Articles

The strategic dimensions of Political Marketing

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Summary:

Political marketing is often criticised for devaluing democratic processes. However, there is no literature that outlines the various concepts of democracies and or offers a systematic comparison with political marketing in its varied conceptual and practical aspects. In this article, we outline three different strategic dimensions, i.e. a selling-oriented, an instrument-oriented, and a relational political marketing.

We have to be precise about the strategic dimensions and activities of political marketing as represented by different, often incompatible concepts.

Keywords: strategic dimensions, political marketing, politics, democracy

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1. About Political Marketing and Politics

Political marketing means many things to many people. In general, it is a term more often used in academia and practice in Europe and United states. The distinction between political marketing, political management, or political communication is not always clear and often blurred by overlapping interpretations. However, what it clear is that political marketing often evokes negative feelings and is assumed to be harmful for politics and democratic systems (e.g. Moloney, K. and Colmer, R. (2001), p. 957). The use of marketing instruments in politics arguably implies atrophy and aberration. Henneberg has collected and catalogued some of these criticisms by political scientists as well as marketing theorists: while political scientists mostly focus on the ethical aspects of political marketing management practice, i.e. questioning the use of political marketing instruments during election campaigning, marketing theorists are concerned with more theoretical flaws in the theory of political marketing. In particular the lack of a clear and consistent position of political marketing vis-à-vis political practice on the one hand and democratic fundamentals on the other are discussed as a shortcoming which holds back the research area of political marketing (Henneberg, S. C. (2004), p.225).

In general, the merging of the two worlds of marketing and politics, perceived to be that of the trivial and superficial in contrast to the spiritual and substantial, provokes

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profound anxiety. At its extreme, the fear is for politics itself, transformed from what should rightly be a quest for a common vision of the just, noble and good into the private and often irrational whimsy of consumerism. Political marketing, it is argued, encourages voters to judge politicians in terms of the rewards of consumer purchase; equally it may undermine the courage necessary for political leadership (Klein, J. (2006). However, on the other hand political marketing should not be judged against ideal and impossible standards of a perfectly informed, knowledgeable and participating electorate, but rather against the real world of relatively low interest and knowledge in politics. This 'realist' strand of research claims that marketing of some sort may be valuable, even essential, for promoting voter interest and involvement.

However, as O'Shaughnessy put it "The answer to the ethical question [regarding political marketing] depends on the views of democracy we hold" (O'Shaughnessy, 1990, p. 6). The available literature in political marketing and political science does not deal with the epistemological foundations of political marketing management but remains concerned with specific applications and tools. We therefore attempt to fill a gap in the literature which hitherto has hindered further conceptual development of the area of political marketing as well as cross-disciplinary interactions between marketing theory and political science. We will structure our arguments as follows: to specify and motivate our research, we will briefly discuss the status of political marketing management with regards to

politics in the next section. At the next stage, the paper will introduce an analysis of the characteristics of three distinct concepts of political marketing management, derived from theoretical vantage points. In a conclusion section we will synthesise our findings and their consequences, and discuss implications for research in the area of political marketing.

2. The 'Position' of Political Marketing in Politics

Political Marketing as an academic discipline 'works' on two levels: firstly, it consists of explanatory constructs for political marketing management activities as employed by political actors in practice; secondly, it represents an exchange or interaction-based research lens to explain the political sphere per se (Henneberg, S. C. and O'Shaughnessy, N. (2008). More specifically, political marketing research needs to be concerned with issues of democracy in general and its commensurability with political marketing management and its underlying concepts, such as voter-orientation, or market-orientation (Newman, B. I. (2002). This goes beyond more specific questions about the applicability of political marketing activities in politics, such as whether it is ethical to focus only on 'floating voters' in a targeted election strategy (Baines, P. R., Harris, P. and Lewis, B. R. (2002).

The point of departure of this argument is the fundamental question regarding the integrity of political marketing management. By posing the question in this way, there is somehow not enough clarity regarding the constructs concerned: what do we mean by

'democracy', and what exactly is 'political marketing management' in this context? Thus, this question quickly disintegrates into more complex sub-questions once the two main components are scrutinised. Political marketing management and its theoretical and conceptual foundations, following marketing theory, is not a monolithic bloc of unambiguous definitions, clear aims and aligned activities, but comprises many different 'schools'. Below, we focus on three distinct concepts of a marketing-orientation in politics which span the space of possible options: a 'selling-oriented' concept of political marketing management, an 'instrument-mix-oriented' concept, and a 'relationship-building' concept which is also informed by societal marketing considerations. Thus, the initial conceptual question about the relationship of political marketing and democracy needs to be related to each of these concepts of political marketing management.

