

# Political Brands and Consumer Citizens: The Rebranding of Tony Blair

By  
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It has become commonplace to speak of political parties and brands. This article looks at the rise of the brand and explains how branding has become the cutting edge of commercial marketing. It examines how the brand concept and research techniques are used in politics and focuses in particular on the rebranding of Tony Blair in the run up to the 2005 U.K. general election. More broadly, it argues that branding is the new form of political marketing. If market research, spin, and advertising were the key signifiers of marketed parties and candidates in the 1980s and 1990s, “branding” is the hallmark now. It will argue that the brand concept has analytical value. It is not simply a convenient and fashionable term for image. Furthermore, it is a demonstration that we are moving from a mass media model to a consumer model of political communication.

*Keywords:* political communication; political brands; marketing and elections; Tony Blair

Political parties are the ultimate brands.

—Burkitt (2002)

This article describes how and why branding is used in politics. It focuses in particular on the rebranding of Tony Blair in 2005. However, more broadly, it argues that branding is the new form of political marketing. If market research, spin, and advertising were the key signifiers of marketed parties and candidates in the 1980s and 1990s, “branding” is the hallmark now. The article will argue that the brand concept has analytical value. It is not simply a convenient and fashionable term for image. Furthermore, it is a demonstration that we are moving from a

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DOI: 10.1177/0002716206299149

mass media model to a consumer model of political communication. Before moving to the politics, however, it is important to get a firmer grip on the concept of the brand.

## Brands: What Are They?

Our common if loose understanding that brand refers to image and reputation is more or less right. As consultants Anholt and Hildreth (2004) put it, "A brand is nothing more . . . than the good name of something." In marketing, a brand is defined as "the psychological representation" of a product or organization: its symbolic rather than tangible use-value. At a basic level, the brand acts as a shortcut to consumer choice, enabling differentiation between broadly similar products. Most intriguing for marketers, however, is the way brand image works, appearing to add a layer of emotional connection that operates over and above the functional use-value of a product. Thus, in the classic example of brand power, "two thirds of cola drinkers prefer Pepsi in blind tests, yet two thirds *buy* Coke" (Burkitt 2002). Although brands, most famously Coca-Cola, have existed as household names for more than a century, the brand idea acquired its contemporary ubiquitous importance over the past twenty years. The term *brand* is everywhere now, applied not just to products, companies, organizations, and celebrities but also to cities, nations, and even private individuals, such that job seekers, for example, are encouraged to "consider yourself a brand" to impress interviewers (Whitcomb 2005). There are four main reasons for the contemporary rise of the brand: first, economic, and the recognition that a respected brand name translates into financial value; second, promotional, and growing skepticism about the efficacy of mass advertising in a world of media abundance and audience fragmentation; third, the perception of increasing consumer power as the new consumerism of the turn of the century brings together heightened demands for value-for-money and new concerns for corporate social responsibility; and fourth, consumer research, which insists on the importance of emotional engagement in shopping behavior, especially in explanations of repeat purchases.

The economic imperative stemmed from the phenomenal increase in the value of intangibles over the last quarter of the twentieth century. Intangibles are equivalent roughly to the gap between companies' "book values" (such as material assets, equity, and return on investment) and their stock market valuations. "The brand is a special intangible that in many businesses is the most important asset," according to Jan Lindemann (2004) of Interbrand, a consultancy that together with the magazine *BusinessWeek* publishes league tables of top global brands. The precise financial value of brands is notoriously difficult to measure by orthodox accounting practices. However, international stock markets recognize the value of intangibles in takeover claims (sometimes called "acquired goodwill") on the balance sheets. It is now beyond dispute that brands contribute massively to corporate worth. An Interbrand study, conducted in association with

JP Morgan, concluded that brands account for more than one-third of shareholder value, on average, while for some leading brands (for example, Coca-Cola and McDonald's) the brand is worth well over 50 percent of stock market value. In cash terms, the figures are truly staggering. Google, the hottest mover in Interbrand/*Businessweek's* 2006 league table, has an estimated brand value of \$12.38 billion. Coca-Cola, still the world's top brand, was put at \$67 billion, while the number two brand, Microsoft, was valued at \$56.9 billion.

