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Starting in the early 1990s, something odd started happening to governments and companies: politicians began to talk about performance indicators and targets, and businesses began using the language of citizenship and manifestos. The adoption of political terminology has accelerated rapidly since then. In 1990, only a handful of companies produced stand-alone corporate social responsibility or sustainability reports globally; last year, 3,350 were produced, according to Global Reporting Initiative data.

This trend needs to be located within the wider “politicization” of business, which has meant that many companies are now assessed in the same unforgiving way as political parties. Brands are now very much seen as public property, with assertive consumers feeling a strong sense of sovereignty over what they can and can’t do. As recent flaps over executive pay and corporate tax rates have shown, it is not sufficient for something to be simply legal or

commercially correct: it must also be judged to be moral and fair.

Underpinning this shift is a greater awareness of the power of business. In developed economies, businesses have encroached further into the traditional domains of government, from running utilities and transport to involvement in healthcare and education. As public sector budget constraints continue, the private sector will be expected to do more. In developing markets, companies can often provide the apparatus and capacity which the state cannot. Gillian Tett, a columnist for the *Financial Times*, has argued that companies are increasingly expected to have a broader view on issues impacting society, in part due to awareness of their scale, as well as declining confidence in the power of governmental institutions to bring about change.

More complex demands on business mean that corporate communicators have much to learn from how political leaders

build and mobilize support in the face of the same challenging media dynamics, such as a partisan and confrontational style of coverage, the ever-changing horse race of who is ahead and behind, and constant scrutiny and default skepticism towards motives. Politicians have also learned to deal with a media that not only reports the news, but aggressively lobbies on issues.

The premise of “permanent campaigning” in politics – where a campaign is no longer a few weeks or months every few years, but rather a continual effort to maintain support and momentum behind a leader’s agenda – is a concept that can serve businesses well as they look to secure everyday legitimacy and advance their corporate strategy. The newly-formed advocacy group Organizing for Action, created to help push President Barack Obama’s second-term agenda, exemplifies the power behind “permanent campaigning” and mobilization.

Previously, corporate communicators often borrowed heavily from the campaign tactics of center-left parties in the 1990s. From Bill Clinton’s campaign in 1992 to those in the late 1990s by Tony Blair in the UK and Germany’s Gerhard Schroeder,



politicians emphasized the following when confronted by a legacy of perceived media stereotyping and historical antipathy from voters:

- 🔗 Message discipline.
- 🔗 Intensive use of opinion research to understand how to overcome voter concerns.
- 🔗 Rapid rebuttal of opposition claims and perceived media distortions.
- 🔗 Setting the media agenda and “winning the news cycle.”
- 🔗 Centralization of different functions within a single “war room.”

Though many of these principles remain true, particularly the concept of a war room, we need to remember that they were first developed more than 20 years ago, when print media and network evening news still dominated, rolling news wasn’t yet mainstream and the internet barely existed, let alone Twitter and Facebook. Times have changed. Over the past decade in particular, political campaigns have evolved to adapt to the new media landscape and respond to greater voter skepticism about spin.

We are seeing a shift towards a looser, more participatory style of campaigning, and away from the command-and-control model. This centers on empowering voters and is partly a response to the opportunities created by social media, but also the desire for greater involvement. Building on the pioneering work of 2004 presidential hopeful Howard Dean’s campaign, the 2008 and 2012 Obama presidential campaigns used social networks extensively to gain feedback and to encourage conversations between supporters. That strategy was replicated in France by François Hollande in 2012.

As well as creating an operating framework, this strategy is also about tone, where politicians can find an effective way to open themselves up to criticism. Tony Blair’s “masochism strategy” in the 2005 election, for example, was designed to show a politician who was not afraid to listen, even to a painfully embarrassing extent when an angry voter exposed her rotten gums to the Prime Minister on national television to make a point about the quality of healthcare.

The theme of empowerment can be most acutely seen in the emergence of online

campaigning communities, such as Avaaz and Change.org, which allow for the rapid mobilization of their members behind causes. This trend in campaigning finds a broader echo in governing, where there has been a greater use in various countries of referendums, ballot initiatives, deliberative methods such as “citizens’ juries” and online petitions.

What are the implications for corporate communicators? This more dynamic style of politics – which also affects business – underlines the importance of an *outside-in* approach to communications. That is to say, as our colleagues Lucy Parker and Jon Miller argued in the previous issue of the *Brunswick Review*, the challenge for companies is to identify which of society’s “conversations” to join, rather than simply pushing messages down in traditional fashion. Business needs to help facilitate a “community of interest” around issues, and see how best to contribute to debates.

Political campaigners have also realized the futility of trying to win every “news cycle” – indeed, the very notion of a news cycle is a quaint concept in an environment of rolling news and digital media. In any case, David Plouffe, a top campaign adviser to President Obama, recently stated that he believes there are now at least six cycles a day.

This requires a change of focus. Peter Hyman, a former senior adviser to Blair, argues that in the 21st century media environment, it is more important to concentrate on winning “the big arguments,” that is, the issues where you wish to bring about enduring change. This means focusing on an end point rather than each day’s headlines. Similarly, Plouffe has emphasized the importance of focusing on the legacy and finding the “pivot points” where you can shift the narrative when confronted by the “stray voltage” generated by partisan rolling news and social media buzz. In business, the challenge – particularly during critical situations – is to craft those “pivot points” when the media torrent can be redirected.

Recent political campaigns have also developed a more sophisticated understanding of voter behavior and how to tailor communications to speak directly to individual voters. A lot of post-election analysis of Obama’s win, for example, has focused on that campaign’s “big data” approach, guided



by campaign chief Jim Messina’s pledge to “measure everything.” Perhaps a lesser-known development in sophisticated message-crafting is the application of thinking from social psychology and behavioral economics. In response to sniping about Obama’s religion, for example, the campaign took advice from academics that a direct denial would just feed the myth, whereas a positive affirmation of his Christian faith would be better received. Academic thinking about how people process and act upon communications is becoming a key part of a more evidence-based approach to decision-making.

While much of the experience gained from political campaigning can be useful for businesses, we also need to be conscious of its limitations. Financial communications must meet a much higher level of veracity and credibility than politics, and the long-term nature of managing a corporate reputation across audiences and markets is quite different from the needs of mobilizing target voters on election day. However, as businesses deal with rising expectations and assertive audiences, the political war room provides a robust model for action. 🗣️

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