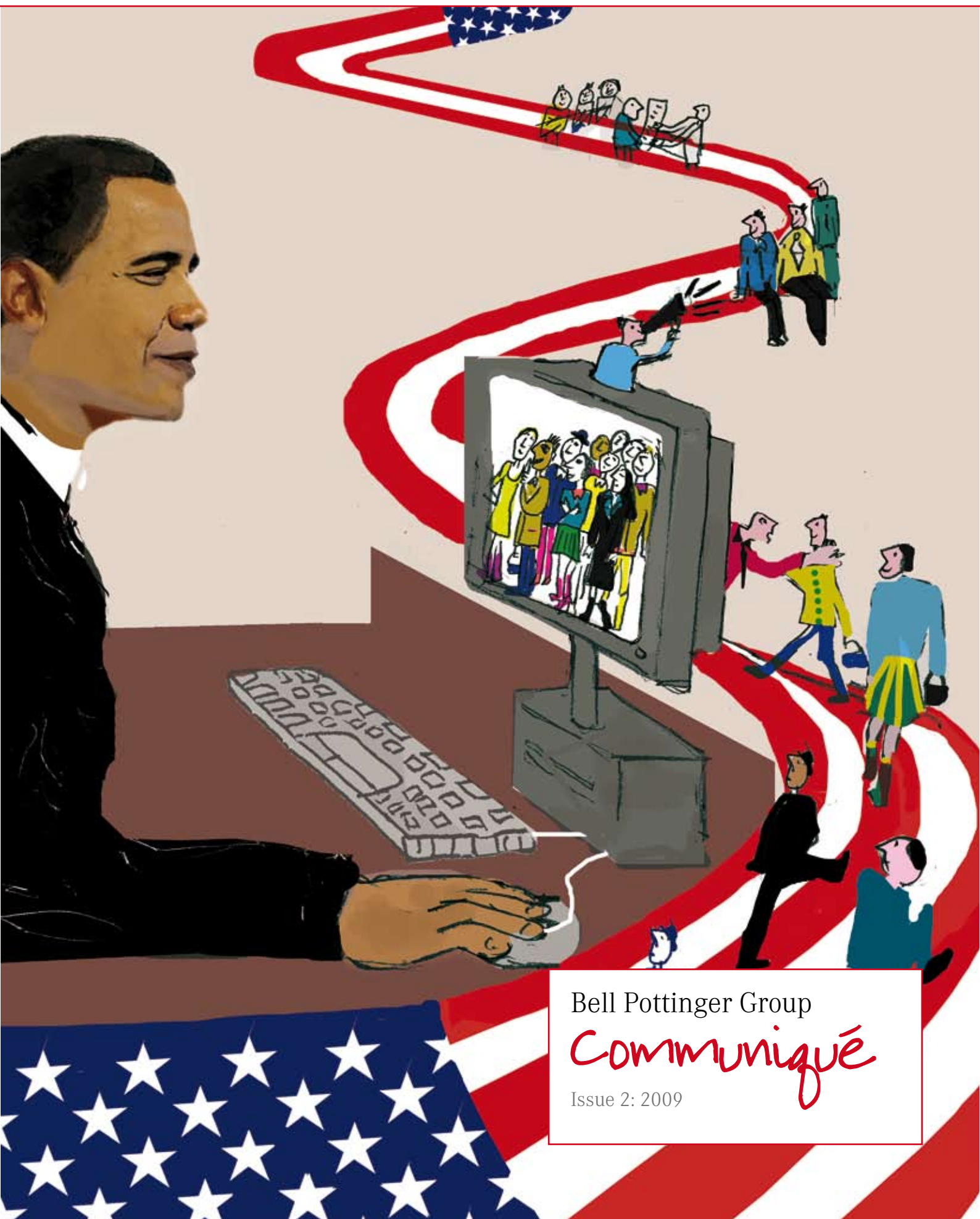


What we can all learn from the Obama campaign to improve our communications



Bell Pottinger Group

Communiqué

Issue 2: 2009

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Just two years before last November's US election, two in five Americans didn't know Barack Obama's name. He spent a whole year 20 points behind Hillary Clinton amongst likely primary voters. That is going on for double the Labour deficit against the Tories in many of the most recent opinion polls.

Now he is President of the United States.

A common view is that his success was a result of his personal appeal. He is a fantastic orator, who does just as well on talk shows as he does in stadia (not to mention his remarkable ability to swat flies). Clearly, this was a key part of what took him to the White House.

However, charm alone would not have been enough to overturn the hurdles he faced. In the words of his own Chief Strategist, David Axelrod; he was "a couple of years out of the Illinois Senate and he was a black guy named Barack Hussein Obama. You don't have to load up the wagon with too many more bricks than that."

Getting over those challenges took remarkable, innovative campaign techniques. In a Bell Pottinger breakfast seminar at the end of June, James Morris, Research Director of Brand Democracy, our sister company to Bell Pottinger, talked about three of them.

Technique 1: Turn supporters into advocates

Where Senator Clinton went into the campaign backed by one of the most powerful fund raising machines ever seen, Obama had very little. As an outsider, there was little chance of raising significant corporate donations. As an inexperienced, little-known, junior Senator without independent means, he lacked the contacts or personal wealth to bankroll a campaign. Never has it been truer for necessity to be the mother of invention.



Where Senators Clinton and McCain used money to buy a campaign team, Obama built his from volunteers. His entire communications architecture was built around his need to motivate a volunteer force of Obama advocates.

