

**NEW LABOUR: A STUDY OF THE CREATION, DEVELOPMENT AND
DEMISE OF A POLITICAL BRAND**

Dr Jon White

Associate

Henley Management College and

Visiting Professor, Public Affairs

USI Lugano

Professor Leslie de Chernatony

Professor of Brand Marketing

Birmingham University Business School

The University of Birmingham

Abstract

This paper examines the use made by political parties of branding, as a means of establishing party values and winning political support. It looks in particular at the way in which political parties use communication to create, build and maintain political brands.

The paper involves an examination of the recent history of the British Labour Party. After a long period in the political wilderness, the party re-branded itself as 'New Labour' in the mid-1990s, and - as New Labour - swept to power in a landslide election victory in 1997, under their new leader, Tony Blair.

Using media coverage and material written by some of the architects of New Labour, the paper will describe the creation of the 'New Labour' brand, and look at how it was developed and used to generate political support. The paper will also consider the evolution and development of the brand, as the substance underlying the stated brand values has come to be questioned, not least by so-called 'Old Labour' supporters of the party.

The paper will draw conclusions regarding the successful management of a political brand, pointing in particular at the need to ensure that the performance of a party espousing a particular brand supports and reinforces communicated brand values and the brand itself.

Introduction

Political parties emerge as a response to social developments, when groups of people feel that they have an approach to social questions around which they wish to gather support, or which they seek to defend and promote in the face of opposition. Political parties have histories, traditions and approaches to managing their own affairs. They also acquire and use names and symbols, to strengthen their own positions, to rally their supporters, to garner further support and, perhaps, to intimidate their opponents.

In recent years, political parties have turned to techniques of marketing to manage their affairs and further their interests. Since World War II, and drawing to a large extent on the experience of political parties in the United States and other developed democracies, political parties in North America and Europe, and more recently in emerging democracies such as South Africa and the countries of central and Eastern Europe, have made steadily increasing use of these techniques.

This paper looks in particular at the use of branding by political parties, and at the recent experience of the United Kingdom's Labour Party which put branding at the heart of the process of modernization which led to the party's return to power – after a long absence – in the country's general election of 1997. Since then, and using the same techniques, the party has consolidated its hold on power in an election held in June, 2001.

The paper examines the creation of the 'New Labour' brand, looking at how it was developed and used to generate political support. The paper will also consider the

evolution and development of the brand, as the substance underlying the stated brand values has come to be questioned, not least by so-called 'Old Labour' supporters of the party.

The paper also considers the successful management of a political brand, pointing in particular at the need to ensure that the performance of a party espousing a particular brand supports and reinforces communicated brand values and the brand itself. Throughout, the importance of communication in establishing and sustaining the brand cannot be understated.

Branding

A brand is a multidimensional construct, involving the blending of functional and emotional values to match consumers' performance and psychosocial needs (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). One of the goals of branding is to make a brand unique on dimensions that are both relevant and welcomed by consumers (de Chernatony and McDonald, 1998).

Success in an overcrowded market will depend on effective brand differentiation, based on the identification, internalization and communication of unique brand values that are both pertinent to and desired by consumers.

Powerful brands communicate their values through every point of contact they have with consumers (Cleaver, 1999).

A functional value is a value relating to the way something works or operates and can be evaluated through rational deduction. An emotional value is a value relating to a person's emotions and derived from a person's circumstances, mood or relationships with others, and being instinctive or intuitive or based on feelings, as distinguished from reasoning or knowledge.

**Applying branding principles to a political party –
the case of New Labour**

A political party, despite the difficulty of defining the market place for its brand, can consider itself as a brand, to be developed to offer functional and emotional values to an electorate as part of its appeal.

The New Labour brand was developed as part of the modernisation of the Labour party, which occurred of necessity between 1983 and 1994. By the 1983 election, the Labour party's support had reduced to the point where there was a danger it might lose its position as official opposition to the increasingly powerful and secure Conservative Party. The Conservative Party had come to power in 1979, replacing a weak and failing Labour government. It was to remain in power until 1997, through elections in 1983, 1987 and 1992. By 1983, the Conservative Party was making strong use of marketing techniques to sustain its hold on power (White, 1983).

“New Labour was the product of traumatic and multiple failures” (Rawnsley, 2000, page viii). It emerged from recognition through three election defeats, that the party had to

modernize, reconnect to the electorate, and overcome the electorate's doubts and fears about Labour as a party of government. The process of modernization is well described in books such as Gould, 1998. He first mooted the term 'New Labour' in 1989, but the term and the brand were not adopted until the 1994 Party Conference, which had the theme, New Labour, New Britain.

The New Labour brand represented an explicit break with 'Old Labour,' the party of tradition and the almost one hundred years of history that the party had lived through since its foundation as a party to represent the interests of organized Labour.

New Labour had to break explicitly with the past, and to demonstrate the new party's commitment to current values. This involved changing the party's constitution and founding principles, among them Clause IV, which committed the party to taking significant components of the economy into public ownership. A revised Clause IV allowed for the workings of the market economy.

New Labour set out to represent functional values of openness, modernity, economic orthodoxy and redistributory social policy. Emotionally, the brand had to reassure, remove the fear that voters still after many years felt that a Labour government would return the country to the dark days of the 'winter of discontent', when the country was paralyzed by union disputes in the winter of 1978 – 1979, under the last Labour government.

