

Brandspeak: A Brand Becomes a Presidential Candidate—Donald Trump

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The world of politics is experiencing rough times as it tries to digest stunning news: Donald Trump will [likely](#) become the presidential candidate of the Republican Party in the US. Seldom before has political expertise delivered more erroneous prognoses. And more than ever before, the rest of the world is struggling to believe what appears to be politically possible in the US.

For those involved in the world of politics, Trump is by and large an inexplicable catastrophe. “This is how fascism comes to America,” as Robert Kagan [opined](#) in the *Washington Post* last month.

Yet his success thus far is a triumph for political **marketing**, the proof of its powerful ability “to create reality” as Foucault put it. **Marketing** experts appear hardly surprised that “Donald Trump’s **brand** is so successful... The very things Trump is doing that look like political suicide are only reinforcing his **brand**,” TIME [commented](#) last August.

Donald Trump is a successful businessman, especially in the eyes of his fellow Americans since he experienced and bounced back from bankruptcy. He learned his lesson and turned from selling real estate to productively implementing a new strategy: selling himself as a **brand**. Now, as the presumptive Republican nominee, he is celebrating his biggest success so far.

The Brand’s Core: Power

“Trump is the first **brand** to run for president,” as Elizabeth Drew [wrote](#) in the *New York Review of Books* last month. As a **brand**, Donald Trump is a skillfully **designed** construct, a presidential candidate with a bewitching mixture of “reality television star and wealthy businessman.” For relevant target groups—primarily active Republican voters—this **brand** is irresistibly attractive.

The core of the **brand** is *power*. Electrifying power. Trump, the **brand**, does not actually have to possess power. Rather it suffices to convincingly convey the impression of being powerful.

The **brand**’s attributes are:

- *Experienced* in a way that matters for real-life situations rather than in politics. “I know

the Chinese. I've made a lot of money with the Chinese."

- *Self-confident*. Completely blunt, nonchalantly sure of itself. "Show me someone without an ego, and I'll show you a loser."
- *Independent*. Not caught in the constraints of the political system and not tied to the corset of political correctness. "Hypocrites argue that a man who loves and appreciates beautiful women ... shouldn't become a national leader. "
- *Successful*. Irrefutably so to fellow countrymen: "I'm really rich."

This **brand** does not need a complex political program. To announce its mission, a catchy slogan of a few words suffices: "Make America Great Again." The **brand**'s appearance is considered "exciting and funny." Whether travelling by private plane, tossing out repeatedly entertaining verbal attacks or sporting a baseball cap, it captures attention.

The audience is always thrilled, excited by the new, hungry for the next unexpected move, ready for any destructive, otherwise unforgivable misstep. This forms the basis of the **brand**'s media strategy and provides unpaid communication, gratuitous reporting. The media world reliably delivers.

And competition? From within the party that the **brand** has chosen as its sales platform, there is none. Only "morons," "dummies," and "lightweights."

The Brand's Attitude: Insult and Provoke

This **brand** recklessly offends good judgment. For open-minded people, it presents a frightening provocation. For responsible politicians, it is hardly digestible. In the political world, it is unthinkable and not particularly promising.

Yet how does this work within the **marketing** world based on prevailing economic rationality? **Marketing**, adhering to the concept of functional rationality, aims to single-mindedly maximize success rather than pay too much attention to questions regarding what the benefits (or costs) might actually be. Its ambition revolves around minimizing the effort to achieve a given goal. Only the way the goal is achieved is interesting. **Marketing** activities are based on a crude "success ethics" (as *Otfried Hoffe* put it) and the pretense of ethical neutrality. Economic rationality is not unreasonable but does not follow reason.

The Trump **brand** cannot be criticized for successfully playing by these rules. In today's world, the ubiquitous application of **marketing** logic to increasingly more areas in our society lends a high degree of legitimacy to Trump's success—even if unintentionally so.

And now?

How will things evolve? **Marketing** plays an increasingly popular role as a recipe for success. However the history of **marketing** is also the history of flops. The Trump **brand** may still fail in the chaos of the upcoming Republican convention. And enough frightened voters may interrupt the record of success and come between Trump and the White House. Past election records indicate that only a small number of votes is needed to decide the presidential election between

the two major parties. In the worst-case scenario, the successful Trump **brand** may still mesh with the gears of the US political system. After all, that also happened to Obama.

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