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Recognition of this market power has led to the development of "brand management" as a specialist function within companies, supplemented by a boom in brand consultancy as a new branch of marketing expertise. Brand consultancies are frequently staffed by people previously employed in advertising (Burkitt 2002), who often employ similar qualitative research techniques but who now see their work as more fundamental, and always prior to any advertising campaigns. It is increasingly common for former advertisers to talk of the "postadvertising age." Al and Laura Ries's influential book *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR* (2002) argued that the hard sell of advertising was insufficient for the business of brand building. Advertising cannot substitute for the longer-term, more wide-ranging creation of reputation through sustained public relations. Maurice Saatchi (2006) went further, enlisting neuroscience to explain the "strange death of modern advertising." Constant exposure to a vast array of digital media has effectively "rewired" the brains of the under-twenty-five-year-olds; they respond faster but recall less, Saatchi said. This is why teenagers can digitally multitask at rapid speeds, receive and send a text message, play a game, and download music all in the space of the typical thirty-second commercial. Neuroscience calls it "continuous partial attention," and the result is that "day-after recall scores for television advertising have collapsed, from 35 percent in the 1960s to 10 percent today."

A common thread in the marketing literature is that brand image is not, nor can it be, the simple creation of advertising. The peculiar property of the brand, as distinct from the product, is that it is not under the sole authorship of the owner companies. The brand emerges also from customer experience and perception. Promise, the agency that Labour commissioned to conduct research

prior to the 2005 General Election, claims that “brands belong to everyone . . . shaped by millions of conversations which take place every day between a company and its customers . . . customers and non-customers” (Trevail, 2004). Ultimately, the brand is “only as good as the grapevine says it is.” The customer contribution is known as brand equity. Brand equity is effectively a gift that customers may bestow or withhold; thus, it is a complex source of strength and weakness for companies. It may add billions to corporate worth; equally, it is acutely sensitive to competition and highly vulnerable even to small shifts in consumer perception and behavior.

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Thus, the surge of consumer activism of the past decade created new anxieties and opportunities in the boardrooms. Companies faced a diverse and intensified range of pressures from both the traditional consumer watchdog wing of activism, buttressed by mounting attention from the news media (scrutiny of value-for-money, product quality, and honesty of claims) and from activists, championed famously by Naomi Klein and Anita Roddick, with demands for social responsibility and ethical corporate behavior in human and animal rights and the environment. The climate of heightened consumer activism simultaneously increased the vulnerability of brands and their potential value. A good brand name is a tremendous asset as consumers become more demanding, but equally a reputation built over years may be dismantled virtually overnight by scandal, evidence of misdeed, or even simply competition from a smarter rival. Consequently, all aspects of brands, their definition, research, communication, and methods of economic evaluation, have become increasingly sophisticated as management invests in brand development and research while consultancies compete to sell brand-building formulas. On the economic side, statistical models contend to demonstrate the importance of brand equity, linking financial values to equity indicators, such as consumer awareness, preference, satisfaction and scores on specific image attributes and, increasingly, perceived social responsibility. On the definition and research side, marketers draw on cognitive and neuropsychology to make sense of consumers' emotional responses and attachments to brands. It has led to a burgeoning marketing interest in emotional intelligence

TABLE 1  
WHAT MAKES A BRAND DISTINCTIVE?

Cultural	“symbol of our society”	Brand differentiators
Social	“grew up with it”	
Psychological	“says something about me”	
Economic	“value for money”	Boundary conditions
Functional	“works better”	

and the ways that reason and emotion work in consumers’ purchase decisions (Heath 2001; Franzen and Bouwman 2001; Goleman 1996; Woods 2004).

James Donius’s influential model (cited in Woods 2004; see Table 1) distinguished between “boundary conditions” (the basic economic and functional performance of a brand) and “brand differentiators” (cultural, social, and psychological associations) in consumer choice. In mature markets, where many products meet the basic boundary conditions of reliable functionality and acceptable pricing, consumer choice is decided overwhelmingly by the less tangible attributes of brand differentiation.

