

Selling Sarah Palin: political marketing and the ‘Wal-Mart Mom’

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The emergence of Sarah Palin as an iconic figure for the Republican party in the 2008 election was testament to the interplay of several issues central to an understanding of the contemporary nature of political marketing. Her personal brand utilised elements of her personal values and her lifestyle choices, the emotive use of the history of the Republican party to symbolise her as the inheritor of a distinctive Republican mandate, and the expression of populism through the exploitation of her autobiographical past and regional location. On its own the Palin brand was sufficient to create an identifiable and marketable political product which attracted attention on both a state and a national stage. However other factors were significant. Palin’s ‘mediagenic’ presence granted her a disproportionate amount of coverage in the 2008 election race in comparison to her opponents and indeed her running mate. Her brand of marketing, while targeting a perceived swing voting group in the form of the ‘Wal-Mart mom’ appeared across time to marginalise rather than expend the base from which she aspired to gain a tangible voting block. While her marketing strategy in the first instance appeared to aspire towards a sales approach in an attempt to attract swing voters, it became clear as the 2008 campaign progressed, and indeed beyond its cessation, that she became increasingly embroiled in a product oriented approach, shoring up the right wing of the Republican party. Palin’s position, as the most prominent female political figure of the era, is instructive in understanding the advantages, alongside the limitations, in the marketing of a political figure as an individual within a contemporary election campaign.

Palin entertained support and opposition across the full spectrum of American politics, creating controversy and attracting media attention in a manner experienced by no other candidate in the race. While she would not occupy the presidential office, the poor health of John McCain, in combination with his advancing years, gave reason for serious consideration of her merits as a candidate who might assume the office of Chief Executive. In making herself a credible and electable candidate Palin was forced to address a number of issues commonplace in election contests, while also exploiting the fact that she was a woman who would make history if formally placed in the position of Vice President. Palin’s strategies to convey a positive impression to the American people hinged on a number of marketing strategies which played on her gender, her position as a wife and mother, her role as a politician and her embrace of a strong Alaskan identity.

This paper examines how Palin tried to engage with the electorate and sell her politics and personal identity. She sold herself as a reflection of the constituency she wished to appeal to, allowing the voter to perceive her as part and parcel of their own communities and as a person who understood the daily challenges that faced them. While there was a strong gender orientation to her campaign it was not necessarily designed to draw those who were one time supporters of Hillary Clinton to her cause. In large part they were too ideologically removed from Palin to make them natural consumers of her message.

Marketing Theory: Selling the Individual

The American approach to political marketing is distinctive, frequently candidate rather than party centred, and is highly dependent upon the interaction between polling

information and media images. In addressing political marketing in America Bruce I. Newman wrote, 'In politics, the application of marketing centers on the same process [as commercial marketing], but the analysis of needs centers voters and citizens; the product becomes a multifaceted combination of the politician himself or herself, the politician's image, and the platform the politician advocates which is then promoted and delivered to the appropriate audience.'¹ Palin possessed a distinctive image, an identifiable platform and an perceived socio-economic audience. Consideration of Palin as a core component in debate about political marketing was evident during the 2008 election race. America online addressed the issue of Palin's individual and personal marketing. It identified the issue of personal market branding, familiar from business issues, and how this applied to Sarah Palin. It considered, 'A person's brand is their mission statement. What are your core values? When people hear your name, what do you want them to think? These are the questions brand consultants say Palin should be asking at this crossroads of her career.'² Reported on CNN, John Quelch, a marketing professor at Harvard Business School considered the McCain-Palin ticket to be 'an example of what good marketing and brand-building are all about.'³ McCain was aware, at an early pre-Palin stage of the election process that the Republican party had a problem of identity and placement, that close association with the deteriorating image of the Bush presidency was harmful to the Republican cause. He argued that 'we've got a brand problem.'⁴ John Quelch considered that the 2008 election had a twist which accentuated the importance of the individual candidate brand at the expense of that of the political party. He observed, 'What is relevant is the brand image of the candidate. I don't think that there is a GOP brand issue relevant to the outcome of this presidential election. It is going to be a matter of McCain-Palin, Obama-Biden. Those are the brands in play for the swing voters, regardless of party affiliation.'⁵ McCain worked in particular to distance himself from past Republican brand of Bush, however he failed to convince the voting block as a whole that he offered a 'different direction'⁶ The problem for the Palin candidacy was that while in theory she could sit alongside McCain and appeal to swing voters, in practice her brand, individually and politically, became increasingly narrow and defined in its impact and worked to satisfy the voter as a consumer in a squeezed range of the electoral spectrum. McCain argued, when he introduced Palin as his running mate on the ticket, that she appealed as someone 'who reached across the aisle and asked Republicans, Democrats and independents to serve in government.'⁷ The brand image of the candidates, and aspirationally for the party, was to present a movement that captured the centre ground in a spirit of bi-partisanship at a time of national need.

The evolution of the McCain-Palin brand, as is posited later in this paper, was one that revolved around her political and cultural populism and a rejection by the

¹ Bruce I. Newman, The Mass Marketing of Politics: democracy in an age of manufactured images (London: Sage, 1999) p. 3.