Labour set out to appeal to middle England, recognizing it is most successful as a party when it bestrides the centre ground (The Economist, November 15, 1997).

The evolution and development of the brand

Improvement of the Labour product and the communication of its benefits went hand in hand (Fletcher, in Marketing, November 27, 1997). Gould (1998) shows how, partly as a result of his experiences with the US presidential campaign in 1992, he and other advisors were able to professionalise the process of party and campaign communication through the elections of 1987 and 1992, and in the successful election of 1997. Gould, a strategy and polling advisor to Tony Blair and the Labour Party in the 1997 General Election campaign and in the three years that preceded it, is one of the central figures in the modernization of the the Labour Party, but the architects of New Labour are recognized as Tony Blair (now Prime Minister), Gordon Brown (Chancellor of the Exchequer), Alastair Campbell (the Prime Minister's press secretary) and Peter Mandelson (a close advisor to the Prime Minister, and recognized master of communication techniques used in the pursuit and retention of political power).

In the 1997 election, Labour came to power with 419 seats in the House of Commons, for a majority of 179. The Conservatives retained 165 seats.

New Labour as a brand was successful in part because of its ambiguity. It represented values with which large swathes of the population could identify, such as personal opportunity flowing out of strong communities. It was an easy target for criticism. The

Economist, for example, said that Tony Blair's project to establish New Labour in government was to achieve cultural hegemony by creating a more inclusive politics for a post ideological age (The Economist, October 25 1997).

Rawnsley (2000) talked about the illusions that sustained New Labour. He said "the illusionists are best placed to know what an illusion it was that New Labour was a glossily impotent machine always under the masterful control of an assured leader. That this illusion was maintained for so long was one of the great triumphs of Alastair Campbell's spin."

The demise of the brand

New Labour was described by Derek Draper, an aide to Peter Mandelson in the 1997 campaign, as "an election strategy rather than a governing strategy" in comments to a forum to assess New Labour's record held in 2001, at London's Institute for Contemporary Arts.

Nevertheless, Tony Blair, speaking outside his office at Number 10 Downing Street on May 2, the day following the election in 1997, said "we ran for office as New Labour and will govern as New Labour. It will be a government that seeks to restore trust in politics" (speech in Downing Street, May 2, 1997, quoted in Rawnsley, 2000, p15).

However, Philip Gould, writing in a memo to the party leadership in May 2000, *Getting the Right Place in History*, said by then the New Labour brand has "been badly

contaminated. It is the object of constant criticism and, even worse, ridicule. . . Labour is undermined by a combination of spin, lack of conviction and apparently lack of integrity” (Gibbon, 2000).

Part of the contamination was due to the discrepancy between the high aspirations incorporated into the brand’s values, and the performance of the party in office. In an end of term assessment, Toynbee and Walker (2001) wrote “expectations had been raised, only to be dashed when nothing much happened, or with transport, things evidently got worse. Early trickery with figures undermined confidence” (Toynbee and Walker, 2001, page 230).

Other commentators felt that it was hard to find much that was concrete, let alone distinct and consistent, in the principles on which New Labour’s approach was built (The Economist, May 2, 1998; White, 1999). The article concluded that it would be better to judge New Labour by its deeds rather than by its words.

The New Labour government embarked upon its first years in office on a flurry of activity, but early on attracted criticism for the tightness of control it sought to maintain on information, and on the messages delivered by government and the people who spoke for it. Charges of ‘control freakery’ and ‘spin’ were directed against the government.

Marketing professionals asked if New Labour had spun totally out of control (Marketing, July 27, 2000). In mid-2000, as the government seemed to lurch from one crisis to

another (for example the fuel crisis of September, 2000) the New Labour brand was seen to be under threat. The brand was discredited by internal disputes within the party, and a perceived inability on the part of the government to take control of current issues. Where the brand once stood for modernity, integrity and competence, it now seemed to represent elitism, spin and drift.

Toynbee and Walker's assessment of the government's record prior to the 2001 election, at which Labour was returned to office with a comparable majority concluded that the government was "a modest, competent, unambitious government, over-given to high flown rhetoric while trimming its sails to every wind." (Toynbee and Walker, 2001, page 239).

From mid-2000, use of the term 'New Labour' lessened. One report at about this time suggested that the term new was now redundant (Daily Telegraph, July 20, 2000).

Conclusions

Reflections on the emergence, development, evolution and demise of the New Labour brand suggest a number of conclusions. The brand was an essential element in the modernization of the party, and a device to suggest and promise changes. The brand promise, vague though it seemed to commentators at the time, was aimed to reassure, to allay fears and to convince the electorate that Labour would provide a new kind of government.

The brand came to be devalued when some of the important promises made were not delivered. One of these had to do with the standards to be followed by the government in the conduct of public business, but early illustrations of government and ministerial performance showed that the government was essentially no different from other governments (Rawnsley 2000, see in particular the Ecclestone affair, and the forced resignation of Peter Mandelson from ministerial posts).

The brand was built through communication (Gould, 1998), but the discrepancies between announcements and actual performance led on to cynicism about the government, New Labour and politics itself. This cynicism led on to poor voter turnout at the 2001 election.

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