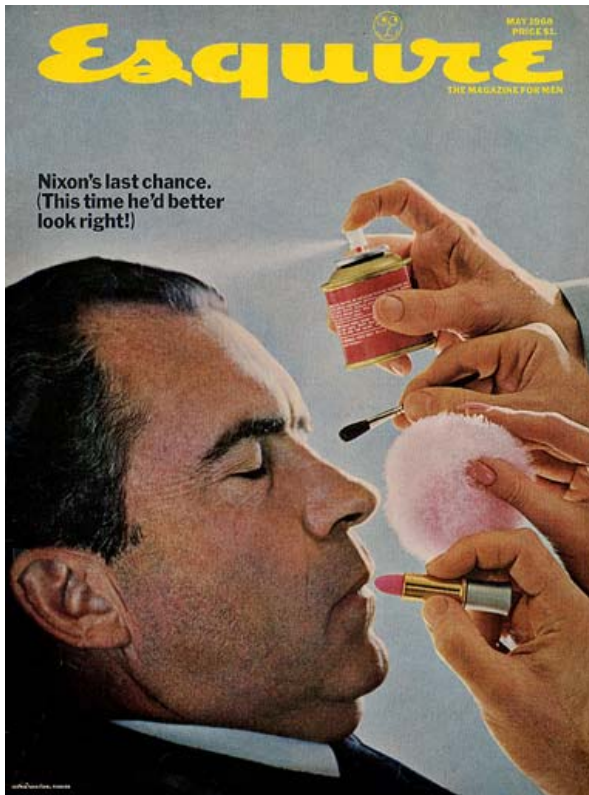


Ballot Booth Screenings

How presidential candidates are [re]branded.



It is the 17th of February and you are in a ballot booth ready to register your vote. In the heat of the moment your subconscious dispatches a stream of chaotic images of political posters and advertising spots. They flicker before you, like visions in near death experiences. A blur of candidates wrestling for your attention, grappling to pocket your vote.

That instant filtering in your mind's eye – especially if you are in the all precious undecided group - is precisely what brand and media consultants have been working on over the last few long months. It is possible that somewhere in that visual stream you will see a Ioannis Kasoulides close-up standing in front of an immaculate green valley more reminiscent of Microsoft-land than any region of Cyprus (photo 1),



Demetris Christofias slim and tall enough to make his opponents turn crimson (photo 2)



or Tassos Papadopoulos stern but as affable as photo-shop tools permit (photo 3).

What is it

Political brand building is the science of shaping the image of political personalities to affect the public's perception of them. It is the attempt to establish and project a set of values and attributes that portray a favourable image of the politician, create easy and memorable visual and verbal associations for target audiences, and by extension forge bonds of familiarity, comfort and hopefully even allegiance that would help draw votes on the day.

But selling politicians as brands, in essence as products, inevitably treats voters as consumers. And this is a new phenomenon for Cyprus. In a country where political affiliations run deep and, most importantly, where new faces rarely emerge on the political scene, branding political personalities is a difficult, some would say unnecessary, task.

This election campaign has therefore required a re-branding of long established personalities most of whom have been at the forefront of the political scene for at least two decades and whose policy positions and personal traits have become deeply entrenched in the public psyche. The products are not new, they are simply going through a re-packaging process. There was no new line up to choose from. No David Cameron or Nick Clegg, no Mitt Romney or Mike Huckabee, no Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama.

The only remote connection to the exciting – from a communication perspective – campaign in the United States has been Mr Kasoulides' call to his campaign staff to become inspired by the Senator of Illinois' unexpected surge in the Iowa primary last month.

On top of that, elections here have traditionally been decided on the positions the candidates maintain on the efforts for a Cyprus settlement. Nonetheless, with Cyprus a member of the European Union for four years and now a member of the eurozone, other important considerations have begun to enter the electorate's criteria. Perhaps resigned to the post 2004 referendum circumstances on the ground, the electorate may not be fully convinced of the seriousness in the differences between the candidates' positions on the Cyprus problem or their capacity to change things one way or the other. So, it is possible that personalities and the feel-good factors they may carry could emerge as new standards when choosing who to vote for.

For decades the Cypriot electorate, in part due to its very rigid political party system, would only allow a marginal swing vote. The referendum has opened up that crucial swing vote, and that is where the attention of political strategists is now focusing on. A new wave of difficult to define and confine young voters has also enlarged the now 515,000 strong electoral list.

How it is done

A long-standing in house political strategists' joke which illustrates the difficulty of changing deeply held images of politicians dates from Richard Nixon's days. Nixon's image was one of a grumpy president with a deep dislike for journalists. His political strategists, the joke goes, thought it would be a good idea to invite the press to the White House on a Sunday, offer them a few drinks and have the president chat with them in a relaxed context. They do, the press attends, though it is an uneventful gathering until the moment Nixon rises from his chair and walks towards the pool and begins to actually walk on the water.

Stunned but elated, his political strategists, cannot wait to read the next day's press, confident that their man would definitely receive favourable reports by the hacks who witnessed his messianic stroll. They are disappointed however when headlines run the cruel 'NIXON CAN'T SWIM'. The joke was often adjusted to suit the unpopularity of former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl though his stroll was held, as one would expect, across the Danube.