² Steve Pendlebury 'Will Sarah Palin reinvent Herself' AOL News 25 July 2009 [http://www.aolnews.com/story/sarah-palins-brand/588403]

³ Kirsti Keck, 'Palin power recharges GOP ticket' CNN 17 September 2008 [www.cnn.com]

⁴ Kristi Ramsay, 'McCain: If the election was tomorrow, GOP would lose' CNN 26 June 2008 [www.cnn.com]

⁵ 'Palin power recharges GOP ticket' CNN 17 September 2008 [www.cnn.com]

⁶ 'Growing Concerns About Palin's Qualification' PEW Center for the People & the Press 1 October 2008

⁷ 'Mayor Palin: A Rough Record' Time 2 September 2008

Republicans, and Palin in particular, of any trappings of elitism. This went hand-in-hand with an anti-intellectual platform. This is not to say that the Palin brand was one that was monolithic or unable to change. One of the attributes she displayed in Alaska was a flexibility in identifying what was demanded from the voter. Time observed, 'In the end, her political journey from banner-waving GOP social conservative to maverick reformer may simply be about good timing. It's what former journalist Bill McAllister, who now works for Palin's press staff, used to call "Sarah-dipity" – that uncanny gift of knowing exactly what voters are looking for at a particular moment. And, of course, the political will to give them what they want.'⁸ In essence this was the bedrock for Palin's style of political marketing. It was instinctive, revolved on an appealing personality, and valued emotion above reason.

There were problems in separating Palin from a Republican brand, which was politically expedient in the case of 2008, and her accommodation alongside McCain and his brand as a both a Republican and a political maverick. Palin served in part as a focal figure for the Republican right, but also had to appear pragmatic so as to cultivate new support from those who might be tempted to defect from her party in a period of economic hardship or not be attracted by its message. Bruce I. Newman, argued, 'Just as companies need to partner with each other to be effective, so too do politicians. A candidate must get all partners to share his or her vision of the future. The focus should be on what can be, not what is. One must never lose sight of one's customer.'⁹ The emotional relationship with a candidate, alongside the tangible political rewards of voting, is part of the marketing process of forging a bond between elector and elected. The selection of Palin was designed to allow co-branding within the Republican party as described by Howard Belk, co-president and chief creative officer at branding agency Siegel and Gale in New York, 'Each partnered a complementary personality who would overcome their own shortcomings and reach new audiences. It's a good strategy, but it panned out very differently for each...McCain's appointment of Sarah Palin, on the other hand, looked smart initially – she is young and a woman – but she became a bigger focus of media attention than McCain himself, which was confusing.'¹⁰ Additionally media reports identified McCain as a 'maverick' candidate – giving him an ill-defined position within the race. Palin followed a similar path, particularly as election day approached. She declared that she was 'going rogue' and had forged her own identity and agenda within the campaign. However this appeared to distort her brand image and that of the party. An unnamed McCain source complained that Palin '...is a diva. She takes no advice from anyone. She does not have any relationships of trust with any of us, her family or anyone else. Also, she is playing for her own future and sees herself as the next leader of the party.'¹¹ Increasing disputes and overt tensions between Palin and McCain created a campaign where the precise nature of the party brand became unclear.¹² It was relatively easy to pinpoint their individual ideas and political aspirations, but as a team the brand became ill-defined and problematic. In the aftermath of the election it appeared

⁸ Cited in *Ibid.*

⁹ Newman, The Mass Marketing of Politics (1999) p. 85.

¹⁰ Jane Simms, 'What UK marketers learn from the US presidential election' Marketing 11 November 2008

¹¹ 'Palin's "going rogue", McCain aide says' CNN 25 October 2008

¹² Kate Snow, 'Palin Aide Fires Back at Reported McCain Camp Slams: says RNC, Not Palin, Responsible for wardrobe missteps; rejects other complaints' ABC News 6 November 2008 [www.abcnews.co.com]; Also, Sarah Palin, Going Rogue: An American Life (New York: Harper Collins, 2009) pp. 318-321.

that the individualism of Palin, loosened from the associated position of being tied to McCain's brand of Republican ideology and belief, was of particular note. Chris Cillizza, writing in the Washington Post, observed, 'There is no brand in Republican politics as powerful – or as tenuous – as that of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin. She is simultaneously the hottest commodity on the Republican fundraising circuit and a figure of ridicule among the Democrats (and even many independents) who believe that her status as a national figure is entirely undeserved.'¹³ The individual vs. party brand tag appeared to have a strong influence in the 2008 election, which in part explains the tensions within the McCain-Palin camp, and thereafter Palin's desire to extricate herself from a position of responsibility within the party so as to market herself as opposed to a faltering neo-conservative ideology.

