

How did Obama *connect (and win) with* Gen Y?



AS A LEADER OF TODAY you are unlikely to have missed the election of America's 44th President in one form or another. In fact, you're probably wondering, how did he do that? Or, how could we do some of that? We know the Director of Internal Communications at Virgin is already asking this question on her blog: *Can we replicate that in Virgin Media?*

In this article we will unpack these two core questions – **what was so appealing about Barack Hussein Obama** that ensured he won the highest ever Generation Y vote for the presidency? And, then, **what can we learn as we seek to engage the next generation of leaders, consumers and collaborators?**

Digest these statistics: the BBC reported that Obama won the votes of those under 30 by 68% to 31%! From the US-based CNBC news channel we can further add that this was the highest ever score of the youth vote achieved by any presidential candidate ever (since exit polls began in 1976). Here's the crunch... out of the total number of voters 10% were voting for the first time, and in this group 72% voted for Obama, and in the sub-30 (largely Generation Y) category 69% voted for Obama (compared to just 28% in favour of McCain). So, *Why?*

Stories

'Behind every statistic there is a story' said the newly elected President in his weekly video log ('vlog') from the White House, addressing the nation. Indeed he's quite good at telling stories: with everyone from YouTube and to the tabloid newspapers telling *his* story across the world. *'I stand here knowing that my story, is part of a larger American story... and that in no other country on earth is my story even possible'* (Obama). He only met his father once for a month when he was 10; his grandparents grew up in Kansas; they were brought up during the great depression; his grandfather fought in the army; his grandmother worked on an assembly line; we know the young Barack would be woken at 04:30 in the morning to do his lessons; that he would grumble at having to wake up so early and his mother would respond saying "well this is no picnic for me either Buster". From this perspective he's kind of normal. Loveable, almost.

We know his list of values: from 'treating everyone equal', 'hard work', 'honesty', 'self-reliance', 'empathy', 'kindness', 'faithfulness' and 'Christianity'. We know he is able to connect with the ordinary voter in the middle class (almost half of his \$670 million raised came from small donors giving \$300 or less); with white collar workers (in fact the top two states by 'donation count' were California and New York – together donating close to \$150 million – two of the most influential cities in the United States, business-wise); and business executives (for example SONY BMG Chairman Andrew Lack, who gave just over \$30k).

We know Barack Obama! And that's half the point. We know so much about Obama that it almost feels as if we know him personally. The 'Stories' insured he was first, amiable (the little boy called 'buster'); second, admired (surviving against the odds and winning over the system); and third, 'normal' (his parents raised him on school and honest values). Oh... and he was extremely talented at telling his story. Generation Y lapped this up. They love *stories*, they love people that are inspirational that paint big visions and they have a tendency to side with the underdog – to make them believe that maybe, one day, that will be them.

Vision

Obama created a new vision and was able to communicate it such that he achieved agreement from his supporters. This inspired a generation to take ownership for communicating this to their peers. It signalled their backing for the 'audacity of hope'. 'We are Americans' he said, 'We can do anything if we put our minds to it'. Why is this clever? It's a story that appeals to our subconscious without believing that he is trying to sell us a vision. But he is already. He's telling a third party story, (which includes the audience), that draws them in, because every time Obama says something the audience finds themselves nodding in agreement. One of our clients recently started a 'cultural transformation programme' and in this document they stated that the reason why they wanted to implement this new culture was that it would enable them to 'transform their industry'. That is a bold claim. When we saw the faces of the Emerging Talent group that would be a part of the team to help do this, their eyes lit up. They realised they were on the edge of something huge, and they wanted to be on the winning side.

Ownership

On the campaign website Obama writes this: "I'm asking you to believe. Not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington... I'm asking you to believe in yours." He was asking for their support. He didn't just say, "I'm going to do this", he said "If we really want this, If you believe it, I need your support to make it happen" Suddenly Obama and the American supporters were on a journey together. This led to enormous public participation in many different forms. User generated content played one of the biggest roles it will have ever in any election worldwide (remember Obama Girl?). Looking at this you might think, well that's just stupid, a bit of fun. But how many views did this one piece of home-made video have? In excess of 13 million! Does it have to do with the girl in the video? Most probably! And...Does it raise the subconscious, is it viral (does it have a 'pass it on' quality), and did it appeal to Generation Y? Three 'Yes-es', better still, its UGC! They felt a part of a team and they knew that their role was to create as much publicity for their cause as possible. Another great example is the Microsoft 'I'm a PC campaign' – which created mass UGC. The paradigm shift is in the *distribution* ability.

Community

This leads us to our third point: Obama used, very effectively, 16 social networking sites – ranging from 'Facebook', 'MySpace' and 'Twitter' to 'AsianAve', 'Faithbase' and 'Eons' – to build a community of supporters aggregated in one place to whom he could blog (well, someone on his behalf we imagine), and importantly with whom he created a two-way dialogue (as opposed to a web-based corporate bill-board of promises summed up in values, behaviours and future projects). Our generation probably learned more about Obama from social media than we did from his website, or any written document. Log on to any of these and we can rate him, tweet and retweet him, vlog in response to his vlog or offer an opinion. In so-doing we felt listened to. Furthermore Obama espoused the generation y motto 'ask, don't tell'. It's genius. Generation Y wants a 'conversation', not just a static page of content and a load of promises. In these communities we can find out more about him whenever we want. He appears 'transparent'.

Obama won this race with our generation because: his story had 'viral' quality (and we passed it round); He gave Generation Y a vision (and asked for their support to achieve it). He gave them ownership for achieving it (and used social media incredibly well to create a dialogue) with this voter demographic. Oh, and did we mention that behind every successful president is a 27 year old speech writer?

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Follow the team blog at www.nakedgenerations.com/blog or www.twitter.com/nakedgen_chris

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