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The task of brand research lies in discovering how differentiators operate in consumers’ perceptions and in finding patterns of differentiation. A common theme is that, while brand differentiators emerge from multiple and diverse experiences and psychological associations, they often work at a low level of consumer attention. Consumer psychology, drawing from cognitive psychology, calls this low-involvement processing (Heath 2001). Moreover, “many of the encounters that each of us has with a brand are experienced beneath the radar of conscious attention. The tiny details that do contribute to brand image such as the quality of plastic carrier bags, the information on a till receipt . . . sneak into our brains invisibly” (Gordon, quoted in Burkitt 2002). Hence, the skill of brand research is to make explicit that which is normally unexpressed and to convert it into a prioritized order that can assist brand development and promotion.

Brand research is primarily qualitative, seeking of necessity to delve beneath the surface evidence of quantitative polling. Burkitt (2002) described two traditions of consumer qualitative research: first, the behaviorist school, which seeks explanations through direct observation of consumer behavior rather than through questioning respondents; and second, the human psychology school, which is premised on the assumption that people can and do understand their own motivations, although they may need help (“moderation”) to access and make explicit “views and values that people have not thought about in a very conscious way or do not normally admit to.” The latter school is commonly equated with the focus group, although according to Burkitt, British market researchers prefer “qualitative research” since the purpose is to encourage respondents to speak as freely as possible, rather than restrict them to a narrow product focus. It enlists enabling and projective techniques from counseling and self-development to uncover respondents’ normally unspoken intuitive associations and hard-to-admit private feelings. Typical techniques include “mood boards” (collections of pictures/images that evoke emotional territories, lifestyle, and feeling); “concept statements,” in which respondents are asked to write down their views before discussing them; and party-game-type associations, which are probably the best known among the brand researcher’s bag of tricks. The result is questions such as “If product X was a car/fruit/football team what kind of car/fruit/football team would it be?” Beyond this, and as we shall see in the case of Tony Blair, researchers call upon techniques of psychoanalysis to access respondents’ most privately held or even repressed opinions.

### “Reconnecting the Prime Minister”: Political Branding in Action

The strategy to “reconnect” Tony Blair with disaffected voters prior to the 2005 U.K. General Election offers a sharp illustration of the centrality of brand thinking in politics. Labour, although consistently ahead in the polls, approached the campaign nervously, worried at their ability to mobilize their own supporters and concerned at the depth of anger toward Blair, especially among women voters. Moreover, Labour, as the party of government for eight years, was particularly susceptible to rising public cynicism. Politicians, Philip Gould (2003) said, were talking to an “empty stadium”; voters felt powerless and ignored and were looking for a more interactive engagement with politicians. The 2001 contest had produced the lowest postwar turnout at 59 percent, and Labour strategists feared that another record low rendered them vulnerable to a hung Parliament or worse should the Conservatives motivate their base through anti-Blair appeals and promises of tough immigration policy and lower taxes.

This was the context in which Labour, in January 2005, enlisted the services of Promise plc, a commercial consultancy specializing in brand building. Promise detailed its work in an unusually frank paper for a Market Research Society

conference (Langmaid, Trevail, and Hayman 2006). The following account and quotations come from their paper, unless otherwise stated. Promise came to Labour's attention in December 2004 through a *Financial Times* article written by Charles Trevail, one of the company's founders. Trevail had argued that Labour was a "premium brand"—a high-cost, high-service product that, precisely because it raised consumer expectations to high levels, was especially vulnerable to credibility problems. Promise runs an annual index tracking the fit between consumer expectations and experience of leading brands. It had concluded its 2004 survey with the finding that two-thirds of brands failed to live up to their promises and that "premium brands were especially likely to let customers down." This, said Promise, was "the pain of premium": premium products offered high quality to customers and their very success brought with it the risk that consumers may "idealize these brands—they imbue them with lots of positive qualities they'd like them to have, and which they cannot always live up to." Trevail's argument was spotted by Shaun Woodward, former Conservative communications director, who had defected and been elected as a Labour MP in 1997. Woodward arranged a meeting between Promise executives and Labour campaign strategists Philip Gould and Sally Morgan at Number 10 Downing Street in December 2004. At the meeting, Gould said "they needed a new perspective on the New Labour brand."

