

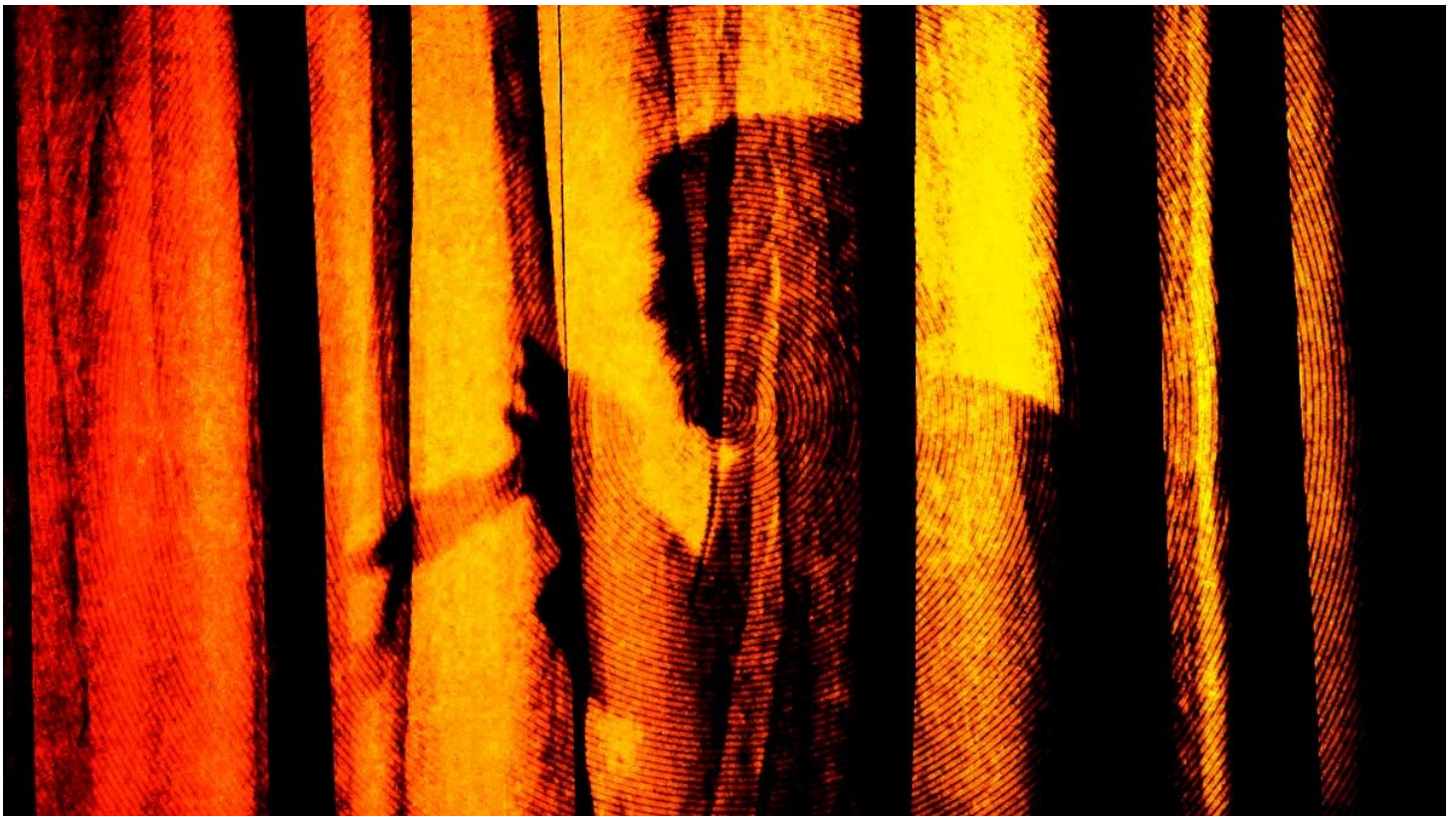
How the
STRATEGY
Attacks on

Trump
Reinforce His
Strategy

How the Attacks on Trump Reinforce His Strategy

by Roger L. Martin

JANUARY 12, 2017



One of the tricky things about strategy is that good strategies end up seeming inevitable, and that makes them difficult to analyze. After the fact, we have trouble distinguishing cause from effect, or strategic choices from good luck – and as a result, we draw suspect lessons from the exercise. This is especially true when the success in question was a surprising one.

