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The Utilisation of Language in Political Marketing Theory and Practice

Abstract

Purpose: Whilst political marketing has become established as a subject area, important issues remain under-researched. One such area is language utilisation in political marketing. The purpose of this paper is therefore to further the literature with respect to this issue.

Method: The paper discusses at a conceptual level: (i) the use of political marketing language inside political parties; (ii) the relationship between the use of political marketing language and the media; (iii) academics' use of political marketing language, and; (iv) the impact of the language of marketing experts/ advisors on political parties.

Results/Conclusions: The utilisation of political marketing language has many complexities. The language of political party insiders has value providing the language of marketing can be disentangled from political campaigning. The media's use of political marketing language has an advantage of alerting researchers to potential research avenues, but sometimes has limitations in its appropriateness and proportionality. Moreover, advisors to political parties on political marketing may fail to adequately adapt 'general' marketing models to the relevant context. There is a high degree of contestability in both marketing and political theory language; thus creating higher level meta-contestability in political marketing language.

Keywords: politics, marketing, language.

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Introduction

The subject of political marketing is now firmly established as a scholarly research theme and practice. This has created an ever rich and growing academic literature at conceptual and empirical levels (e.g Bowler and Farrell, 1992; Lees-Marshment, 2001; 2004; Maarek, 1995; Newman, 1994; 1999a; 1999b; Newman and Sheth, 1985; 1987; O'Shaughnessy, 1990; O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg, 2002). A critical area of political marketing which is significantly under-developed and under-researched is the notion of language¹. This is an important potential research area as [marketing] language can have multiple meanings (Hutchinson, 1952; Percy, 1987), and thus can be a considerable source of ambiguity. Moreover, as Fairclough (2001) demonstrates through his critical commentary of the language of New Labour, language is especially important when studying contemporary politics. For the purposes of this paper, language is conceptualised as the usage of any form of written or spoken language related to the political marketing subject.

The paper comprises five sections. The first section considers the use of political marketing language inside political parties. The second section discusses the relationship between the use of political marketing language and the media. The third section discusses academics' use of political marketing language. The fourth section discusses the impact of the language of marketing experts/ advisors on political parties. The final section offers conclusions.

The arguments advanced in this paper are primarily in relation to the U.K political marketing context, however are likely to have relevance (whilst taking account of context specific limitations) in other international political arenas.

1. Political Marketing Language Inside Political Parties

It should be recognised that the utilisation of language of political marketing is a relatively new idea inside U.K political parties. As such, it can be argued that in general terms, the language of political marketing has perhaps not fully permeated the ethos and culture of contemporary political organisation (Moloney, 2007). Nevertheless significant strides have been made in the adoption of political marketing language inside political parties. This can be seen from 15 years ago, when the notion of the use of political marketing language tended to be dismissed particularly in the Labour Party (Needham, 2001). In current times, there is arguably more acceptance by political parties to communicate in political marketing terminology. A good example of this is how the Conservative Party under the leadership of David Cameron has been using the language of branding (e.g Charter, 2005; Kirkup and Gray, 2006). In this case there seems to be a greater willingness to use such political marketing language internally within the party. It can be asserted that the extent to which political marketing language is utilised inside political parties however depends upon the ideological base of the political party membership. For example, a right of centre party such as the Conservative Party is more willing to utilise and accept political marketing language because it is associated with neo-liberal economic ideas that have formed the centre-piece of Conservative Party policy throughout the Thatcher era of the 1980s, and arguably persists to the present day. In contrast, a

¹ The only well disseminated paper with a substantive contribution on political marketing language is that of Moloney (2007).

political party such as the Labour Party, whilst appears to have embraced the ‘spirit of the market’ during its time in government from 1997 (in the form of ‘New Labour’) has more difficulties in the utilisation of political marketing terminology inside the party. This is because the membership base is traditionally left of centre (Needham, 2001; White and de Chernatony, 2001; Wring, 2006), and more at home with social democratic principles (Lees-Marshment and Lilleker, 2001; Seyd and Whiteley, 2002). The Liberal Democrat Party arguably also has some difficulties in the adoption of political marketing language. This is because of the differing schools of ideological thought within the party between economic liberals who are likely to be more comfortable with the idea of marketing, and the social democratic ‘leaning’ members who are more suspicious of marketing because of ideological concerns that it undermines their quest for social justice and fairness².

