filling potholes in roads. In office, Newman sought to deliver on the brand promise via infrastructure like tunnels, roads and a public bike scheme.

Newman’s audacious plan in 2011 to become Premier from outside the Parliament perfectly fit the Can Do brand. Again, the brand name effectively positioned him against a long-term Labor Government seen as out of touch. Newman reprised some potent imagery from his 2004 mayoralty campaign, including taking up a shovel to fix a stormwater drain as he campaigned in the seat of Ashgrove, to demonstrate the brand promise. The brand name was reworked into the slogan, Can Do Queensland, as part of a co-branding of the leader and the Liberal National Party. This combination delivered a huge victory for the conservatives at the election in March 2012.

But experience has shown that it is much harder to manage a brand in office than in Opposition.^{9 10 11} Former Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and US President, Barack Obama, are among those who struggled with brand management in their first terms. A brand strategy must evolve when a party moves from Opposition to office. The party, and its brands, must make the shift from campaigning to governing and from promising to delivering. The brand narrative must credibly and coherently

⁶ Scammell 2007. op. cit., p. 187.

⁷ O’Cass and Voola. 2011. op. cit., p. 636.

⁸White, Jon and Leslie de Chernatony. 2002. ‘New Labour: A Study of the Creation, Development and Demise of a Political Brand’. *Journal of Political Marketing* 1(2): 45-52. Pp 48.

⁹ Lees-Marshment, Jennifer. 2009. ‘Marketing After the Election: The Potential and Limitations of Maintaining a Market Orientation in Government’. *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34: 205-227. pp. 209-210.

¹⁰ Lees-Marshment, Jennifer. 2011. *The Political Marketing Game*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 168.

¹¹ Spiller, Lisa and Jeff Bergner. 2011. *Branding the Candidate: Marketing Strategies to Win Your Vote*. Santa Barbara: Praeger. p. 143.

evolve, with one eye on the short-term demands of the media and interest groups, and the other on the long-term viability of the brand. Such a task is demanding for any new administration. It was even harder for the Newman Government during the tumult of 14,000 public service sackings, fights with doctors and the legal fraternity, controversial anti-bikie laws, and a push to privatise state-owned assets. Voters increasingly began to see Newman as combative and authoritarian. Along the way, the Can Do brand became ever more tarnished, as evidenced by a run of negative polls and historically heavy defeats at two by-elections and in 2014. Newman recognised this and sought to repair his brand, most notably via Operation Boring from mid-2014. This did produce a short-term poll revival for both Newman and the LNP, however, Newman's brand was beyond rescue. Voters had a serious case of post-purchase dissonance;¹² that is, they didn't get what they thought they were buying with Campbell Newman. And they weren't prepared to make a repeat purchase. On election night, Newman and his brand were swept off the political stage.

With Can Do canned, the LNP is left with a major headache; the party brand has been harmed by its close association with Newman's personal brand. While voters do perceive distinct differences between the leader and the party brands, they also see close links between the two.¹³ In addition, the leader is often seen as the proxy for the party, or a summation of the party's offerings.¹⁴ So when a leader brand goes bad, the party brand is at risk too. The LNP must think carefully about how it plans to reinvigorate its brand over the next three years. No doubt the party hard-heads are doing just that; leaders come and go but the party, especially a party of government like the LNP, must endure.

The party brand was the focus of much attention on the Labor side. Labor put a lot of work into restoring its party brand following the 2012 defeat, for two reasons. First, the party brand was seriously damaged at the 2012 election when Labor retained just seven seats in the 89-seat Queensland Parliament. Second, Palaszczuk, as a new leader, needed time to shape and consolidate her personal brand. For the past three years, Labor worked on rebuilding its brand with its base of traditional supporters who abandoned the party in 2012 in protest at the perceived breach of trust on asset sales. Labor's reversal of this policy was a bid to regain the trust of traditional Labor voters, and provide a clear point of difference with the LNP brand for all voters. In addition, it laid out the brand promise; that Labor would govern in partnership with the people. The 2015 election result shows Labor has gone a long way to revitalising its brand but there is more to do. Labor must continue to reassure its base by sticking to its commitment of no asset sales and by providing credible points of difference with the LNP on key issues like provision of education and health services, and environmental protection. Labor must also

¹² de Chernatony, L. and M. McDonald. 2000. *Creating Powerful Brands*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann. p 74.

¹³ Davies, Gary and Takir Mian. 2010. 'The reputation of the party leader and of the party being led'. *European Journal of Marketing* 44(3-4): 331-350. p. 332.

¹⁴ Needham, Catherine. 2006. 'Brands and political loyalty'. *Journal of Brand Management* 13(3): 178-187. p. 182.

reassure the wider electorate that it can deliver competent economic management. The latter is a pre-condition for many voters; if Labor isn't credible on economic management, they won't consider it a viable option for office.

In political co-branding, the fit between the party brand and the leader brand is important. Serendipitously, there has been a very good fit between Labor and Palaszczuk over the past three years. The party was seeking to win back its heartland; its new leader hailed from the heartland seat of Inala. The party wanted to show it had learned the lessons of the 2012 defeat; the new leader presented as approachable, consultative and trustworthy. This presentation was greatly helped by positive imagery from the last week of the campaign. Just as many voters were tuning in to the campaign, Palaszczuk was relaxing into her role, playing barefoot cricket on Australia Day and leading a rousing old-style town hall meeting of Labor true believers. In doing so, Palaszczuk tapped into voter emotions. This stood in stark contrast with Newman who played heavily to his brand's functional appeal, such as reducing debt and building infrastructure, and neglected the emotional side, such as seeing public servants as people with families and responding to clear voter resentment over asset privatisation.

The challenge for Palaszczuk is to avoid the mistakes of the Can Do brand. That means evolving her brand from Opposition to office, from campaigning to governing. It means finding the difficult balance between dealing with the short-term demands of office and the long-term viability of her brand. Importantly, it means delivering on the brand promise to lead a consultative government.

Voter sentiment means there is little room for error on either side of politics. Political consumers, like commercial consumers, own brands.¹⁵ A brand is whatever the consumer believes it is. If political consumers do not believe that leaders and parties have lived up to their brand promise, they will look elsewhere. Just ask Campbell Newman.

¹⁵ Keller 2008. op. cit., p. 74.