

# Lessons from Obama's presidential campaign

 By [Dr Nikolaus Eberl](#)

8 Nov 2012

Having followed the Obama re-election campaign closely ever since the New Hampshire Primaries in January 2012, I have come to believe that there are important lessons to be drawn for success in leadership branding and getting people to vote for your brand - both on a political and commercial level.

These are 10 principles that have helped Obama snatch victory from the jaws of defeat (when the global media were counting him out after the first TV debate with Mitt Romney) and secure a landslide victory that only a few weeks ago seemed impossible.

1. **Strategy trumps tactics:** Obama's campaign team understood the dynamics of this election extremely well as they not only got their timing right almost to the minute of swaying the undecided voters but also targeting so-called loyal places and clearly defined voter groups such as Hispanics, gays and women in the swing states that had been secured in 2008. In Virginia alone (a state that had been predominantly Republican for almost half a century), Obama's field operation included more than 60 offices, hundreds of paid organisers and more than 20,000 volunteers, who, last Saturday alone, placed 560,000 phone calls and knocked on 580,000 doors.

2. **Negative advertising does not work anymore:** After decades of presidential candidates all over the world dragging their opponents through the proverbial mud, electorates have grown tired of being bombarded with negative advertising. Recent surveys have shown that the most popular comments on social media (and the highest EdgeRank views on Facebook) are those that carry a positive message (over 70% of social media users attested to that). According to a live CNN tracking poll of undecided voters in Colorado, the lowest rated moments for both candidates during the TV debates were moments when they negatively attacked each other.

3. **Application hunters beat fault finders:** Romney clearly did not get this message as he kept hammering away at everything that Obama had not achieved during his four year term instead of putting forward an action plan on just how he proposed creating the 12 million jobs he kept promising throughout his campaign. Obama's economic pitch dovetailed perfectly with the one policy that helped him most in swing states - the bailout of the car industry. His decision to use government funds to rescue GM and Chrysler, and by extension, the rest of the industry, proved to voters that Obama was intent on fixing the economy rather than playing the partisan game as his opponent kept doing.

4. **Collaborative intelligence matters most:** In the new economy, there is strong public support for more collaboration and less partisanship in most parts of the world. More collaborative people tend to be more likeable, especially in times of hardship. They are the ones who are able to work with anyone, even those who disagree with them. Perhaps more than any other time in American history, voters realised that this had to be a critical quality in their next president. Throughout his

campaign, Obama by far was the more conciliatory candidate of the two, always looking at the bigger picture of the United States of America rather than the divided camps of political foes.

**5. Connecting with the culture code:** According to Clotilde Rapaille, author of *The Culture Code: Why People around the World live and buy as they do*, every country is subscribed to their individual culture code, a set of unwritten rules that determines the behaviour of the constituency at large and determines the leadership style that resonates the most within the populace. Says Rapaille: "Our leader is the person who leads the rebellion. We are always changing, always moving forward, always reinventing, and we want a president who can direct this process. The president needs to understand what is broken, have a strong idea about how to fix it, and then 'rebel' against the problem. We expect our presidents to show us that they know where the country needs to go and how to take us there." Especially in the third and final TV debate with Romney, Obama demonstrated more than once a keen understanding of what it will take to restore Brand America and move forward (as his campaign slogan astutely referred to the very American notion of continuously pushing FORWARD).

**6. Applying 'the vision thing':** According to Rapaille, the first George Bush famously derided 'the vision thing', and that cost him dearly in the 1992 election. George Washington understood 'the vision thing'. So did Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and all the other presidents who resonate in our minds as the greatest to lead our nation. At his final rally in Des Moines, Iowa, Obama put forward his vision of one America where young and old, rich and old, black and white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, Democrats Republicans who believe we all have something to contribute. We all deserve a shot at the American dream. When the cynics said we couldn't, you said "Yes We Can!".

**7. Likeability rules:** Contrary to popular belief, it is not the rational arguments that tend to swing the undecided, or the "low information voters" (as Bill Maher derisively called them) rather than the irrational factors of trust and likeability. According to the author of *Likeonomics: The unexpected Truth Behind Earning Trust, Influencing Behavior, and Inspiring Action*, Rohit Bhargava, by most accounts, they are the ones who decide US elections, and they cast their votes based on which candidate they like and personally connect with more. After all, the winning candidate is the one that they have to contend with sharing their living room for the next four years.

**8. Archetypal branding creates trust:** Very much like 2008, at the end of his presidential campaign, Obama successfully adopted the archetype of the Creator (the motto of this archetype being "If you can image it, it can be done"). He did so most effectively so when the natural disaster of Sandy called upon his leadership qualities and he positioned strongly as a hands on leader who managed to rally every single governor of the affected states in a national rescue effort that stood in stark contrast to the ambivalent posturing of his predecessor, George W Bush, during Hurricane Katrina.

**9. Getting the facts right:** Halfway through his campaign, Mitt Romney claimed that Chrysler was planning to move all production to China (later repeated in a Republican ad on national radio), adding fire to his assertion that a trade war with China was looming (and playing to the gallery of advisors who pleaded with him to establish a clearly defined "enemy of the people"). Unfortunately for Romney, this move backfired badly when Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne went on air declaring that "Jeep production will not be moved from the United states to China". Chrysler went as far as sending an email to all Chrysler employees to correct Romney's assertion and allay fears about imminent job losses.

**10. Don't listen to the experts:** "Too close to call!" That was the resounding verdict of veteran political analysts all over the world, predicting that this election would be decided in the so-called swing states and that the vote would come down to one or two percentage points in the delegate vote. By now, the margin of victory is 303 to 206, hardly a close call and a very clear indication that Obama's strategy was vastly superior to that of his opponent.

Will brands heed the lessons gleaned from Obama's campaign? Only time will tell - especially after very few leaders applied the lessons of inspirational leadership after Obama's history making campaign in 2008.

## ABOUT DR NIKOLAUS EBERL

Dr Nikolaus Eberl is the author of *BrandOvation™: How Germany won the World Cup of Nation Branding* and *The Hero's Journey: Building a Nation of World Champions*. He headed the Net Promoter Scorecard research project on SA's destination branding success story during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, co-authored the World Cup Brand Ambassador Program 'Welcome 2010' and was chairperson of the inaugural 2010 FAN World Cup. Email [nikolaus@brandovation.com](mailto:nikolaus@brandovation.com) and follow [@nikolauseberl](https://twitter.com/nikolauseberl).

- Leadership lessons from the Iron Lady - 11 Apr 2013
- Lessons from Obama's presidential campaign - 8 Nov 2012
- Can SA restore investor confidence? - 18 Oct 2012
- Should SA bid for hosting 2020 Olympic Games? - 16 Aug 2011
- [2010 FIFA World Cup legacy] The true legacy of 2010 - part 2 - 8 Jul 2011

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>