3. Strategic dimensions of Political Marketing

Political marketing provides a theoretical umbrella for different applications of marketing concepts within the political sphere. No singular approach to political marketing exists.

As is the case with marketing theory, a similar variety of approaches exist in political marketing management. This is represented in the extant literature by analyses of communication-based campaigning approaches, by strategic positioning approaches, or by concepts based on the organisational attitudes and behaviours in their relationship with external and internal political stakeholders. However, there have been a few categorisation attempts to make a comparison of different political marketing management approaches, e.g. Lees-Marshment's conceptualisation of product, sales, and, market(ing)-oriented parties (Lees-Marshment, J. (2001).

We have to be precise about the strategic dimensions of political marketing as represented by different, often incompatible concepts:

- Selling-orientated political marketing;
- Instrument-oriented political marketing;
- Relational political marketing.

These approaches have been chosen because they illustrate the ideal types of orientations and are based on state-of-the-art research discussions. Furthermore, they constitute the dominating paradigm for research and practice in this area.

The selling-oriented political marketing is most often equated with a traditional, ideology-oriented approach to politics (Henneberg, S. C. (2002). The political offering, i.e. the policy promises, and the electoral and campaign activities are derived from solid political convictions, often characterised by an alignment with certain interests within dominant or social cleavages, such as class and region. A 'market-leading' perspective and a predominantly tactical use of political marketing instruments characterises this approach (e.g. Henneberg S. C. (2006). A selling-oriented political marketing is often seen as the 'first age' of political marketing, exemplified by the use of party political broadcasts, slogans, posters, and the 30 second ad spot. It has been argued that this meant that political management mattered more than political marketing.

The instrumentally-oriented political marketing can be characterised as the sophisticated and managerial use of political marketing activities and strategies employed to convince voters of the value of the political offering, adapt the offering to target segment preferences, and implement political marketing campaigns effectively and efficiently through the co-ordinated use of a multitude of political marketing instruments. This is in line with 'market-led' approaches of strategic marketing, or a 'following' mentality as a radical interpretation of a voter-orientation. The New alternative political party first in Bulgaria's 2013 election campaign represents an example of such 'focus-group'-driven campaigning. An instrumental approach can mean a focus on short-term expediency with emphasis on responding to tracking polls and public opinions.

Recently, a relational approach to political marketing has been advocated (Henneberg, S. C. and O'Shaughnessy, N. (2008). This is inspired by societal marketing considerations which have also been advocated in the political sphere. The emphasis is on long-term exchange interactions that benefit all relevant actors as well as society. Value considerations are linked to an acknowledgement of the (inter)dependency of all involved exchange partners and are therefore grounded in mutual benefits as well as societal needs, based on delivering promises, i.e. a voter and citizen-inclusive approach to policy implementation (Johansen, H. P. M. (2005). To make the relational approach to political marketing operational, however, it has to go

beyond the cosmetics and the superficial. For example, e-mails, blog and websites posts, social networking sites and YouTube videos have all been used extensively by the candidates.

To compare these three distinct approaches, some pivotal characteristics are selected which emphasise the essence of the different political marketing concepts. These dimensions are used to describe typical and therefore to some extent generic aspects and cover elements of the strategy on which the specific political marketing is based, the envisaged characteristics of the underlying political exchanges, as well as the specific activity patterns associated with the relevant political marketing (see table 1).