For a sterling example, look no further than Donald Trump. Ex-post-facto rationalizing has portrayed his rise as being largely the result of Hillary Clinton's strategic fumbles (not enough campaigning in the Rust Belt) and bad luck (James Comey). In this telling, Trump won the election not through his own actions but because he happened to be up against a particularly incompetent opponent. Another line of thinking argues that Trump's win was a function of external factors: the media's obsession with celebrity, the large field of GOP primary candidates, the interference of Russian hackers, an electorate that wanted change above all else. The factors here are very different, but the upshot is the same: Trump somehow won the election despite himself, not because of anything he actually did.

The problem with both of these views is that they portray the Trump triumph as inevitable, and it just wasn't. It was one of the longest long shots in modern U.S. presidential history. So it's worth asking what Trump did – strategically – that made it possible.

When he entered the race, Trump had zero political experience and was reviled by the Republican establishment. The normal thing to do was to follow the path of a typical "outsider" candidate, accepting the boundaries of the category and attempting to be sufficiently distinctive within that category to overcome the outsider disadvantages. For example, see Bernie Sanders: "I am a Democrat, but I bring a much more compelling liberal view than my establishment opponent." Or Ben Carson: "I am a Republican candidate, but as a successful surgeon, I bring a fresh perspective." In fact, this was such expected behavior from Trump that during the primary the media largely covered him as a classic outsider candidate, even though he was doing something radically different.

What he was doing was creating with precise and relentless consistency an entirely new category in the minds of voters: the politically incorrect candidate. He has since monopolized that new category.

To establish the legitimacy of the category, he made a consistent and devilishly tautological argument: *In the category of traditional presidential candidates, the politicians are all politically correct. When they get in power, they fail you. Hence you don't want a*

leader in that category – you want one in a new category called politically incorrect presidential candidates. I have been a huge success in business by being politically incorrect. Therefore: political correctness = failure, and political incorrectness = success.

It doesn't matter whether he consciously set out to pursue that strategy or whether it was the result of his personality and instincts. The outcome is the same in either case.

Trump used an approach to attract primary and general election voters that businesses use to attract customers. Customers create categorical boundaries in their minds - e.g., Chinese restaurants, sporty cars, blue jeans - and within those boundaries they are disproportionately inclined to choose the product that feels the most natural, familiar, and comfortable to them. Because the mind craves simplicity and consistency, the product that feels most comfortable tends to be the one with which people have a long and dependable experience. For example, someone's favorite Chinese restaurant is their favorite because they have gone there the most often and know the people and the menu and the layout best. Former Procter & Gamble CEO A.G. Lafley and I have termed this "cumulative advantage," and it is an underappreciated way of attaining sustained leadership in a market.

It's also why every time Trump acts politically incorrectly – which he often points out, in case anyone missed the fact that he was acting politically incorrectly – he demonstrates that he is in a different category from other politicians. And because he did it continually during the campaign, he helped voters find him increasingly comfortable and familiar. This is why he never apologizes for his political incorrectness: It would undermine his consistency and be a disaster for him.

When he was excoriated for doing extremely politically incorrect things, like criticizing John McCain for being a POW, lambasting a Gold Star family, mocking a reporter with a disability, maligning Megyn Kelly, repeatedly refusing to release his tax returns, or, more recently, causing international incidents with China and rebuffing intelligence briefings on Russian hacking, the politically correct thing to do would have been to apologize and attempt to retreat diplomatically from his faux pas. Nope. Instead of showing remorse, he has gone on the attack.