Palin: manufacturing the product

Palin's selection as a vice presidential candidate in the election was based on a number of factors which fused to present her as a viable alternative to Senator Joseph Lieberman, an independent and former Democrat who at first sight appeared to be appealing to McCain in creating a potentially winning ticket. Lieberman's selection however, while it might create some affinity with swing-voters and disillusioned Democrats, threatened to alienate the bedrock of Republican support on the grounds that he was pro-choice and the Republican convention might be thrown into disrepair as a consequence. Palin offered herself as a timely and appropriate selection for the Republicans in 2008, offering a number of strengths which could be marketed as positive attributes in an electoral contest and nullify perceived strengths held by the Democrats. Steve Schmidt, key campaign strategist for the McCain team, identified the requirements of the vice presidential candidate. They had to support McCain's "'maverick" credentials', attract women voters, distance the ticket from the Bush presidency and mobilize the base of the core Republican movement.¹⁴ Palin's position as a vice presidential nominee however made the attainment of these objectives demanding, particularly as she perceived herself to be constrained by the mandate of the McCain agenda and was unable, in her opinion to, express herself as she desired during the campaign. Moreover, attracting female voters would become increasingly challenging as election day approached, as poll statistics indicated that Palin's appeal was more meaningful to men rather than women.

Palin's selection revolved around several instrumental facets which advanced her as a credible and viable alternative to established Republicans with more established political records. In advance of her selection as Vice President Palin had entertained a position as a noted female Governor of Alaska. Although not necessarily particularly well known she had cultivated a position within the Republican party to a sufficient level to have grassroot activists and influences within the party to suggest her to McCain. For his own part McCain had only met with Palin for 15 minutes prior to her being offered the

¹³ Chris Cillizza, 'The Protectors of the Palin Brand' The Washington Post 17 March 2009 [www.voices.washingtonpost.com]

¹⁴ Cited in Brian J. Brox and Madison L. Cassels, 'The Contemporary Effects of Vice-Presidential Nominees: Sarah Palin and the 2008 Presidential Campaign' Journal of Political Marketing Vol. 8 2009, p. 352; See also, Sumaria Mohan-Neill and Indira Neill, 'Executive Decision-Making and Marketing Research: the choice of Sarah Palin as 2008 Republican Vice-Presidential Nominee' Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Studies Vol. 14 No.1. p. 24.

vice presidential candidacy. Several elements which could later be exploited during the election race were already present. She was a candidate who could easily be sold as being removed from the failed politics of Washington. Palin's candidacy and personality did not have to be reinvented to play to a national audience. Marketing involved subtle refinement and accentuation on aspects of her background which had already proven to be a viable and electorally popular in Alaska and suggested she might be a credible national candidate. Early poll evidence suggested that the selection of Palin played well to the electorate. Following her acceptance speech, Palin was viewed favourably by 58% of a Rasmussen poll sample, a rating which put her ahead, albeit marginally, of both McCain and Obama.¹⁵

A core element in the selling of Palin was perceptions of her as an individual who was authentic. In previous election contests candidates had struggled to convey the emotional bonds required to forge relationship with the electorate. For example, Dukakis and George Bush Sr. both struggled to convey, in 1988 and 1992, respectively that they shared the mood and feeling of the electorate. Similarly in 1984, as indicated by Newman, Mondale struggled to create an affinity with the American voter, 'Perhaps Mondale's biggest failure was in his inability to convey an image of the person he was in real life. In person, Mondale was said to be easygoing and fun to be around. However, on television, he came across as stiff and uptight. Unfortunately for Mondale, the television age had already hit politics, and his inability to use it to his advantage killed his image and ultimately his campaign.'¹⁶ Palin by contrast came across as a person who authentically represented the person she was in real life. In looking for a distinctive construct of values and the branding of Palin within the ticket the PEW Research Centre asked poll respondents for a single word which best described the vice presidential nominees. Although 'inexperienced' was the highest one word response for Palin, there were additional issues which contributed towards the positive branding of Palin. PEW observed, 'For Palin "strong", "fresh" and "interesting" are among the most commonly mentioned terms. Voters also say Palin is "smart", "confident" and "energetic"'.¹⁷

Palin: the consumer market and the Wal-Mart Mom

The 2008 campaign was founded, somewhat predictably, on the legacy of the Bush presidency and the financial problems which had afflicted sections of America's economy. Issues which had characterised 2004, such as war and terrorism still played a role in shaping voter concerns, but economic issues predominated. Partisan divisions were evident along traditional Republican and Democratic lines, but the dominant feature of the 2008 campaign was a fight over which party could address the economic plight. The Democrats had been out of office for 8 years, the Republican candidates had to address the legacy of the Bush presidency. As a consequence the fight for the middle ground of politics was an intense one, characterised by an appeal by both sides for consumers unconvinced by the political products on offer.

Palin's marketing brand during the 2008 became heavily interweaved with an identification with a perceived swing voting group. In keeping with previous presidential

¹⁵ 'Palin Power: fresh face now more popular than Obama, McCain' Rasmussen Reports 5 September 2008

¹⁶ Newman, The Mass Marketing of Politics (1999) p. 74.