With regard to the strategic dimensions, the three political marketing rationales differ: while a selling-oriented approach is offering focused, i.e. puts an ideology or conviction first, instrumentally-oriented political marketing is focused on a deep understanding of primary stakeholders, and specifically on target voters' needs and wants. A relational approach enhances this perspective in line with a wider societal orientation which also incorporates the interests of stakeholders that are not direct exchange partners, and assesses the trade-offs between short-term and long-term effects. While this implies a differentiated targeting approach covering core and periphery actors, the instrumentally-oriented political marketing focuses pragmatically on those decisive voter segments which need to be convinced in order to achieve the organisational aims, i.e. main target

Table 1. Three concepts of Political Marketing

		Selling-oriented political marketing	Instrumentally- political marketing	Relational political marketing
STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS	**Rationale of political marketing**	*Offering (ideology)*	*Voter needs*	*Voter and societal needs*
	Target segment(s)	*Cleavage group*	*Floating voters*	*Core and periphery voters*
	Targeting strategy	*Undifferentiated*	*Differentiated*	*Differentiated/ Micro*
	Importance of political marketing for party	*Peripheral; tactical activity management*	*Central; tactical/strategic activity management*	*Central; strategic policy development/ implementation; strategic/ tactical activity management*
EXCHANGE DIMENSIONS	**Interaction**	*One-way*	*Mediated one-way*	*Dialogue*
	Value construct	*Conviction-based promises*	*Needs-based promises*	*Mediated needs-based promises*
	Temporal orientation	*Short-term, electoral*	*Short-term, electoral*	*Long-term, electoral and governmental*
ACTIVITY	**Political marketing activity**	*Communication*	*Communication, Channel management, Offering development, Activity co-ordination, Intelligence management*	*Policy and value strategy development, Promises implementation, Micro-activity management, Managing in relationships*
	Instruments	*Push marketing instruments*	*Push and Pull marketing instruments*	*Relationship building instruments*
	Campaign orientation	*Election*	*Election; Resource-generation*	*Election, Government, Resource generation; Implementation*

segments are 'floating or indecisive voters'. An undifferentiated targeting of voters who are aligned with the core offering is to be expected for selling-oriented political organisations. Consequently, these political actors use political marketing as a peripheral and tactical tool of politics, while political marketing is central for the two other approaches, specifically for the relational political marketing management concept which perceives marketing strategy as the guiding principle of offering creation,

stakeholder interaction, as well as service delivery in politics (Smith, G. and Hirst, A. (2001).

The exchange dimensions of political marketing rationale are concerned with what kind of interaction is facilitated by the specific approach, on what aspects value considerations are based, and what time perspective underpins the different approaches. For a selling-oriented political marketing approach, a uni-directional and episode-based exchange, focusing on

election campaigns, is characteristic. This is in line with a conviction-based definition of exchange value components. An instrumentally-oriented political marketing shows some similarities. However, the underlying exchange value concept derives its content from the current needs of specific groups of voters or the prevailing public opinion. On the other hand, the relational political marketing concept stresses the long-term perspective, including besides elections other interaction processes, such as governing and policy implementation as part of societal interactions. A dialogue with changing agenda-setting functions between different interaction partners is envisaged, with a societally-mediated value concept as its foundation (Scammell, M. (1999).

Relational political marketing is based on a comprehensive and 'permanent' (i.e. continuously ongoing) portfolio of marketing activities, including policy development, communication, and implementation, and long-term relationship and stakeholder management. This contrast with the more limited activity set of the other two approaches: while the instrumental political marketing orientation focuses specifically on communication, intelligence gathering, and market-based policy development, a selling-oriented political marketing predominantly uses communication activities, specifically deployed in a push-marketing setting for election campaigns.

4. Conclusions

A clear implication of our analysis is that political marketing needs to engage in theories of democracy in order to ensure its legitimacy. While political marketing may arguably be 'conceptually neutral', its application and practice is not and needs to be imbued with a normative aim. For example, political relationship marketing, if pursued by politicians and political parties, could succeed in moving politics further towards the forms of democracy. The concepts, techniques and technologies inherent in the idea of political marketing, and based on societal marketing considerations, could be used to foster a true relationship between party, politician and their publics, re-inventing traditional methods of political proselytisation such as direct mail, the posts in blogs and social media to inform as well as persuade, to listen as well as consult.

In fact, the rise of such phenomena as blogs and social media, the idea of 'net roots' and the cacophony of democratic noise emanating from the Internet, has persuaded some at least that we are on the edge of a new era of democracy. The resulting change in the balance of power between policy producer (political parties and politicians as well as media) and policy consumer (citizens), and the empowerment of self authorship, has some potential impact on the future possibilities for a democracy which can be channelled via relational marketing practices.

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