The adoption and utilisation of political marketing language inside political parties is however not consistent throughout the different hierarchical scales of a political party (Reeves, 2007). This may be explained by a number of factors. First, unless individuals within a party have some degree of professional and /or academic background in marketing and /or business, then they naturally do not have the skills and knowledge of marketing theories and practices, which allows them the frameworks to express political ideas through a marketing lens. It can however be counter-argued that since marketing is so central to our everyday human existence (Reeves, de Chernatony and Carrigan, 2006), that all individuals to some extent become conditioned in the language of marketing. Despite this, it is however unlikely that those members without formal training in [political] marketing will consistently and typically express political ideas in marketing terms. Second, there may be a view within a political party that the language of political marketing is best avoided because of fear that internal and external audiences may perceive political marketing ideas as a form of spin or other type of negativity (Needham, 2001; White and de Chernatony, 2001). In keeping with Panebianco’s (1988) ‘electoral professional model’, the language of political marketing therefore becomes such that it is a terms of reference which is communicated within the central professional apparatus of the party organisation, and is not something which is necessarily communicated and/or encouraged within the wider party base (Moloney, 2007). This is not to say that marketing theories and approaches are not deployed within the wider apparatus of a political party, but rather it may be that it is couched in linguistic terms that are more salient, understood and accepted by the majority of the party membership. Therefore it may be asserted that the language of political marketing to a certain extent transposes itself into the more accepted language terrain of political campaigning (Baines and Egan, 2001; Reeves, 2007). This presents challenges to the external analyst who has to disentangle notions of campaigning from political marketing, within the language utilisation of internal political party actors. This can create significant challenges in building theories of political marketing.

2. Political Marketing Language and the Media

Traditionally the media have viewed political parties’ use of marketing language in a negative manner; suggesting it to be a tool of spin and media management. However, more recently it can be argued that there has been an increasing change of emphasis

² See Whiteley, Seyd and Billingshurst (2006) for a detailed discussion of the ideological bases of the Liberal Democrat Party.

from viewing political marketing from a purely negative context (although this view still persists), to one which is to some extent more positive. Moreover, it is with growing regularity that political correspondents utilise in their reporting, words associated with political marketing; such as 'brand' and 'image'. This however presents an inherent challenge in that it can be asserted, that the media do not typically fully understand what such terminology means. This means that recipients of such political marketing language hear and see language usage which is not precisely and specifically grounded in political marketing theory and practice. This can create problems for political parties in that their messages are not communicated in a manner which they were intended. Moreover, scholars face problems in assessing whether the language that correspondents use is completely valid. This can lead to misinterpretation of the extent and practice of political marketing utilisation by political parties. After all, it is journalists who have access, to and report on politics on a 24-7 basis. Researchers inevitably do not have such access, and therefore rely on the media to give indications of where interesting avenues of political marketing are emerging within political parties. Journalistic language in relation to political marketing is therefore a useful catalyst (albeit it one with limitations) into the commissioning of research projects by political marketing scholars.

3. The Use of Political Marketing Language by Academics

The language of political science contributes to political marketing theory and practice. This is beneficial in that political science has a rich, valuable and vast, literature that is potentially useful for political marketing purposes. The key problem however, is that there is limited literature from political science, which gives detailed consideration of marketing issues, and where it does exist, the language of marketing is perhaps treated in a critical sense (e.g Franklin, 1994; Kirchheimer, 1966; Scammel, 1995). Moreover, where political marketing scholars utilise political science theory, they have to translate and /or apply the language of politics into a marketing context. Thus political marketers lie open to the accusation that they may be inappropriately applying political science language to a purpose which it was not intended. In other words, some may assert that the language of marketing may 'contaminate' the value and ethos of political theory. This researcher does not take this negative view, and would argue that the language of marketing and political science are compatible providing there is careful consideration and empirical support (on a case by case basis) for the linguistic merger of language between the two subjects. There should not be wholesale transposition of commercial marketing theory onto the political domain without necessary contextual analysis and where necessary, adjustment (O'Cass, 1996). The situation is however further complicated in that much of the language in political science is itself deeply contestable (Finlayson, 2004; Jones, 2001).

