

Give Your Logo Power Beyond Words

By John Maas

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The campaign: Obama

The tactic: A campaign logo that conveys – and spreads — the brand message without words.

The business takeaway: The stickiness of a logo has as much to do with the design as how it's used — and how you let others use it.



Until Bush-Cheney unveiled its bold, iconic "W '04" design, made-for-bumper-sticker treatments of candidates' names and flag-like illustrations have long described the creative limits of campaign logos. The 2008 Obama campaign's iconic "O" logo, however, broke the mold. It's not just the most successful logo in modern political marketing, it's also become a powerful and memorable logo that stands up against more familiar corporate brands.

The Obama logo was created early in 2007, through a collaboration between Chicago firms Sender LLC and MO/DE. Chief Obama strategist David Axelrod gave the agencies a mandate: design a logo that would evoke "a new sense of hope," as he told the *Chicago Business Journal*. The agencies

worked quickly, and on February 10, 2007, when Obama officially announced his candidacy, the newly minted logo was already emblazoned on his podium, along with thousands of signs waving in the arms of devotees.

“Logos should be simple. They should not require a great deal of interpretation,” says design critic Steven Heller. An abstract logo can be a symbol of a brand’s narrative, he adds. Obama’s narrative shows in the red stripes (rolling farmland as heartland values or flag stripes as patriotism) and the semi-circle (sunrise as hope), framed by the initial “O.”

But the real success isn’t the logo’s visual power. “How it’s used makes the difference,” says Michael Bierut, a partner with leading design firm Pentagram, “and how it’s used is the big lesson for businesses.” The Obama team has blanketed every [official campaign space](#) with the familiar “O,” borrowing a trick from the Nike playbook. The shoe company’s famous swoosh means nothing, Bierut says, but “you think it means something because Nike has made it ubiquitous.”

But Obama’s team took that concept a step further – they allowed campaign managers to adapt the logo for different constituents. The [Kids for Obama](#) group, for instance, uses a version of the logo drawn in finger paint, and the campaign’s [Obama Pride](#) effort swaps rainbow stripes for the red-and-white horizon. But the simple, recognizable design has also inspired many “unofficial” uses. [The Logobama Web site](#), for instance, allows visitors to insert their own photo into the logo, and the site [Yes We Carve](#) posts photos of Obama-themed jack o’ lanterns. Such eager brand proliferation by the public is the sign of a successful logo. Bierut says Pentagram client Harley-Davidson knew their branding was a success because customers “go through the time, trouble, and personal discomfort to have that logo tattooed on their bodies.”

Bierut points out that the logo is only part of a strong overall branding package, which includes obsessive consistency right down to the official campaign font. And then there’s the product itself — a great logo can’t save a foundering brand. Heller brings up the example of Enron, whose logo, developed by design legend Paul Rand, became the object of derision once the company sank into scandal. Successful branding only works when there’s a strong product to back it up. “Would Obama have a great campaign without all this?” asks Heller. “Probably.” But with a strong logo, “it all gets packaged into one piece.”