¹⁷ 'McCain Gains On Issues, But Stalls As Candidate of Change' PEW Center for the People & the Press 18 September 2008 [www.people-press.org/report/?pageid=1375]

election campaign where defined social groups were scrutinized because it was thought that they were pivotal in deciding the outcome of the election, Soccer Moms and Security Moms for example, in 2008 Wal-Mart moms became the focal demographic group of the campaign. While the importance and labelling of swing groups is open to criticism and some doubt as to their statistical importance, in 2008 it is clear that during the campaign perceptions of importance helped to shape the campaign in a significant manner, and this in turn influenced heavily the choice of Palin and her conduct through the election period. Wal-Mart moms represented a distinctive brand of their own during the campaign. With an ongoing economic recession an appeal to an identifiable consumer group on the grounds of gender and socio-economic status appeared to be of strategic benefit to the Republican party and catered to a swing group which received focussed media attention.

The Wal-Mart mom was defined as a lower-middle class white woman who shopped at discount retailer Wal-Mart at least once a week.¹⁸ Business Week identified the statistical bracket within which this group fell: ‘They’re not as well off as average Americans: Some 41% of frequent Wal-Mart shoppers have incomes below \$35,000 vs 25% of the population at large. They’re less educated than their neighbors: 31% of U.S. voters have a high school education or less, vs. 39% for Wal-Mart Women. Those characteristics set them apart from the firmly middle-class Soccer Moms so closely tracked in past election.’¹⁹ They were considered important on three counts. Firstly they were a social group squeezed by the prevailing downturn in the economy. Secondly, they were likely to vote, and thirdly, polls indicated that they, as an aggregate grouping, were undecided about who to vote for. In the centre ground of politics it was clear that they had to be convinced about the merits of either the Republican or Democrat causes, having been, as a group, supportive previously of the Bush mandate, yet adversely affected by the economic downturn of 2008. In several respects it was poll material that indicated the importance of the grouping and leaders from both parties could not afford to neglect or be seen to neglect the statistical data.

The selection of Palin as the vice presidential candidate pitched a political product into the marketplace that matched the apparent profile of the political consumer. Palin was presented as the Wal-Mart mom who now graced a national stage and epitomized the life challenges faced by white working class women. Although wealthy, she was by far the poorest of the four candidates competing for office. The New York Magazine considered the rationale for the prominence of Palin in the race, ‘Yet the lipstick wars were about more than tactical skirmishing to win a couple of news cycles. They were a sign that, in picking Palin as his V.P., McCain had introduced into the electoral equation a set of variables – gender, class, celebrity, ideology – at once powerful, combustible, and unpredictable. They presaged a fall campaign in which the most wretched sort of identity politics will apparently prevail. And they reflected a new strategic dynamic that may well determine the outcome: the fierce and frantic pursuit by sides of this year’s “It” demographic, the so-called Wal-Mart moms.’²⁰ Alongside the array of variables used to foster support and cater to prevailing market conditions lay the concept of values, an issue which granted Palin considerable strength with the Wal-Mart mom, and added a facet which could transcend the issue of economic concern, which would be cast as a

¹⁸ ‘Obama winning over “Wal-Mart moms”’ Financial Times 29 September 2008 [www.us.ft.com]

¹⁹ Jane Sasseen, ‘The Wal-Mart Sisterhood’ Business Week 17 April 2008 [www.businessweek.com]

²⁰ John Heilemann, ‘The Wal-Mart Frontier’ New York Magazine 14 September 2008 [www.nymag.com]

temporary phenomenon. For example, a single mother from Florida who worked as a waitress argued that there were connections between her prior support for President Bush, and her new found support during the campaign for Palin, 'He [Bush] was really good for my family... We're hurting financially, but he shares our values just like Sarah Palin does.'²¹

In deconstructing Palin's interplay with the Wal-Mart factor it is clear that she was marketed as the embodiment of the social group she sought in part to represent. The integration of the product with the consumer was both transparent and complete, and was a feature of continued media coverage and speculation. This created two outcomes. Firstly, Palin's political identity was interweaved with an understanding that she was derived from the social and emotional values of lower class white women in the election. Secondly, while it may have forged bonds between Palin and a target constituency, it created doubt that the selling of a political product in a transparent and blunt manner left Palin open to criticism of being one dimension and lacking in the flexibility to appeal to others across a range of the voting blocks needed to create a sustainable, but above all, winning coalition. Conservative columnist William Kristol, writing in the New York Times, mused over the political considerations used to pick vice presidential running mates and how this impacted on the selection of Palin. 'McCain didn't just pick a politician who could appeal to Wal-Mart Moms. He picked a Wal-Mart Mom. Indeed he picked someone who, in 1999, as Wasilla mayor, presided over a wedding of two Wal-Mart associates at the local Wal-Mart. "It was so sweet said Palin, according to the Anchorage Daily News. "It was so Wasilla." A Wasilla Wal-Mart Mom a heartbeat away? I suspect most voters will say, "No problem." And some – perhaps a decisive number - will say, "It's about time."²²