Promise conducted preliminary research for Labour, involving standard focus groups of Labour loyalists and former Labour voters who were now undecided. Although it mainly confirmed what Labour already knew, the party's campaign team was impressed, especially with the analysis of respondents' "relationships with Blair personally" and how these fed into overall attitudes. Promise was commissioned to devise a strategy to counteract the Conservatives and crucially to recommend ways to "reconnect" Tony Blair to the electorate. Thereafter, Promise focused only on undecideds, particularly groups of women who had previously voted Labour. The focus was in line with Gould's surveys, which found that the hostility to Blair and Labour was especially keen among women and "might severely damage their showing at the polls." Promise attempted to isolate the Blair factor through the numerical scaling it uses in its brand index, asking respondents to award marks out of ten to parties and leaders on the basis of two attributes: reputation and delivery. It then asked respondents to score Labour and Conservatives against their own set of ideal attributes (competence, leadership, teamwork, integrity, in touch, understand, interactive). "Worryingly for New Labour, the Tories outperformed them"; and worse for the prime minister, he scored lower than his own party. Overall, Promise concluded that the New Labour brand was undermined by constant media attacks, the Iraq war, and the perception that Blair had lied about weapons of mass destruction. A key finding was that Blair personally was crucial to brand perceptions and that there was a marked deterioration over time, from enthusiastic welcome of the young Blair to resentment and anger at the later tough Blair.

To probe the link between perceptions of Blair and the party brand, Promise used expressive techniques, including asking respondents to write a letter to

TABLE 2  
LETTERS TO BLAIR (FROM UNDECIDED WOMEN VOTERS)

Key Phrases	Underlying Emotional Experience	Desires/Wishes/Direction
Theme 1: You've left me! "you should have come home" (Tsunami); "your country needed you"; "where were you when the disaster happened"; "all the promises you made that never came to fruition"	Abandoned and unimportant	Put us first Get back in touch Get more involved with us
Theme 2: Too big for your boots/celebrity "a president with Cherie"; "globe-trotting holiday makers"; "celebrity hero worship (Bush)"; "thought you were a people's person, not a movie star."	His self-importance and global lifestyle leaves me feeling inferior/undervalued	Reorder priorities Get back to basics Get real
Theme 3: Reflect and change "take time to think"; "how foolish you've been"; "you've lost sight of reality."	Not held in mind Uncontained Out of control	Think, reflect—are you still the bloke we elected; have you moved on to bigger things?

SOURCE: Langmaid, Trevail, and Hayman (2006).

Mr. Blair, "to let him know what they thought and more importantly how they felt," assuring them that "we would place the content of their letters before him, as we did." Promise summarized the emotional experiences of Blair under three broad headings (see Table 2): "you've left me," "you've become too big for your boots," and "you need to reflect on what you've done and change." From these broad emotional themes, they then drew on Gestalt psychology and the "two-chair" exercise, asking a volunteer to act out both parts of a two-way conversation between herself and Blair. The conversation was reported as follows:

*Woman voter to Blair:* "I thought you were one of us. A people person. Yet you were more interested in sucking up to people more famous than yourself. To do that you even put our boys' lives at risk in Iraq even though more than a million people had marched against that war. Why didn't you listen? Why are you spending so much time away from us? Why didn't you come home straight away after the tsunami? How could you stay on holiday when our people were dying?"

*Blair to woman voter:* "I'm afraid you've only got part of the picture. From where I sit the war in Iraq was crucial to the cause of world peace. But I understand that it's difficult to see the whole thing for you. [Boos from the group!] You put me in charge and I must do what I think to be the right thing. I am sure that history will prove us right in the end."



After group discussion of the imaginary conversation, the woman returned to the chair tasked to be Blair saying what she would *like* to hear from him. This is what she said:

*Blair to woman voter:* “I understand your feelings and I realize that there are many who do not agree with me over Iraq. . . . I still believe on balance that we did the right thing, though I have been shocked to appreciate the depth of frustration among those who disagree with me. I solemnly promise to spend more time at home in contact with our own people and to debate these issues more seriously before we launch on such an endeavor again.”