Apologizing would have tossed him back into the “traditional” category, where he would have been an ineffective player, like Carson or Sanders. Instead, political incorrectness piled on top of political incorrectness reinforces the fact that he is in a different category and makes him an ever more familiar member of that category.

During the entire campaign, detractors asked how long Trump could “defy gravity.” How long could he keep doing and saying these outrageous things and get away with it? Just asking the question reinforced in voters’ minds that Trump was in a different category and gave him the opportunity to be even more politically incorrect by doubling down. When Democrats, the media, and even mainstream Republicans criticized Trump for his political incorrectness, it simply reinforced his domination of his separate category – a category he was able to make big enough to win the presidency.

His detractors keep on asking how long Trump can keep on defying gravity. They are asking the wrong question. They should be asking how their form of criticism is strengthening Trump.

This all illustrates four important points about strategy. First, understand and empathize with your customers. When they are doing something that you think is crazy, don’t blame them. They aren’t a “basket of deplorables.” They are your customers. Don’t explain why they are making a terrible choice when they choose your competitor’s product. Understand why they are buying it and give them a compelling reason to buy yours instead.

Second, don’t underestimate your competitor; it is dangerous. A smart competitor will gleefully allow the underestimation to continue, and may encourage it. Trump understood that it was essential to keep his competitor from waking up to his strategy, so he worked to reinforce her blindness by unfailingly acting infuriatingly politically incorrect.

Third, when things don’t go your way, don’t blame your downfall on events outside your control. Every strategist faces these issues; the best strategists learn not to scapegoat them. But what has the entire Democratic-leaning universe done in this case? They have

blamed Russian interference. Russian interference didn't win Trump the election; a bland Democratic strategy interacted with a clever Trump strategy to put Trump in a position where, under just the right circumstances, he could squeak out a narrow victory.

This leads to the final lesson: Strategy really matters. Clinton ran an exceedingly competent campaign, with lots of experienced managers, an abundance of planning, high levels of investment, and careful attention to best practices. However, the strategy was underwhelming. She sold customers what she desired them to want: a product that was compelling to her and her management team. She underestimated her competitor until the middle of election night. And there is no sign that she or her team even now understands what really happened.

Of course, a critic could say I'm falling into a different logical trap, one that is particularly rife in the world of business strategy analysis: looking at a winner and reverse engineering his causes of success with the benefit of hindsight.

So, for the record, let me say that I laid out this exact argument in the initial draft of this article back in early March 2016, while the GOP primaries were under way, and submitted it to a major newspaper (which rejected it as being pro-business). Undeterred, I was sufficiently confident in my analysis to put my money where my mouth was. On June 25 I made a bet with a professorial colleague at a leading U.S. business school for \$10,000 at even odds that Trump would win the presidency. Had I cared about the economics of the bet, I would have gone to Vegas, where I would have received 7-2 odds that particular week, but the money wasn't the point. The point was that Hillary Clinton supporters weren't seeing the threat from the underdog. (After Clinton's concession, I emailed my friend to tell him I didn't want the money. Gallantly, he insisted on taking his medicine, so we agreed that he would donate \$10,000 to his favorite charity.)

My view on this matter as a strategist, not a political partisan or pundit, is that Trump's election strategy was brilliant. He understood that there was only one way to win the nomination against entrenched competitors in a crowded field: He had to create a new category and dominate it, building cumulative advantage. He understood that there was only one way to win the presidency: He had to work for the entire campaign on being as

consistent as possible to become the most familiar and comfortable choice he could possibly become. And after all of that, he had to hope for an entirely improbable win, because that was the best he was ever going to get. But an improbable win is still a win.

He is still using the same strategy today, and it continues to work. If his opponents want to outmaneuver him, they will have to try a different strategy. Theirs is not working.

Roger L. Martin is a professor at and the former dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. He is a coauthor of *Playing to Win* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).