(Photo 4 Image of Nixon)

Back in Cyprus, after long and visually sterile years of badly printed posters and images of leaders standing on balconies addressing mass rallies, brand consultants in the mid nineties began to pay attention to how their candidate was portrayed and to harmonize that image with the growth of the glossy magazine and TV culture.

True to the Nixon make-over was the turning-point poster of former president Glafcos Clerides during the 1998 presidential campaign. A smiling and more youthful than his (then) 79 years, Clerides, his hands clasped under his chin revealed an expensive pilot's wrist watch peering under his sleeve, an image of an experienced leader in total control. A reminder of his RAF past and his steady negotiating hand.

Deciding on which of the candidates traits to promote or suppress is not an arbitrary business. Everything is measured, scientifically scrutinized and tested on the basis of opinion polls and focus groups conducted by the campaigns.

In the run up to the European Parliament elections in June 2004, candidate Ioannis Kasoulides' team had found that he was not faring well among young age groups. The elections were being held very close to the end of the year exams; it was too soon after the arduous referendum campaign, there was simply no interest. The Kasoulides camp in a last ditch effort printed thousands of stickers of a Kasoulides caricature slam dunking and stuck them in colleges and universities prompting students to associate with him and to take the time to vote.

Television

The crucial battleground of course, where the big money tends to flock, is television. The key here for the candidates is to come up with short, simple messages capable of appealing across all voter groups. The stage management permitted by television allows image builders absolute control over their product.

Last week's televised debate last week was the first test. So anxious were the strategists of their candidate's performance, that they effortlessly concurred on rigid ground rules on the format and response times which neutralised their candidate's capacity to shine. But television allows key words and phrases to be used relentlessly to help implant the central message in people's minds. On the night, if viewers managed to stay awake until the end of the broadcast, they were unlikely to have learnt anything new let alone be prompted to shift camps.

Ioannis Kasoulides' central slogan is *Responsible Strength (could be power)*, Tassos Papadopoulos' *A Choice of Trust* and Demetris Christofias *A Policy of Unity and Humanity*. All these carry what the candidates perceive as a reflection of their candidacy's strongest and broadest quality feature but also what they perceive as the electorate's potentially defining priority.

For the moment Kasoulides is the closest any of the candidates have come to match the slickness of European and American political campaigns. From print to screen his campaign radiates a uniformity of style and delivery that is calculated and consistent. His team appears to have defined the context for his brand and has constructed a sellable product. Colours that accompany his image are clear and confident particularly when compared to the rainbow spectrum chosen both by Papadopoulos to reflect all the parties that support him and by Christofias to deflect attention from the red of the past. Kasoulides' candidacy has one backer, has one ideological source whereas Papadopoulos is deriving support from four different parties which – advantageous though it may seem – gives off a sense of disorder. Christofias, visually at least, appears stuck in the colours and the shapes of the past.

Yet, even the most polished of campaigns, such as Kasoulides, would fail if they become trapped in a one-dimensional strategy. James Carville and Paul Begala, the two strategists behind Bill Clinton's successes in the 90s in their influential book *'Buck Up, Suck Up and Come Back When You Foul Up'* are cruel when they define what they describe as the Pyramid of Public Awareness. They claim that only around

20% of the public are 'highly informed folks', who read the newspapers and follow politics closely. The remaining 80% are mass opinion and 'pretty damn clueless'. But they are the most crucial constituency.

They include those who do not pay attention to the detail of images, to the choice of words or the strategic sequence of ads. They are the ignorant; those who are swayed by factors unfathomable to the strategists. Those to whom branding means little as they simply would vote because they 'like' certain candidates or their spouses or because they'll chose to vote one way because someone they know will vote that way too.

So does it matter when Ioannis Kasoulides wears a red tie to send a message to communists for the second round? Does it matter whether Demetris Christofias is photographed in front of the Cyprus flag blending into the blue sky intimating an innocent reference to the Greek flag to calm and woo potential voters of the traditional right? Probably not, or not as much as strategist would think, but they cant afford to let any detail unchecked any opportunity pass without exploiting it.

Of course they might go through all this and something unforeseen happens or something startling is said which turns the whole campaign and the brand upside down. Their deepest fear is for their candidate to be caught looking weak or vulnerable. They can afford to falter during a speech, they can even shed a tear – which these days tends to work in their favour - but under no circumstances can they afford to have their candidate be seen to shrivel during an argument, betray insecurity or trip up when climbing on to a stage.

On 19 September 1996 on the US campaign trail the Republican Bob Dole, running against incumbent Bill Clinton, defied the odds of gravity, took a step forward to shake the hand of a supporter and fell face first to the ground, prompting journalists to rush over and take photographs of his 73-year-old body sprawled out on the ground. The incident momentarily wiped out the vigour and poise a Commander in Chief would need to exude. Ask anyone whether they remember Dole's central message during the campaign or the percentage by which he lost to Clinton. But you can be certain that image was flashing across people's minds in ballot booths across America on Election Day.

END

Nicholas Karides is Director of **ampersand** a Nicosia based public affairs agency and of **newswatch** media monitoring (www.ampersand.com.cy).