The consumer response to Palin indicates that there were justifiable reasons for selecting Palin, and poll evidence suggested that the market based research into the type of candidate desired by white women worked effectively with her selection. Palin's entry in to the firestorm of the election race was most prominent with her speech at the Republican national convention. Although poll bounces are to be expected, McCain experienced pronounced alterations in support across the period of the Republican meeting. The need for a change in fortune was clear for the Republican party. Time reported, '...where 55% of white women voted for Bush in 2004, only 50% voted for Republican candidates in the 2006 midterm elections, which was one of the reasons the party lost both houses of Congress...as much as Palin pleased the conservative base of the party, white women were the real target audience McCain was aiming at with his surprise pick of the Alaska governor. The campaign hopes female voters will relate to her thoroughly modern and complicated everywoman story, even if they don't agree with her on the issues.'²³ Through the Republican convention, according to a Washington Post/ABC News poll, 'McCain enjoyed a 20-percentage point turnaround against Obama among white women, going from an eight-point deficit before the Republican National Convention to a 12 point advantage after it.'²⁴ The problem for the McCain-Palin ticket was that Palin made little inroad into solidifying a female vote across the longer term.

²¹ Jule Bosman, 'Palin Plays to Conservative Base in Florida Rallies' New York Times 8 October 2008

²² William Kristol, 'The Wal-Mart Mom and the media' The New York Times 9 September 2008

²³ Karen Tumulty, 'Can Obama Win Back Wal-Mart Moms?' Time 9 September 2008

²⁴ Ibid.

She was viewed in a similar light by men and women in poll samples, suggesting that across the duration of the campaign her gender as a campaign issue meant little in shaping a distinctive demographic vote. In September PEW reported, 'Men and women offer nearly identical ratings of Palin; 56% of men and 53% of women say they have a positive view of the vice presidential candidate.'²⁵ As the race progressed Palin appealed less and less to women voters, and less to those identified as Wal-Mart moms. By the third week of October 38% of women sampled by PEW had a 'favourable impression' of Palin, as contrasted with 50% of men.²⁶ The early poll figures, where Palin fared best, indicate that she appealed, in socio-economic brackets, mostly (61-34%) to those who earned between fifty and seventy five thousand dollars, and much less (46-35%) to those who earned less than thirty thousand dollars.²⁷

Palin: branding contradictions

In presenting Palin as a viable political product her physical appearance became an issue which determined her brand and political identity. Palin's appearance was a focus of media attention from the outset. Susan Scafidi, a law professor from Fordham, perceived of Palin, 'In our image cased society, the packaging of a candidate requires strategic spending on visuals, from stage make-up to backdrops to podiums at a flattering height - - and yes costumes.'²⁸ Palin's packaging relied upon her physical appearance and her repeated portrayal of herself as mother and wife. The disclosure in the press that the Republican candidate had spent \$150,000 on clothing appeared to go against the brand image that Palin had worked on since her nomination as Vice-President. The clothing issue appeared to be gender oriented, with Palin alone being subject to extensive review of her wardrobe and her appearance.²⁹ She was forced to defend the apparent discrepancy between her brand image as an ordinary American supportive of the Wal-Mart mom, and the impression created by expensive clothing purchases. The Associated Press reported, 'Palin talked about her accessories Sunday: earrings that were a gift from her husband's Yup'ik Eskimo mother, and " a \$35 wedding ring from Hawaii that I bought myself. Because with my ring, I always thought, it's not what it's made of, it's what it represents." News of such expensive clothes offered a stark contrast to Palin's image as an average "hockey mom".'³⁰ Ed Rollins, who ran Reagan's re-election campaign in 1984 argued on similar grounds, 'It just undercuts Palin's while image as a hockey mom, a "one-of-us" type of candidate.'³¹

Palin's political position among swing voters proved to be problematic through the campaign. While she initially appeared to be in a political position to draw undecided

²⁵ 'McCain Gains On Issues, But Stalls As Candidate of Change' PEW Research Center for the People & the Press 18 September 2008 [www.people-press.org]

²⁶ 'Growing Doubts About McCain's Judgment, Age and Campaign Conduct' PEW Research Center for the People & the Press 21 October 2008 [www.people-press.org]

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Foon Thee, 'Palin clothing bill up, poll standing down' Boston Globe 22 October 2008 [www.boston.com]

²⁹ Julie Bosman, 'Emphasizing Frugal Tastes, Palin Addresses Clothing Issue' New York Times 27 October 2008

³⁰ Mitch Stacy and Mark Wangrin, 'Palin says expensive clothing not her property' Associated Press

³¹ Patrick Healy and Michael Luo, '\$150, 000 Wardrobe for Palin May Alter Tailor-Made Image' New York Times 22 October 2008

voters to the Republican cause, increasingly Palin's social conservatism, perceptions of her political inexperience and her interview performances eroded her poll standing. The brand she accumulated was one that was based on disputed personal attributes as opposed to political reliability and authority.

Palin as Populist

Palin's populist identity was carved neatly out of a perception of contemporary social conservatism and an engrained popular understanding of the stereotype of a liberal, and predominantly Eastern, elite. Palin's populism was sold as a clear and distinct form of her appeal, and contrasted with the more subtle populist mandates of her opponents, including Obama.³² The populist nature of Palin's candidacy was pronounced. As outlined by Michael Kazin populism embodied '...a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as a self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter.'³³ In 2008 the label of populism was spread subtly across several candidacies. Eleanor Clift in *Newsweek* identified the challenges facing voters when considering the information presented by the vice presidential candidates of each party.

