



5 Lessons from Donald Trump

Q: Is it true there really is no such thing as bad publicity?

A: To answer this question, let's look no further than Donald Trump, the ultimate publicity machine. This past summer, Trump stole the nation's attention, generating extensive media coverage from critics predicting that his controversial remarks would lead to his demise as a presidential candidate, as well as from promoters suggesting that his ability to generate attention gave him a significant advantage over his competitors.

Given how fleeting media attention can be, Trump may have crashed and burned by the time you read this column. But there are still valuable lessons you can learn from what's gone on with him this year.

Stand for something clearly. Of the nearly 20 presidential hopefuls from the Republican Party, Trump has managed to stand out. He enjoys salience because of his controversial comments and unvarnished style. Trump hasn't tried to stay within the confines of the Republican Party, nor has he been worried about offending people—he picks the topics he wants to talk about and says what he wants to say. Whether people agree or disagree with his positions, they've been talking about him because there's something to talk about. It's been harder for people to form opinions about most other candidates because they haven't clearly stated their positions or done anything remarkable.

As a limited-service restaurant operator, are you giving people something to talk about? Are you clear about what your brand stands for? Are you ignoring the rules or expectations of the category and creating and executing on the very best concept that you can conceive?

De-position your competitors. Trump has made the rest of the Republican field seem quite moderate. Rand Paul and Ted Cruz had been considered by many as anti-establishment candidates until Trump entered the scene and started expressing extreme opinions. Trump also stole the media celebrity stage from Hillary Clinton. Are you doing things that make your competitors' moves seem irrelevant or milquetoast? Instead of following trends and trying to jump on the latest news cycle, are you actually creating the trends and the news?

Be real and spontaneous. Trump seems to say whatever is on his mind and in no uncertain terms. His real and spontaneous style contrasts sharply with most other candidates, who seem to stick to rehearsed messages and prescribed personas—and many people find it refreshing. Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban expressed a widely held assessment of Trump when he told *Business Insider*, "He says what's on his mind. He gives honest answers rather than prepared answers."

Just as voters pine for straight-talking political candidates, customers want transparency and honesty from companies. Are you upfront with your customers about your food sources, quality, service policies, and pricing? Are you willing to admit when you make a mistake? Are you training and coaching your employees to interact with customers as individuals instead of following scripts and strict procedures?

Pick partners wisely. While Trump has appealed to some people, he has also offended many others, including many of his business partners and sponsors. NBCUniversal, Macy's, and Serta were among Trump's partners that discontinued relationships with him based on his remarks during his presidential campaign kickoff speech. Univision dropped its coverage of the Miss Universe pageant because Trump owned it, and several organizations, including NASCAR, ESPN, and the PGA, distanced themselves from him.

Partners who act inappropriately or make contentious public statements represent a huge business risk to you. Make sure you thoroughly vet your business partners, including suppliers, franchisees, sponsored organizations, and contractors such as delivery service providers. Do they share your values? Have you made clear your expectations for what is on-brand and what is out of bounds? Are you monitoring their media activity? Do you have a plan for quickly discontinuing or modifying your partnership if necessary?

Watch out for rogue employees. The Republican Party has learned an important lesson with Trump about the people representing its brand. At the time I'm writing this column, opinions were split between Trump hurting or helping the GOP, but it was clear the party hadn't expected him or his antics. And its early attempts to quash him or downplay his influence were unsuccessful.

The situation between political party and candidate is not unlike companies and employees. The Republican Party cannot control Trump, just as you cannot control your employees. Each of your employees affects customer perception of your brand in some way, and employees who don't meet expectations or follow procedures or who just want to do their own thing can cause serious problems. Of course, you can fire them, but in some cases, the damage may have already been done.

Your best defense is to hire, train, and coach your people carefully. Do you hire slowly? Do you ensure your employees understand and respect your values? Do you educate, equip, and empower them to be good ambassadors for your brand?

In no way is this meant as an endorsement of Trump or an expression of my political views. I am always looking for what we can learn from different angles and sources; Trump has provided valuable lessons in his successes and his screw-ups. ☑