It was a relatively small difference in Blair’s response, but it produced an extraordinary reaction, one woman even shouting out, “We love you.” This was the crucial moment in the strategy to rebrand Blair. The women’s anger toward Blair stemmed not so much from opposition to the Iraq war, although that was deeply unpopular, but from perceptions of Blair’s patronizing tone and self-justificatory response to criticism. Promise researchers had been taken aback by the “degree of aggression—even hatred” directed at Blair. Moreover, the strength of hostility was related to the warmth of their welcome to the younger Blair, who had seemed so “fresh,” “approachable,” “modern, progressive and easy to look at and listen to.”

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Promise concluded, “There appeared to be almost two completely separate Mr. Blairs out there in the public’s consciousness. The one, ideal, almost perfect as a leader and source of hope; the other almost equally mendacious, even wicked as a source of disillusionment and despair.” Ideal Tony had become Terrible Tony. Respondents reacted to Blair “with the feelings of jilted lovers: He had become enthralled by someone else, a figure more powerful than ourselves, the resident of the White House. . . . Therefore feeling rejected ourselves we must start to reject him.” The task, as Promise saw it, was to integrate the two Tonys, the young, hopeful Tony and the older tough Tony, into a new “mature Tony”; and the two chair exercise suggested that it was possible to do this through communication style and tone.

Simultaneously with the Blair focus groups, the Promise team worked on a new brand model for Labour, approaching the issue “as they would any other large brand,” exploring the environment in which the brand existed, how it was

promoted, and most important, what it meant to consumers. New Labour had emerged out of a sophisticated brand strategy, driven by intimate contact with voters, the party's customers. But by 2005 it was badly tarnished: "The brand lens through which people viewed the party had become clouded by the Iraq war and constant media attacks on the government. . . . The research categorically stated [that] New Labour had a problem with their leader, but so influential was he as an icon of the brand, the party also had a problem that reached the very core of the brand." The New Labour brand, personified by Blair, had stopped listening, it was too reliant on him, but without him seemed lightweight, all spin rather than substance. The Conservatives' brand, despite being perceived as out-dated, felt "more real"; the Tories had more substantial "brand equity."

The depth of dissatisfaction on three core attributes, competence, integrity, and teamwork, "could not be reversed over the twelve-week period before the election. However, we realized that the brand did have an opportunity to address issues of integrity and teamwork head-on. . . . We recommended a strategy that portrayed members of the Cabinet working as a team; something that was very much lacking for the Tories." Promise suggested the rebranding of New Labour as "progressive realists": passionate, friendly, and inclusive for the benefit of all. It needed to show strength in depth by promoting a greater range of spokespeople and competence through highlighting management of the economy. It also needed to emphasize public services ("this brand is about *we*, not *me*") and communications that looked "in touch." For Blair, this meant showing that he understood why people were angry and that he should drop the much-resented "I know best" stance in favor of "we can only do this together."

### From "Tough Tony" to "Mature Tony": The Masochism Election Strategy

The plan to "reconnect the prime minister" got its first airing two weeks later (February 2006) with Tony Blair's speech to the Labour Party Spring Conference at Gateshead, in northeast England. To the delight of Promise and Labour campaigners, sound bites chosen by the media highlighted the new, "mature Tony" approach: "I understand why some people are angry, not just over Iraq but many of the difficult decisions we have made, and, as ever, a lot of it is about me," said Blair. "So this journey has gone from 'all things to all people,' to 'I know best' to 'we can only do this together.' And I know which I prefer. A partnership. Forward together. It's your choice."