'Biden...represents Main Street populism, the people against the powerful, anti-corporation, little guy kitchen-table values. Palin is wooing the same working-class constituency that could decide the election in battleground states like Ohio and Pennsylvania with her pro-gun, family and religious down-to-earth values.'³⁴ Palin's life story afforded her many advantages in presenting herself as a populist. She utilised it extensively when campaigning and marketing herself as a logical evolution in the span of modern Republican leadership. She reflected in her autobiography on what she and her husband brought to the ticket 'We felt our very normalcy, our status as ordinary Americans, could be a much needed fresh breeze blowing into Washington D.C.'³⁵

However, in presenting her populist credentials Palin created tensions with the media, the Democrats and blurred where she stood on the issues. She became embroiled in debates on issues of culture, conservatism and how relevant a previously winning Republican message had become across time.³⁶ The consumer was being bombarded with elements which on their own seemed appealing, but when combined offered friction and inconsistencies which undermined her electibility. Eliza Jane Darling commented that 'Although the fevered frenzy of redneck-baiting [of Palin] was soon eclipsed by the financial debacle in a whiplash-inducing swing from Wasilla to Wall Street, the discursive slippage between Sarah Palin's politics and Sarah Palin's background exposed a contradiction deeply entrenched in American culture – and not for the first time on the stage of presidential politics.'³⁷

The integration of Palin's life story, her use of language and her populist mandate gave a multi dimensional profile which epitomised Palin's political journey. However,

³² David Greenberg, 'The Populism of the FDR Era' *Time* 4 July 2009

³³ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: an American history revised edition* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995) p.1.

³⁴ Eleanor Clift, 'Palin Reignites The Culture War' *Newsweek* 3 October 2008

³⁵ Palin, *Going Rogue* (2009) pp.220-1.

³⁶ Reihan Salam, 'The Last Culture Warrior' *Forbes* 4 July 2009 [www.Forbes.com]

³⁷ Eliza Jane Darling, 'O Sister! Sarah Palin and the parlous politics of poor white trash' *Dialect Anthropol* 33 2009, p.16.

there were problems with the presentation of the populist mandate and debate about its worth. Palin was accused of lacking the skills required for high office, yet in part this was not what she was trying to market in the election. Her method of delivery was unconventional. Yuval Levin, writing in Commentary, argued that Palin represented a different brand of politics and its presentation, largely as a consequence of her upbringing and location. Addressing the allegations of competence he asserted, ‘This is why Palin was seen as anti-intellectual when, properly speaking, she was simply non-intellectual. What she lacked was not intelligence – she is, clearly, highly intelligent – but rather the particular set of assumptions, references, and attitudes inculcated by America’s top twenty universities and transmitted by the nation’s elite cultural organs.’³⁸

In part the attempt to have Palin considered to be ordinary worked. The major tv networks branded her as a ‘perfect populist’, her rhetoric was consistent to this end, and her opponents criticised her consistently for celebrating the merits of the ordinary person at the expense of elites and political leaders. Selling her as a person worked effectively. Selling her as a prospective political leader proved more problematic. PEW reported on Palin that ‘By a wide margin (70% to 50%), more swing voters say Palin is down-to-earth. While nearly identical percentages of all voters see both candidates as honest, more swing voters say this trait describes Palin (67%) than say it applies to Biden.’³⁹ Marketing the person was an important element in selling Palin to the Wal-Mart mom, however politically she was strongly linked to the conservative right of the party and this proved more difficult to present as an asset during the campaign.

Palin as a mother

In chronicling her position as a social conservative and as a Republican who was pragmatic as well as principled, Palin played heavily on her position as a working mother. This allowed several core themes of her values and political mandate to be cast into the public realm at one time and ensured that she could contrast her position with those of her competitors. This strategy was pronounced from the outset and was aided by media coverage which gave coverage to her husband and children during her speech at the Republican national convention. Palin was celebrated as a mother, as a working parent and as a woman of resolve and principle.

Palin cast herself as the embodiment of a modern working woman, who could juggle domestic responsibilities alongside her executive position. At the time of the 2008 presidential campaign she had 5 children. She used this fact to convey several messages. When she had given birth to her daughter Piper, she had returned to work the day after giving birth, providing testament to her determination to work on behalf of the people of Alaska.⁴⁰ In a similar fashion, when her son Trig was born, she returned to work three days after his birth. In part this conveyed the impression that Palin was in touch with contemporary gender demands and represented a branch of conservatism that considered the modern woman to be far more than a person confined to the home. Addressing the gender debate on the political, work and motherhood balance, and trying to cultivate the

³⁸ Yuval Levin, ‘The Meaning of Sarah Palin’ Commentary February 2009 [www.commentarymagazine.com]

³⁹ ‘Growing Concerns About Palin’s Qualifications’ PEW Research Center for the People & the Press 1 October 2008 [www.people-press.org]