This article is about STRATEGY

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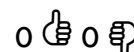
23 COMMENTS

Urquhart Wood 3 hours ago

While I agree with much of Mr. Martin's analysis, it seems to me that the #1 factor explaining DJT's win was his position on the issues. His political incorrectness worked to his advantage as well because he was taking the most courageous, outrageous, contrarian positions on issues that much of D.C. (and certainly the Dems) didn't even consider, but many middle American's felt strongly about. He spoke to the issues of the working men and women who felt dismissed by Hilary and the Dems. Many people who voted for DJT abhorred his vulgarity and hyperbole, but voted for him anyway because at least he would

fight for the things that were important to them, such as getting a conservative on the Supreme Court, building our national defense, taking terrorism seriously, stimulate capitalism and the private sector to create jobs, etc. Style does not "trump" content.

REPLY



Brobchae Brown 6 hours ago

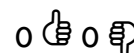
I think this article has some merit identifying the approach DJT used to win the Republican primary, but the General Election was a dealing with a vastly different demographic. I also predicted the Trump victory in early spring 2016 but told people the only Democrat that could lose to Trump was Hillary Clinton, and if she was the Democratic nominee his victory would be almost inevitable.

I think many are still unwilling to lay blame where it is due. Media stories that showed voters wrestling with themselves over the decision because they could not bring themselves to vote for Clinton serve as evidence of her unsuitability.

With all of Hillary Clinton's difficulties she won the popular vote by a healthy margin. Had the Democratic Party nominated a candidate that was less contentious, more energetic, charismatic and behaved in a manner that did not wreak of entitlement the majority in popular vote would have been far greater and a electoral majority would have been won.

I am shocked Professor Martin would look at DJT's strategy in isolation of market dynamics (general election) and claim it is an example of "disruption" at work.

REPLY | 1 reply

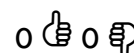


Joan Braun 4 hours ago

I think my basic issue with this article is that 2.9M more people voted for Clinton than Trump in the presidential election. That would suggest that his brand is not as popular as the alternative brand. His win is based more on our very peculiar winner-take all electoral college than on a juggernaut of persuasion and inadvertent reinforcement by opponents.

Then, I find myself thinking about the most recent of the independent Quinnipiac polls (1/10/17) which indicates, among other things, that "American voters give President-elect Trump a negative 37 - 51 percent favorability rating, compared to a divided 44 - 46 percent favorability rating November 22." If pushing back against the statements and actions of the president elect are reinforcement for his brand, why is his favorability rating falling?

REPLY



Dianne Campbell 6 hours ago

OK. But if you **really** want to be helpful, outline the strategy to derail his. You are a little shy on that point. Is there one??

REPLY

1 👍 0 🗨

Joseph Panzica 11 hours ago

Not inspiring, but true enough from a "Branding" perspective.

trimp has indeed "created" a new brand - inspired by beerhall Brownshirt yahooism and reality TV. It's laid uneasily on a fraudulent foundation carelessly set in shifting swampland by cornercutting conmen.

But the "Branding" perspective is just as toxic to democracy as an overdose of some powerful drug.

None of us are "customers" of our political system although overpaid hacks in slick suits work irresponsibly to impose that vapid mindset upon us. Still some are sporting enough to allow peeks behind the curtain.

Building a solid culture of serious citizenship is a project that will take generations - if we ever start.

REPLY

1 👍 0 🗨

Nick Gall 11 hours ago

I think everyone would agree that Trump carved out a new category (or "brand") of politician (at least for the US "market"): the politically incorrect politician. What was shocking, and disappointing, was how appealing such a new brand would be to SO many Americans (still a minority, but a big enough one to win the electoral college).

However, I see no analysis in the article that would support a prediction that ENOUGH Americans would prefer this new brand of politician. The polls analyzed by sites like the fivethirtyeight indicated that the majority of likely voters did NOT prefer the new brand. So my question is: What made Prof. Martin believe so strongly that a ENOUGH Americans preferred the new brand that he was willing to bet \$10K?!?