Promise's main recommendations appeared in Labour's campaign war book: "TB must connect with the electorate . . . and make it clear that he has not abandoned them"; he should show greater candor, humility, and willingness to listen (as cited in Kavanagh and Butler 2005, 57). This emerged publicly as the "masochism strategy," in which the prime minister increased his appearances on television in the run-up to the election, deliberately seeking out aggressive interviewers and

asking TV shows to find hostile audiences to question him. The strategy, with its underlying analogy of a rocky marriage, provoked considerable press interest and no little contempt as the prime minister was subjected to some humbling encounters. He was repeatedly lambasted over Iraq; while in the most excruciating confrontations a hospital worker asked the prime minister if he would be prepared to “wipe someone’s backside for £5 an hour,” and on the popular Saturday night show *Ant and Dec’s Takeaway* a child asked him, “My dad says you’re mad. Are you mad?” As the pro–New Labour commentator Andrew Rawnsley (2005) noted, much of the press did indeed think that the strategy was madness: “The traditional campaign playbooks say that leaders should always be displayed among crowds of cheering supporters affirming their goodness and greatness. And predictably conventional reporting has depicted these TV trials as evidence that the wheels are already coming off a ‘humiliated’ Prime Minister’s campaign.”

Nonetheless, the masochism strategy was central to Labour’s campaign, as was the attempt to showcase a united leadership team. The latter was easier said than done, requiring a concerted effort from Labour campaigners to heal the much-reported rift between Labour’s most powerful figures, Blair and Gordon Brown, the chancellor of the exchequer. Labour’s longest-serving campaigners, Philip Gould and Alastair Campbell, were convinced that Brown’s inclusion was indispensable to electoral success. Brown would ensure focus on the party’s key assets, management of the economy and public services, and without Brown, Blair would look isolated and vulnerable. As one Labour insider said, “I think Philip and Alastair were both kept awake at night by the thought that if Gordon did not come back, Tony would be humiliated” (as cited in Kavanagh and Butler 2005, 58). After weeks of negotiation, the pair was persuaded to bury their differences, at least for the duration. The reuniting of the Lennon and McCartney of British politics was signaled in the party’s first election broadcast (PEB) of the campaign. Directed by filmmaker Anthony Minghella (*The English Patient*), the PEB featured Blair and Brown chatting together about their common values and achievements; it was a “soft-sell about a ‘partnership that’s worked’ ” (Harrison 2005, 111). Remarkably, this was the only PEB under Blair’s leadership that had highlighted any Labour politician other than him. In general, Labour’s advertising and promotional material was far less Blair-focused than in the previous two elections. Instead, the team theme continued with Brown repeatedly at Blair’s side on the campaign trail.

## Branding: Its Value for Political Campaigners

Branding as a concept and research method has both particular and general value for campaigners. The particular value is demonstrated in the “reconnection strategy”; its general usefulness becomes clear in the evolution of political marketing thinking.

The reconnection strategy was a strikingly different way to deal with the problem of leader unpopularity. Margaret Thatcher, although widely respected as a

strong leader, was also deeply disliked by a large minority of the population. The Conservative solution for her in the 1987 election was a presidential campaign that highlighted her advantages as an experienced and strong leader but made little attempt to alter entrenched public perception that she was “out of touch” and “talked down” to ordinary people. Labour in 1992 had the opposite problem with then-leader Neil Kinnock, and its remedy was to protect Kinnock as far as possible from exposure to hostile questioning from the press and public (Scammell 1995). Neither course completely fitted the campaigners’ bill for Blair in 2005. It would have been impossible to shield him from the scrutiny of the press, much of which treated the campaign as a referendum on the prime minister (Scammell and Harrop 2005, 131). The option of protecting him from the public, with a Thatcher-like presidential campaign, was considered seriously (Langmaid, Trevail, and Hayman 2006, 6), but it was riskier for Blair than it had been for Thatcher. First, being seen as in touch was the essence of the New Labour brand and, until the Iraq war, had been personified by Blair. He personally and the party generally had more to lose than Thatcher had. Moreover, his closest advisers, including Gould and Campbell, were concerned to bolster his authority in the party. The “Tough Tony” was largely responsible for the party’s current image problems; he should be seen to be spearheading the solutions. Promise’s contribution was not that it introduced Labour campaigners to brand ideas; rather, it provided solutions, including language and tone, that resonated with existing thinking. New Labour itself, as Promise stated, had been widely accepted as a triumph of branding, indeed marveled at by the business world (Scammell 1999, 737), but campaigners recognized it was vulnerable and in need of constant adaptation. The general thrust of Promise’s recommendations, to demonstrate that the party was still in touch and listening, had informed Labour’s 2003 mass consultation exercise, *The Big Conversation*, while Blair in the same year argued for a “rebranding” of the “progressive political project” (Blair 2003).