⁴⁰ ‘Fusing Politics and Motherhood in a New Way’ New York Times 8 September 2008

support of the Wal-Mart mom, Palin asserted, 'To any critics who say a woman can't think and work and carry a baby at the same time, I'd just like to escort that Neanderthal back to the cave.'⁴¹

Palin also had additional considerations to accommodate with the birth of her 5th child Trig. She learned during her pregnancy that he had Down syndrome. She decided to proceed with the pregnancy, this being in keeping with her pro-life stance and beliefs on abortion. Her decision to proceed was greeted warmly by anti-abortion groups when the narrative about Palin's position and her decisions entered the public domain. Serrin M. Foster, president of Feminists for Life observed, 'It speaks volumes about her personally and about how she walked her talk.'⁴² It also appeared to add some credence to her candidacy and branded her firmly as a social conservative. An ABC News poll released on 5 September 2008 observed, 'Among personal and policy matters tested in this poll, the most positive response is to Palin's decision to have her fifth baby earlier this year after a diagnosis of Down syndrome; 41 percent say this makes them see her more favourably.'⁴³ A further factor which could be drawn from Palin's family position was that her son Track was to serve his country in Iraq. This added a further dimension to a patriotic ticket, which in accompaniment with the military record of John McCain left little doubt that the Republic ticket was associated with pressing national causes, both historically and contemporaneously.

The strengths of Palin's use of her family were evident. She appeared to be in touch with several different constituencies at one time and could use her private position to advance her political career. With one of the core constituencies being the Wal-Mart mom her use of gender and family gave her leverage above that that might be gained by her male colleagues or competitors. While, as related in this paper, there were issues which received media attention related to gender which were particular and negative to Palin, she did try to sell her gender as a particularly distinctive quality with a unique appeal.

Communicating the message

A central feature of Palin's image and brand during the campaign was the nature of content of her message. Supporting a populist mandate lay the use of language that set her aside from the other candidates in the race. This was related to her Alaskan background, a perception that she was trying to reachout to ordinary Americans and a consideration of her unique qualities, that she represented something that was different in this particular presidential race.

Palin's communication strategy was greeted in very different ways across the media networks and in the American printed press. Conservative outlets perceived the communications strategy employed by Palin in the first instance to be effective in pitching her political product at her target audience, largely in a form which stressed emotional connections at the expense of policy detail. The conservative leaning Wall Street Journal for instance, in the aftermath of Palin's convention address, stressed a core component of Palin's appeal and marketability, that she was authentic. It considered that

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² William Yardley, 'Sarah Heath Palin, an Outsider Who Charms' New York Times 30 August 2008

⁴³ 'Highly Partisan Reception Greets Palin as V.P. Pick' ABC News 5 September 2008
[www.abcnews.com]

'She has the power of the normal. Hillary Clinton is a grim, stentorian, was born to politics and its connivances. Nancy Pelosi, another mother of five, often seems dazed and ad hoc... There is something normal about her [Palin], so "You've met this person before and you like her," that she broke through in a new way, as a character vividly herself, and vividly genuine.'⁴⁴ Palin's employment of common language, and a folksy approach to her delivery was reminiscent of the syntax and use of language by George Bush Jr and in particular to that employed by Ronald Reagan, to whom she was consistently compared. It also made her message easy to consume for her target audience. While Palin's acceptance speech was greeted with enthusiasm, her communications strategies were subjected to more harsh interpretation as the 2008 campaign progressed.

As is widely known Palin had difficulty addressing issues of policy in interviews and struggled to demonstrate that she was on top of a number of issues related to her possible tenure as vice president. While this not only cast doubt about her intellect and grasp of the issues, it also corrupted what Palin was standing for. Attention was drawn to a corrosive issue which reflected negatively upon what she and McCain represented. The New York Times considered a limited media strategy, employed by Palin, to be appropriate given her performance in the early stages of the campaign, 'The McCain campaign has done its bizarre best to shield Ms. Palin from any sustained media examination of her readiness for the highest offices in the land, and no wonder. She has been an embarrassment in interviews.'⁴⁵ Palin's brand became inexorably linked with her inability to communicate in a form considered appropriate to her political ambition. This is not to say that Palin deviated from Republican convention or left herself open to queries about her association with a Republican brand or tradition. Alistair Cooke perceived, 'Americans seem to be more comfortable with Republican presidents because they share the common frailty of muddled syntax and because, when they attempt eloquence, they so tend to spout a kind of Frontier Baroque.'⁴⁶ However the communication style and strategy used by Palin was thought to be so removed from common political discourse it became an ongoing focus of elite media attention through the campaign. Bob Herbert of the New York Times considered that, 'For Ms. Palin, such things as context, syntax and the proximity of answers to questions have no meaning.'⁴⁷ This affected the ability of Palin to get her message across to the wider electorate. It was increasingly not what she said that drew the attention, but how she said it, and as a consequence the clarity of her message, and the ability of the populace to associate her with distinctive and identifiable messages became clouded. In part Palin's brand was accentuated and indeed distinctive because of the nature and style of her rhetoric. Her accent was considered to be reflective of her background and betrayed an unaffected and 'real' dialect. This appeared to converge with the concept of the overall populist brand and remit that Palin advocated. 'The impression fits with the overall theme that Ms. Palin and Senator John McCain have been trying to advance: that expertise is overrated, homespun sincerity is better than sophistication, conviction is more important than analysis.'⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Peggy Noonan, 'A Servant's Heart' Wall Street Journal 5 September 2008.