In fact, Prof. Martin's "cumulative advantage" strategy can be spun to argue that Hillary should have won, since she was the familiar, comfortable, brand—in most people's eyes, SHE had the cumulative advantage. Again, nothing in the article explains why so many Americans were ready to switch from a familiar brand (albeit one whose performance was an issue) for not just an unfamiliar brand, but a risky one with no track record at all.

REPLY

1 👍 0 🗨

Paul Müller 12 hours ago

It is an interesting theory, which ultimately only worked, because political incorrectness gets you in the news no matter what. So it has something to do with the old french saying: "Better people speak bad about me than not at all".

That is why I would disagree with the conclusion that Sanders had the wrong strategy, or was unsuccessful because of his strategy. Mainly because Sanders had a new category as well... Establishment politicians lie and change positions all the time, he was honest and consistent. Problem was, honest and consistent does not get you in the news... Thus the strategy does not work in that case (It certainly worked in social media so). And even when Sanders was covered later in the primaries, he was not covered with his "new category", but rather like a regular candidate. But the political incorrectness was the main focus of the reports on Trump, even if the media disagreed with him. Even the Clinton campaign pushed that narrative, which was really stupid...

Also I believe that Sanders could have been more aggressive against Clinton as well, which might have won him the primary... But he didn't want to harm the democratic party too much given the small chance he himself saw for a successful campaign... Trump on the other hand did not care about any of this and burned all the bridges he wanted. Ultimately Sanders harmed Clinton enough to make Trump happen. Also I would not blame him for it, since it was not he who forced the DNC to work against him...

REPLY

2  0 

NANCY HALPERN 13 hours ago

Are there subtleties missed here? Creating a new brand that works against the majority to distinguish yourself is one thing - crossing the line so that you not only promote but encourage mocking, misogyny and xenophobia is another. And this may be a great strategic explanation of a winning strategy - but what does it say about how you lead?

REPLY

2  0 

WOLFGANG WEBER 21 hours ago

Could there be a disruptive element in Trump's strategy? Acting at a lower level than the competition (Democrats), but still being good enough for a significant part of the market (electorate) means a disruptive approach. Remember "When they go low, we go high"? That is a typical reaction of a market player being disrupted...

REPLY

3  0 

Serafin Mitrotti a day ago

I think you have hit the nail on the head. Sounds like a Blue Ocean Strategy to me. Trump didn't enter the bloody red ocean of traditional politicians; he created his blue ocean. Blue Ocean Strategy principles say that when competitors realize there is a blue ocean elsewhere, they'll start jumping in and turn it red. So, I guess we'll have to wait and see.

REPLY

2  0 

Pete Kale a day ago

I think it's rather generous to consider Trump's victory an actual strategy, a conclusion that suggests careful analysis and deliberative intent. It seems clear enough from his public interactions that wasn't a factor.

REPLY | 2 replies

3  0 

CS Kyle 21 hours ago

"It doesn't matter whether he consciously set out to pursue that strategy or whether it was the result of his personality and instincts. The outcome is the same in either case."

REPLY

1  1 

Adrian Cristescu 11 hours ago

Let's not forget that his acts while president matter more than the outcome of the election. Had he been a strategist working to win the election, we could have expected a normal president once the elections were safely behind. But because his win appears to be the result of his personality and instincts he'll continue to act disruptively during his term. The last thing the world needs is an US president acting disruptively and unpredictably. A bit like being paid once every four years (instead of once a week or once a month) and then taking your pay to gamble it in Vegas in order to double it ... It could work out well in the end ... but not because of strategic genius ...
So I guess luck matters even more than strategy ...

REPLY

0  0 

Brobchae Brown 6 hours ago

Agreed it does not matter if you only care about the outcome. But, if you want to be able to repeat the outcome in a future situation, it is important to understand the strategy and its execution.

REPLY

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Dianne Campbell 6 hours ago

I so agree.

REPLY

0  0 

Debora Davidson a day ago

What are some alternative options for dealing with this guy and his crew? With individuals who act in this way, I withdraw social reinforcement (i.e. ignore) as much as possible. How might that work in this case? What are other ideas?