It worked. Nearly one in three Americans said they were contacted by a friend, colleague or neighbour on behalf of the campaign. McCain's number was closer to one in ten.

One of the keys to this success was Obama's willingness to share credit with his supporters. Unlike Senator Clinton, Obama did not spend a lot of time talking about himself. Instead his emails and webcasts concentrated on the success of the campaigners with whom he was communicating. A typical Obama email would say something like "You have challenged conventional thinking and built a grassroots movement for change that is sweeping the country". It was about his supporters not about him.

A second element of his success in creating advocacy was his revolutionary use of the web.

Tone and technology is not enough to turn people into advocates – you also need a message. Obama's messages were very good – good enough to go from 20 points behind in the polls to President of the USA.

For Obama's team, the web was, fundamentally, a way of organising offline action. He wasn't talking to them; he was involving them. This started with the tone of voice of his communications: simple, text-only emails that you or I might send to a friend, addressed with the receiver's first name and signed off from 'Barack', 'Michelle' or campaign manager 'David'. These often linked to videos, recorded using hand held cameras or mobile phones in the campaign headquarters, telling supporters what was coming up next week and asking for their help. People were asked to attend or run coffee mornings and neighbourhood drives. They were contacted by telephone after signing up online. They were texted information from Barack before he told the media. Everyone was an insider.



Technique 2: Reframe the arguments

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The Obama approach to message development focussed as much on 'framing' as on winning arguments. The idea behind 'framing' is that a good way to win a debate is to make sure it is on terms that favour you. So, for example, when it came to the idea of change, it helped the Obama cause to define 'change' as being about revolutionising the political system. Once change is framed like that, being an outsider is an advantage and experience is a disadvantage. Senator Clinton's years in the White House become a problem not a virtue. Obama and his advocates are united in being outsiders seeking change.

This insider/outsider framing was exactly what the campaign achieved: painting Washington insiders – like Senator Clinton – as incapable of changing a system they themselves had set up. In the words of Larry Grisolano, their Senior Communications Strategist, the campaign team's core question was: "How do we talk about change in a way that makes Hillary Clinton pay a price for her experience?"

This sort of thinking can be applied in the corporate world. For example, the exact same approach can be applied to the idea of 'quality' in the context of food. Many food retailers are on surer ground if they can frame quality as relating to local sourcing, animal welfare and so on, than when 'quality' relates to health. Campaigners and brands can increase the success of their comms by thinking as much about how to frame quality as they do about winning an argument within a particular definition.

Similar thinking explains why 'energy exploration' is a much harder target for environmental groups than 'drilling for oil'. One triggers mental associations with the pioneer spirit that built America. The other identifies the activity as essentially destructive.

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Technique 3: Identify who can be won over and how to do it

It wasn't just good judgement that led to Obama developing the messages and frames that would motivate supporters. Absolutely essential to this process was the use of advanced polling techniques.

The polls we see in British newspapers measure the vote. Obama's operation went a step further – identifying the extent to which he could grow his vote, and the messages needed to make that happen. Effectively, the poll simulates a campaign before it happens in the real world.

The technique is one we regularly use for clients. At the heart it revolves around taking a benchmark of public opinion, exposing participants in the poll to the arguments from you and your competitors, and then revisiting the benchmark. We use a range of methodological tools and tricks to pinpoint exactly what it is that tips the dial in your direction – whether it be who your spokesperson is, what arguments they use or the detailed language in which those arguments are cased. These techniques can let you refine your campaign before going into the real world, raising the chance that you will win out.

This technique can be extremely powerful for corporate and consumer communications. If you know in advance that your messages will beat the competition, you can go into a campaign with confidence. If your rebuttal performs poorly in a poll, it's best to think again before trying it in the real world. If campaign simulation tells you that your strategy will shift a significant portion of your target audience, you are more likely to get buy-in to that strategy. You can sort what is critical for success and what is not, allowing you to focus on a core message and not be distracted along the way.





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Checklist

Clearly, the techniques listed above were not sufficient to guarantee Barack Obama's success. His good fortune in not being in the Senate when the vote came on the Iraq war meant he was not tainted by its unpopularity. His good judgement in opposing it in the first place also helped. Even with that boost, a less charismatic politician might not have had what it took to beat Senator Clinton and then Senator McCain.

A successful campaign is always feted. The Obama team did not get everything right. He is not Superman, but there is a lot we can borrow from the way he ran his campaign. Hopefully these ideas will help.

James Morris

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However, the techniques listed above did play a crucial role in helping turn a rank outsider into a world leader. If you wanted to use the same techniques you would:

- Use polling to simulate a campaign before it happens in the real world
 - Identify who you can win over
 - Identify your best messages and messengers
 - Understand the best rebuttals to counter-arguments
- Use framing techniques to:
 - Turn your weaknesses into strengths
 - Turn your opponents strengths into weaknesses
 - Identify the killer words that trigger ideas you cant be seen to say and frame the debate to your liking
- Promote advocacy amongst consumers by:
 - Making everyone an insider
 - Focusing on your target audience not yourself
 - Using the web to organise

Bell Pottinger Group

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The Bell Pottinger Group comprises leading brands in the industry, including, of course, several Bell Pottinger-branded companies, as well as Good Relations, Harvard, Insight and Resonate.

The Bell Pottinger Group is No.1 in both PR Week and Marketing public relations consultancy league tables for the UK.

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