The general value of branding to campaigners is both conceptual and practical. It provides a conceptual framework to distinguish and fathom links between the functional perceptions of parties and leaders (the “boundary conditions”), such as economic management, policy commitments and the competence to deliver, and the emotional attractions (“boundary differentiators”), such as “one of us,” authenticity, approachability, and attractiveness to the ear and eye. It brings together the emotional and intellectual, rational and irrational (“sometimes *disturbingly* irrational” [Burkitt 2002, 9]), the big and tiny details that feed into overall brand images. Branding is underpinned by the insight that these images are highly vulnerable, constantly changing, and rarely under complete control. The near-permanence of change has become a Gould mantra and the foundation of one of his key criticisms of political science analysis: that it is so “static”; it can explain admirably a moment in time but cannot capture the “messy unpredictable and often random nature of politics as it happens” (Gould 2002). Thus, “reassurance” was a key task of the brand in 1997, as Labour’s research demonstrated that target voters were unconvinced that New Labour really was *new* (and would not go back to the old ways of special interests, tax raising and a too close

relationship with trade unions). However, by 2001, reassurance had turned into perceptions of caution and excessive concern with opinion polls, and so Labour had to refresh the brand, be prepared to show bold leadership, be “less nervous of unpopularity,” be far less concerned with the press “and, dare I say it, opinion polls” (Gould 2002). By 2005, *new* New Labour needed to change tack again and reestablish “Tough Tony” as the listening, caring, in-touch leader that target voters thought he was when they first elected him.

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Arguably, branding is now the permanent campaign. The original model of the permanent campaign, as first used by President Carter’s strategist Pat Caddell (Blumenthal, 1982), was characterized *inter alia* by continuous polling, intense news management, and constant attention to media images. This model, says Gould (2002), “has had its day.” It may once have been an understandable reaction to a “relentlessly intrusive media” and, he admitted, it had characterized the early years of the first New Labour government. However, spin and news management were not only insufficient to maintain political leadership; they ultimately “contaminated” the Labour brand and undermined public trust. In a similar vein, Needham (2005) argued that the brand concept, rather than the permanent campaign, is the more useful to understand communication in the governments of Blair and Bill Clinton. The permanent campaign focuses on the instruments of media politics; the brand concept uncovers the underlying strategic concerns of efforts to maintain voter loyalty through communication designed to provide reassurance, uniqueness (clear differentiation from rivals), consistency of values, and emotional connection with voters’ values and visions of the good life.

The practical attraction of branding for campaigners is its familiarity. Branding emerged from marketing concepts and methods that have been employed in politics on both sides of the Atlantic since the 1970s. Its emphasis on image is a more developed version of service marketing’s key concern for reputation, based on record and credible promises, which for politicians is pretty much the only thing of substance that they can offer to voters before election. Its qualitative research techniques, designed to tap into emotional connection, are essentially an extension of the type of methods long used in political advertising research. However, the crucial added value of branding is that it provides a conceptual structure to link advertising insight into all aspects of the brand, positioning, development, and promotion; and unlike advertising, it is not wedded to a particular form of

communication. Paradoxically given the shared methods, the marketing turn to branding has coincided with shaken faith in advertising itself as capable of encompassing all the details, big and small, that create brand image. And Philip Gould is one of those former advertisers who now claim we are living in a postadvertising world.

## Political Branding: A Consumer Model of Political Communication

It is not possible here to explore all the consequences of consumer politics, still less all the normative questions that naturally arise. However, here are a few preliminary conclusions:

*Consumer model of political communication.* The mass-media dominated, agenda-setting, advertising-driven model of political campaigning, while far from dead, is in decline. Media-centered explanations are decreasingly able to encompass the strategic logic and promotional changes of either election campaigns or government communication. Branding is both a cause and effect of the shift toward a thoroughly consumerized paradigm of political communication. This is evident not just in campaigns and the rebranding of Blair, but also in U.K. government communications over the past fifteen years. Brand research and promotion is now commonplace for government departments (Needham 2003, 17), while the Government Information and Communication Service has for some time been considering ways to develop a corporate brand image for government itself.<sup>1</sup> It is a progression of the process of the remodeling of the government-citizen relationship along consumer lines that has been a marked feature of “modernization” on both sides of the Atlantic since the early 1990s (Cohen 2003; Hilton 2001; Needham 2003; Scammell 2003).