REPLY

2 👍 0 🗨

Dianne Campbell 6 hours ago

That was my question as well.

REPLY

1 👍 0 🗨

Daniel Corcega a day ago

Beautifully explained. However, I would like to add some factors that help me to predict the inevitable triumph of Donald Trump as well. On June 16th, 2015 on his presidential announcement, he mentioned several controversial facts also used by others candidates in previous elections but this time articulated in a less and more simplistic way, just as the writer said, without the barrier of political correctness. I will mention some of them that I can remember:

- .
- 1) IRAK war (\$2 trillion dollars spent)
- 2) Islamic Terrorism eating up the middle east
- 3) GDP fall by 0.7%
- 4) OBAMACARE's deductibles and its \$5 billion dollars' website
- 5) \$1.3 billion dollars owed to China
- 6) 3rd world like Education system compared to other countries
- 7) And the most important issue, ILLIGAL IMIGRATION.

My certainty of his wining sparked just after the media tried to twist the message on illegal immigration by saying he hates immigrants among other things and started a furious campaign against every aspect of his speech. The next day, Donald Trump became the most popular man in the world. Somehow, they forgot that we live in a world that is online 24/7 and if you become a liar, you will definitely lose the confidence of the public. It is just like selling a product, if you lie to your costumers and they figured it out, you are done. This is the perfect opportunity for competitors to brake your credibility and take you down.

I have seen this phenomenon for the last 15 years in countries like Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and many other Socialists countries of the 21st century. He just threw the ball and waited for the entire media to make a mistake. Example: I am telling the truth and the rest are just a bunch of liars. It was highly predictable.

REPLY

0 👍 0 🗨

Paul Müller 12 hours ago

I agree with a lot of it... In particular, that he used ever mistake the media was doing... (Point in case, he will ride the questionable "buzzfeed leak" forever). However, you cannot deny, that he himself lied like crazy... It is just that it had no effect, because the media was not trusted when they were bringing it up.

REPLY

0  0 

Matthew Plante a day ago

Spot on. Every good salesperson should have predicted a Trump victory: his campaign was like a good pitch in that it was all about the customer: make America great again. Hers, on the other hand, was about the seller and not the customer: I'm with her. Tone-deaf, anti-customer-centric slogan.

REPLY

1  0 

Thomas Hosmanek a day ago

The writer below has it correct - in marketing terms, he differentiated himself. He also had a clear and clearly-articulated message, something his opponent with \$1.2 billion in backing never could do. Despite all the details and organization required for a national campaign, it still comes down to being able to position oneself in a way that appeals to one's desired market segments. Simple stuff.

REPLY

1  0 

Pete Abilla a day ago

It seems to me your analysis of Trump creating for himself a category all on his own is really nothing more than differentiating himself from the rest of the pack.

It's differentiation.

And, if that's true, then the logical conclusion of your analysis is that the way to beat Trump is if more and more politicians became politically incorrect. By doing so, Trump ends up looking like everyone else.

Erase his differentiation through the production of copycats.

Maybe that's what's ahead: more and more Trump look-a-likes.

We'll see I suppose. Over time, however, being politically incorrect isn't necessarily sustainable. Some, if not most, political incorrect behaviors fall into the standard toxic behaviors we've all come to know and hate being around: know-it-alls, demonizers, back-biters, etc. and we know those behaviors have a very short shelf-life. Why? the people around them won't stand for it.

Time will tell if Trump's differentiation (or new category as you argue) becomes a sustainable advantage for him.

REPLY

1  1 

Rachel Kaberon a day ago

Very well put as upalatable the outcome may be there's no question that the simplicity and consistency of his message struck bedrock assumptions which forced people to look and vote their gut values. Decency and politics have not co-existed for a long time, and managing public expectations is not a strategy; but then again the job and role of government is not the same as the mission and role of business. So congratulations for calling out the winning campaign strategy. The question remains if its possible to have a winning governing strategy grounded in political incorrectness?

REPLY

3  0 

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