⁴⁵ Bob Herbert, 'Palin's Words Raise Red Flags' New York Times 27 September 2008

⁴⁶ Cited in, Maureen Dowd, 'Sarah's Pompom Palaver' New York Times 5 October 2008

⁴⁷ Bob Herbert, 'Palin's Alternate Universe' New York Times 4 October 2008

⁴⁸ Steven Pinker, 'Everything You Heard Is Wrong' New York Times 4 October 2008

The interaction with the press, and concentration on issues which involved negative traits of Palin's campaign was perceived by poll samples, suggesting an understanding that the political product being shown on television and in the press was skewed in its presentation. PEW found, '...few than four-in-ten (38%) say the press has been fair to Sarah Palin. Many more believe the press has been too tough on Palin (38%) than say it has been too easy.'⁴⁹ Coverage of Palin also proved to be problematic. By the end of October 46% of a poll sample believed that they had heard too much about the vice-presidential candidate, signifying weariness at the extent and the tone of the coverage, on personal as well as political issues.⁵⁰

In communicating a message to the populace Palin's utilization of new media has been considered to defy political convention. It was targeted narrowly at her supporters and those disposed to embrace her message. This had been a pronounced feature of her political position following the election race and her decision to forego her position of Governor of Alaska. Her embrace of new media, particularly the internet and social networking sites, to attract and communicate with her supporters was evident in a limited form during the 2008 campaign itself. Yet, the selling of Palin as an individual online during the campaign had observable limitations. *Google Trends* suggested a great deal of interest in Palin and her position as Vice President, yet neither camp had purchased rights to her individual name. She was branded as being on the ticket with McCain, but there were initially no links from McCain's election website to Palin as an individual. The Republican team branding approach, irrespective of whether Palin was the hot media topic of the period, appears to have dominated the marketing agenda at the expense of the individual candidates. Yet, as discussed earlier the emphasis was on distancing the candidates from tight party branding. Danny Sullivan, an authority on search engines and marketing observed, 'Yes the campaign in 2008 seemed to understand more about search than in 2004. Certainly they know about placing the ads, but they seem to have much more to learn about the other key aspect of search marketing – converting people by showing them what they wanted when they arrived.'⁵¹

Conclusion

The branding and marketing of Sarah Palin in the 2008 election campaign struggled to create a successful backdrop to her own individual identity or that of her party ticket. In part the lessons that can be derived from her candidacy involve the successful identification of a target consumer group, deemed central to the outcome of the election, followed by an inability to convey a sellable product into the market for highly contested votes. Palin started out as a candidate whom, it was thought, might have bridged an ideological divide and brought disaffected voters into the Republican camp. By polling day it was clear that her primary function during the election was to shore up the core Republican vote. From her acceptance speech at the convention it was clear that part of Palin's marketability rested on her personality and the appearance that she was an

⁴⁹ 'Many Say Press Has Been Too Tough on Palin' PEW Research Center for the People & the Press 9 October 2008 [www.people-press.org]

⁵⁰ 'SNL Appearance, Wardrobe Flap Register Widely: Palin Fatigue Now Rivals Obama Fatigue' PEW Research Centre for the People & the Press 29 October 2008 [www.people-press.org]

⁵¹ Danny Sullivan, 'Search Marketing and the US Presidential Race, Case Study: Sarah Palin' Search Engine Land 29 August 2008 [www.searchengineland.com]

authentic individual in an era of manufactured political figures. It was hoped that this would forge a bridge with independent voters and those previously disaffected with the Bush presidency. Her gender and lifestyle was conducive to attracting Wal-Mart moms to the cause. However, the personal attributes advanced by Palin conflicted with consideration of her as a serious and viable political leader.

The initial positioning of Palin's brand was designed to complement McCain's position. The prominence of the candidates took precedence over the marketing of a party brand on account of difficulties in selling neo-conservatism in a positive form. However a problem with the campaign of 2008 was that it became increasingly difficult to accurately identify what the party product was, bar a populist mandate and the embrace of Joe-the-Plumber as an indicator of generalised Republican affinity with small town America. While Palin's political appeal initially was forged on her character and personality, her exposure as an individual who seemed ill-equipped to address matters of policy created a different understanding and dimension to her brand. In a time of financial crisis Palin did not appear to be experienced enough to address pressing matters of state. Her brand oscillated from that of an engaging and authentic personality to one which entertained more orthodox political themes. Her repositioning, as more became known of her, placed her more firmly in a traditional Republican role, as the bearer of a Republican legacy forged by Ronald Reagan. Her appeal to women in particular, including those on low incomes became increasingly marginal, while her appeal to bedrock Republicans and social conservatives was enhanced. In large part Palin's candidacy returned that which might have conventionally been expected, a Republican with a Republican brand who solidified the Republican vote.