

WHEN YOU REALLY MUST WIN: LESSONS FROM THE HUSTINGS

When you really have to win

So many tenders are approached simply as part of the sales process – a “numbers game”; “We won three tenders” (out of 30).

But there are some tenders you absolutely must win: in many ways they are very similar to an election or other political race:

You’re In or Out, for three to six years in the case of most tenders - or forever;

Coming a close second is total failure.

And for these tenders, there are a number of parallels and lessons that can be drawn from political races, successful and unsuccessful:

Incumbency, size, brand recognition don’t always win

Previous performance and “steady as you go” don’t always cut it – consider the recent Australian Federal elections. And in considering the power of size and brand recognition, forget what you know now, and think back to your knowledge, your name recognition, of John Howard and Kevin Rudd - and more significantly, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama - at the start of their campaigns.

Obama was a first term Senator, largely unknown outside his State, starting off with no significant campaign funding. Hillary Clinton had what appeared to be insurmountable advantages – not least, high brand recognition; experience and a sort of incumbency; and an apparent unrivalled ability to raise money. And at the start of the US Democrat Primaries race, almost all bets were on Hillary Clinton – certainly the Clinton campaigners seemed to think they were managing an anointing rather than a hard-fought campaign.

But the Clinton camp seems to have made a string of errors:

- Assumed it was going to be a fairly short campaign, all over by Super Tuesday in early February – in fact it dragged on until early June
- Failed to read the rules of the game. (More on this later)
- Waged a “big-battleground” strategy, based on this misunderstanding
- Relied on old school, “old money” funding – whereas Obama used the internet to great effect
- Misread the mood, going for an incumbent, negative “old politics” game, when the mood was for change.

Incumbent and insurgent strategies

Incumbent:

If you are the incumbent, consider not acting like the leader, but present as an experienced but energetic insurgent - and if you are going to present as the leader, ensure that you *are*. Hillary Clinton’s slogan was “**Ready From Day One**”; however, this turned out not to be the case, for reasons we will come to in “Understand The Rules” later.

**“You can’t fatten a pig on election day”.
Attributed to John Howard in 2005**

Start thinking like an insurgent: identify areas for improvement, change, fresh ideas – and act on these in time, because one big difference from a political campaign is that if your competitor offers to do the things you should have been doing, you learn about it not during the campaign but when the client tells you why you lost the contract.

Also (in a strategy similar to political push polling):

- Establish customer expectations at the start of or early in the current contract
 - Continuously collect customer feedback; and
 - Regularly report on your performance in areas where you are meeting or exceeding expectations
- if you're meeting or exceeding requirements and expectations, ensure your client knows and acknowledges it.

Insurgent (Challenger/underdog, but we will use insurgent, because there are lessons for the incumbent in insurgent approaches):

Insurgents are often more nimble, innovative, bring a fresh, outsider's perspective and exploit or promote change. However, remember that:

- Incumbent has the inside track
- Incumbent is or was good (won the current contract) and has proven experience
- Change represents risk for customer

In the absence of a compelling reason to change, purchasers will tend to go with the status quo. So:

- Identify incumbent weaknesses
- Identify scope for improvement, change, fresh ideas
- Identify, create what it will take to shift the client
- Minimise risk – don't frighten the horses. (Consider Labour's approach in the 2007 Elections, which many saw as "Me Too: we'll do everything they do, but this as well.....")
- Consider the potential for the insurgent to shape the debate – i.e. the tender; but this needs to be done early in the process, well before the release of the RFT.

Understand the rules

The 2008 US Democrat Presidential Primaries are governed by a set of rules which apportion delegates' wins proportionally rather than winner take all in each State. The Obama camp knew this and worked bottom up, starting to Hoover up votes, district by district. But Hillary Clinton's strategic advisers apparently failed to do something as basic as read the rules until after the campaign was under way, betting on big-state wins, leaving the smaller States free for Obama campaigners and seriously hampering the campaign's early stages – and also not doing a great deal to reinforce their platform of "Ready From Day One".

Lesson: Read, thoroughly understand **and follow** all the RFT requirements and instructions – **before** starting on the planning and development of the tender strategy and response.

It's The Customer, Stupid: focus on and respect the constituents

Whereas Hillary Clinton's platform, of "Ready From Day One", could be seen as "It's all about me", Barack Obama sought to address his constituents and their needs – and the underlying mood for change - with slogans of "Change We Can Believe In" and "Yes We Can".

Lesson:

- It's not all about you, and if you are going to position yourself as leader, make sure you do not shoot yourself in the foot
- Focus on and respect the customer – including their tender response requirements.

Target the issues and constituents you need to win

Just as political campaigns target particular constituencies, identify the key issues and hot buttons, and *focus on them – the issues and the key players, particularly those who are important but hard to shift* - throughout the planning and eventual tender.

Write for the detail readers, but also write and provide visuals for the “scanners” and “visuals” who will often be key in the decision process.

Develop a theme, themes – and stay on message

It is vital to develop a theme, and to summarise the pitch in the Executive Summary and to follow the theme throughout the tender response. There can and should be some repetition, particularly of key strengths and benefits.

Staying on message includes the need to minimise waffle and leave out brochureware and other non-core material. As well, consider the power of “sound bites” – in tendering, this translates to the use of pull quotes or other summarisations of the various parts of theme throughout the tender response – and the possible need to get creative to overcome rigid tender formats or word limits, particularly in electronic response formats.

Show you are not a risk

Purchasers, like voters, do not like risk and are often loath to choose an unproven potential supplier over an incumbent. This risk aversion may be a subconscious, emotional rather than stated, rational factor, but it is always there. Clients will want to be assured that you fully understand them and the needs of the contract, and that you are not going to present problems through e.g:

- Lack of capacity or experience
- Financial instability
- Quality, reliability or other performance issues
- Safety, environmental issues

So, in addition to projecting the positive reasons for choosing you, it is essential to identify and defuse all potential areas of perceived risk for the client, throughout the tender.

This may require the inclusion of or reference in the tender to documented quality management, OH&S and environmental management systems and procedures. The few weeks between tender release and closing date is not the time to be developing these systems (and in any case, it may be necessary or advisable for your company to have documented OH&S and environmental management procedures on legal and operational grounds, quite apart from tendering requirements). Therefore, it is well worth while advocating the development of such systems, among the people in your company who need to perform or authorise the required work, now. Get them in the campaign.