

The Marketing Behind the Vibes of the Kamala Harris Campaign

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Given the state of American politics, the next three months are set to be some of the most important and fascinating times for those of us who tell stories and build communities for a living.

Never before have we had the tools and opportunities available to appeal to a population that is deeply segmented while also yearning for certainty—something we haven't known or seen for a long time.

When President Joe Biden announced his decision to withdraw from the 2024 race, I followed the Kamala Harris discourse in real time, and my marketing spidey senses began tingling in overdrive. Some people have noted that Vice President Harris' brand has struggled throughout her political career, and the brand renaissance we are watching now is something to be studied.

Here are the six things every marketer should be watching.

User-generated content (UGC)

Almost immediately, social media users began creating static posts and videos expressing their excitement over the president's backing of his veep for the Democratic nomination.

UGC is often seen as the crème de la crème of marketer content as it provides an authenticity that can't be bought. Although it is certainly a useful tactic to commission UGC-style content, the true and raw responses that flood our timelines following significant moments in culture are an entity of their own.

UGC allows for genuine engagement and fosters a sense of community with a reach that is far and wide and, most importantly, organic. What will be key as the discourse continues is how the campaign chooses to interact with UGC.

These "real life" endorsements enhance credibility tenfold, providing social proof of support. Giving them political party authorization can dilute the message and even lead to a cringe backlash, as the kids would say, which brings us to...

Social media literacy

We know that as much as UGC can bolster support, social media can be a dangerous place for truth-telling and sharing. Users need a critical eye and skills that are built over lengthy internet exposure to effectively understand social media platforms.

Over half (54%) of adults in the U.S. have literacy skills below sixth-grade level. Considering that media literacy is not even taught in schools, we can assume that the social media literacy rate is at or below this stat.

Social media literacy empowers users to navigate social media responsibly and effectively. Without it, dangerous messages are spread, often by individuals in positions of trust or authority.

Recently, on the platform he owns, Elon Musk shared a deepfake video on X created by AI that was meant to be a parody campaign video using Harris' voice to say disparaging things about herself and President Biden. Musk shared this video with no qualifiers and simply the caption, "This is amazing." As of July 29, Musk's X post has been shared more than 242,000 times, garnering over 130 million views.

It's no shock that collectively, we are in a societal crisis of distrust. AI thought leader Nina Schick has been quoted as saying that 90% of online content could be AI-generated by 2025.

According to a Gallup poll, Americans' confidence in institutions is at a historic low and has been for years. The deepfakes, sensationalism and false narratives shared online contribute to this, alongside political polarization and uncovered corruption across industries.

What the Harris campaign has been able to do is move quickly because, at the end of the day, speed is the name of the game when it comes to content relevancy. They galvanized a feeling of hope, engaged with Americans, acted with purpose and invigorated online conversations. As a society, we've been doomscrolling and trash-talking for so long that a positivity pipeline was welcomed with open arms—and maybe even an iota of trust.

The trust equation

Building trust is paramount to any campaign, and especially to the Harris team. Simply put, The Trust Equation says that a person's trustworthiness equals their credibility, reliability and intimacy divided by their self-orientation.

To gain, or in some cases regain, trust, the Harris team must focus on her credibility, such as what she says and how she says it. Her reliability lies in her actions. Will she do as she says? How will she act under pressure? Or in a debate?

And intimacy refers to the safety or security we feel when entrusting someone with something. I'd love to switch up the "I'd grab lunch with that candidate" sentiment to "I'd let that candidate babysit." There is intimacy in both situations, but trust lies only in the latter.

Lastly, self-orientation refers to the individual's focus. Is it primarily themselves? Or do they uphold the interests of others? Politics at its core is focused on the people, but the individuals we choose to represent us vary widely in their levels of self-orientation, which impacts every political decision they may make. For example, is this good for my constituents? Or is this something that can get me further in my career?

Authenticity

The concept of authenticity is woven throughout these points, but it is so crucial it deserves its own spotlight. As humans, we find authenticity comforting. There is something incongruous about inauthenticity (not doing as one says) that we can typically sniff out in real life.

Some of the biggest moments in culture rise to the top of the algorithm solely due to their authenticity. When Reesa Teesa uploaded 50 videos to TikTok telling the story of how she fell in love with and married a pathological liar, the world tuned in. By the time Reesa appeared on Good Morning America, her videos had accumulated 400 million views. Yes, we love a juicy narrative, but when that narrative is true? That is where virality lives.

As I type this, the Summer Olympics have kicked off in Paris. As much as we adore the pomp and circumstance of the opening ceremony, the peeks at Olympic Village life that come from athlete content creators allow us to feel connected at an ever deeper level to the Games and the people who train so hard to represent their countries. Last week, Australian water polo player Tilly Kearns uploaded a video that became quite popular of Fijian athletes singing a hymn that could be heard throughout the village. This kind of access to raw, authentic content keeps audiences drawn to the story of the Olympics beyond the Games themselves.

When it comes to the Harris campaign, authenticity is a hurdle. The nature of politics in our country is to approach with skepticism, and much of the backlash against Harris has been regarding her communication skills. In recent weeks, we have seen support for “real” moments from Harris and her team.

When Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff told the story of how he found out his wife was running for president on a call to organize Black Gay and Queer Men for Harris, the story quickly leaked and was shared online because of how normal it was. (Emhoff was unaware of the news as he was having coffee with friends and had left his phone in his car.)

Storytelling

The stories that the Harris team tells will be paramount to how the campaign is received. The most powerful way to the brain is stories—our brains are wired to retain and remember information when it is told via a story.

Today, marketers use transmedia storytelling to reach audiences through different mediums at different times and to share different parts of the same story to create a rich, immersive experience.

One of our current most iconic storytellers: Beyoncé. Fan or not, it was impossible to escape the Renaissance tour in 2023. Her team was pushing messages that were reaching fans who were activating their own social media channels to eventually create a movement in which the sight of a silver cowboy hat had a new definition.

This is transmedia storytelling. It's repetition but it's not rote, and eventually your message will find audiences, resonate and permeate.

Color psychology

Colors tell stories and inform the brain when words can't, or act as a support to audio; color psychology plays a significant role in influencing perceptions and behaviors. Different colors can evoke psychological and emotional responses due to biological and cultural influences.

Colors have been important to the Harris campaign from the jump. From the early photograph of her in the light blue suit to the meme-ification of the purple suit to her sorority's official colors of salmon pink and apple green.

What we may never know is how, when and exactly why Charli XCX's team also chose apple green for the cover of her "Brat" album, released in June. Still, the serendipity of the cultural moment that is brat summer in conjunction with Harris pursuing the highest office of the land is too perfect to ignore, and the talented meme-makers agreed. Green signifies freshness, growth, prosperity and a new start—something that has been canonized within the American dream.

To some, memes, color theory and viral TikToks could be deemed unserious, but we know the strategy, foresight, creativity and speed that go into these moments are monumental and can very well change the course of history.

May our stories change history.

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