There is also a challenge in the utilisation of general³ academic marketing language in political marketing research and practice. This is because the terminology utilised by marketing academics is sometimes contestable in terms of its meaning (Hutchinson, 1952; Luck, 1974 cited in Hunt, 1976; Schutte, 1969; William, 2000) based upon the school of thought that the individual academic identifies him/herself with. For example, the term 'brand' is a highly contestable word that has multiple connotations

³ In this paper, the term 'general' is used to describe marketing research, theory and practice that is produced from a broad and 'generic' (Kotler, 1972) macro framework, and as such may have applicability to political marketing contexts.

and meanings which are contingent upon an author's definitional basis and rationale (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998; Schutte, 1969). There are many instances of such language ambiguity across the entire spectrum of marketing theory. This can create problems when communicating general marketing ideas in the vein of political marketing, since if the marketing language used is contestable and debated, then by definition, the political marketing concept and the language used to express it, reaches an even higher level of contestability. It can therefore be argued that political marketers need to be cautious and conservative in their use of general marketing language at all time specifying the definitional scope and magnitude of the language which they are utilising in their argument. The application of general marketing language to political marketing should also be preferably 'backed up' by empirical evidence to support such assertions. This is because there are substantive differences between the commercial marketing and political marketing paradigms (Egan, 1999; Lock and Harris, 1996; O'Cass, 1996; O'Shaughnessy, 1990).

4. The Language of Marketing Experts and its Impact on Political Parties

Whilst U.K political parties have not reached nothing like the same level of usage of political marketing consultants as in the U.S, for example (Johnson, 2001), the major political parties do increasingly make some use of 'commercial marketing experts' advice. In addition, political parties (because of their large membership base) have people internally within the party, who have strategic marketing experience, and are therefore likely and willing to advise the party on its marketing strategy. It can be articulated that such expertise is of value in a resource constrained political party environment (Baines and Egan, 2001; Butler and Collins. 1994; Harris and Lock, 2005; Kavanagh, 1995). However, a particular issue which emerges is that these individuals utilise language and terminology typically from the commercial arena. A danger of this is that such individuals may seek, in part, to transpose what they know from their commercial practice to the political arena, without full consideration of its relevance, effectiveness and value. A further limitation of political parties utilising commercially/ generally trained marketers is that very often (in marketing practice) the language which is used is not precisely and rigorously defined, and is often to some degree different from one organisational context to another. This can create confusion in the use of political marketing language for both the party and external analysts.

5. Conclusions

This paper has discussed how the utilisation of the language of political marketing is laden with complexities and difficulties. Despite this, there has been very limited previous academic consideration of language issues in the context of political marketing⁴. It can be asserted that the language of political party insiders is of value in building theory and understanding, since it is those individuals who practice it. However, in interpreting their language, academics must disentangle notions of campaigning from political marketing, whilst taking account of a multitude of factors, such as; organisational context, political-historical issues, power dynamics, human

⁴ See footnote 1.

and financial resourcing, ideological constraints, culture, structures and processes⁵. If this not difficult enough, academics are to some extent reliant on the media to alert them to valuable potential research avenues, based on the language they use in their coverage. The question that should always be considered here; is whether the political marketing language they use is appropriate, accurate and proportionate? There is a danger that the media use political marketing language in the context of short-term political tactics, whereas resource constrained academics should be concerned with longer term strategic public policy implications of political marketing practices. There is also a risk that language used by general marketing experts who comment or advise on political marketing issues, has limited longevity in political parties, and may lack some degree of value as it is typically heavily influenced by commercial marketing practices, without the necessary degree of context specific adaptation. The most difficult problem in the utilisation of political marketing language rests upon the contestability of language in the principal subjects from which it is derived; namely marketing and political theory. Within political theory there seems to be a continual debate, discourse and reformulation of central concepts (with resultant impacts on language) that may create difficulties for political marketing theory building. Likewise in marketing theory, the definitions of concepts, and language used to express them, to some extent, seems to be contestable in scope. This connection of marketing and politics language therefore creates a magnified sense of dual or meta-contestability. The implications for this in terms of future research is the need for researchers to utilise amalgamated language of politics and marketing in a careful manner 'backed up', where possible, by empirical support for the language assertions which are made.

As a result of the many difficulties faced by researchers in the adoption and utilisation of political marketing language, there is arguably a need for further empirical research in this area. This should ideally include research into the use of political marketing language from the perception of different stakeholders; preferably through designated studies in this area. If this is not possible, then academics should give very careful consideration of language issues when researching, thinking and writing from a political marketing perspective. In short, the health and rigour of the political marketing approach depends on it.

⁵ Hodge and Kress (1993) give a useful discussion of ideological factors that affect language utilisation from general sociological terms of reference.

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