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There is a perfect circle in the brand approach: campaigners research citizens as though they were consumers, and their research tells them that citizens' attitudes toward politics are profoundly shaped by their experience as consumers.

This is made clear in Gould's 2003 brand environment analysis titled "The Empty Stadium: The World Turned Upside Down," in which he argued for a new campaign paradigm. The analysis posited a fundamental mismatch between people's experience as confident consumers and insecure citizens. Affluence and choice had empowered people as consumers, but globalization, threats of terrorism, and environmental erosion had led to insecure citizens. Individuals' greater control as consumers exacerbated their sense of loss of control as citizens. Conventional politics was blamed for the rising climate of insecurity and social fracture, while being considered irrelevant to a "new consumer world of empowerment, self-actualization," and personal values. Consumer power had led to a paradigm shift within marketing, from "interruption marketing" (unasked for, unwelcome) to "permission marketing" (anticipated, relevant, personal). All interruption marketing was resisted, said Gould, but political communication was the most resisted of all. Political campaigns must follow marketing and develop more personal, interactive messages: "if we play the game as we have always done," the stadium will continue to empty.

*Brand connection.* A driving concern of branded politics is connection. Gould says of his work that it is all about connection; he represents the "voice of the electorate" in Labour strategy meetings. Recent moves toward a more personal and interactive communication (including, e.g., Howard Dean's fabled open-source campaign) suggest a positive role for consumer politics. However, it is also true that the voice Gould represents is not the electorate but a small part of it, primarily the soft supporters and undecideds that constitute target voters. Party members, hard-core supporters, and those who say they are unlikely to vote are rarely the subject of focus groups (Burkitt 2002). Political brand equity, in other words, is largely defined by the undecideds. It means almost inevitably that political brand equity has shallow roots and is easily buffeted. This is a striking difference from commercial branding where much of the effort is directed at retaining the loyalty of existing customers.

*Hard and soft politics.* Branding theoretically should include both the hard politics (policies, issues, record of performance) and the soft (emotional connection, values, likeability). It does not necessarily lead to a wholesale flight from hard, "proper" politics, the perennial complaint against political marketing. However, the example of the reconnection strategy shows how branding may muddy these waters. It dealt with the hardest of hard issues, the decision to go to war, and resulted in a strategy that compelled Blair to account for his actions before fierce public scrutiny. Yet at the core of the strategy was the softest of politics: that merely by appearance, communication style, and tone, he could draw much of the sting of public anger. A generous reading of the reconnection strategy might be that it displayed a refreshing attention to the emotional intelligence of voters. A more damning verdict is that branding is yet another step on the road to *Politics Lost*. Journalist Joe Klein's decades-spanning acquaintance with U.S. elections and political consultants led him unequivocally to that conclusion. For

Klein, no one was more cynically nonpolitical than George W. Bush's strategist Karl Rove, for whom there were only three basic questions that matter to voters: Is the candidate a strong leader? Can I trust him? Does he care about people like me? The hard politics of specific issues were only useful as sticks to beat opponents or as illustrations of candidate brand values (Klein 2006, 144-45).

However, branding is not easily categorized as a force for either good or ill. It does not, any more than any other marketing technique in politics, supply single-route solutions. Its research results, like any other, must be interpreted and negotiated by the relevant political actors. Its application, as for any commercial brand, will be shaped by consideration of the environment, the structural, social, and cultural factors that affect people's choices. Much like the citizen-consumer debate itself, it is double edged, offering new potential and creating new anxieties.

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### Note

1. James Humphreys, formerly head of the Strategic Communication Unit, initiated the "government brand" communication effort.

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