Case Study: The duality of Boris Johnson's political brand identity

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Political Brand Identity

Boris Johnson has had a tricky time as UK prime minister of late. He faces criticism that he has mishandled the national response to the coronavirus crisis, leading to public confusion and a very high death toll. I would argue that part of Johnson's struggle stems from his political brand. He has been successful as a politician by projecting a certain image to the public. But now, in a moment of extreme pressure, that image does not provide the reassurances the public needs. Johnson has spent recent months attempting to pivot towards a new political brand, but he hasn't made it all the way there. Now, what is left is a confusing mixture of brands – leaving the British public uncertain of what to expect from the prime minister, and perhaps even the prime minister himself uncertain of how to act. Every politician has a political brand identity. They may not care to accept this proposition or agree with the terminology, but they do. For centuries, they have attempted to create, develop and manage a desired position that represents "what they stand for". The hope is that this will then resonate with the electorate and win them office.

The Boris brand

The prime minister actually seems to have two "Boris" brands. Before taking the top job, "Boris" was positioned as "Boris the comic" – confident, humorous, entertaining, admirable. He was a maverick who often strayed from the party line and was, most importantly, relatable to a wide spectrum of voters. Dishevelled blonde hair, theatrical one-liners and optimistic energy were tools that set him apart from his rivals as a non-traditional politician. In many ways, "Boris the comic" was an example of a politician who built an identity around style over substance, focusing more on soundbites, photo opportunities, stunts and imagery. The second Boris emerged just prior to Johnson's elevation to Downing Street. He seemed to recognise that extra characteristics needed to be added to his brand at this point in his career. Johnson and his team attempted to position him as "Boris the commander" – a strong, decisive leader, eye-for-detail, in-touch, prime ministerial, honest and accountable.

However, these characteristics were, arguably, contradictory to the original "Boris the comic" brand. Indeed, "Boris the commander" seems paradoxical to "Boris the comic". The aim now seems to be to build identity around substance over style. But for the public, that leaves the crucial question: which is the real Boris? Johnson needs to be careful and take stock. Successful political brands need to be clear, consistent, authentic and believable otherwise they can alienate, confuse and disengage the voting public. If people lose trust, faith and respect with political brands, then loyalty can diminish and support can fade away. While a general election in the UK is unlikely before 2024, it can be difficult to recover and regain trust and support once lost.

Get Brexit Done

On the first day as prime minister, Boris proclaimed on the steps of Downing Street that the British people "have had enough of waiting" and his job was to was "get Brexit Done" – a slogan that defined his premiership campaign and the election that followed. Back then, it was clear that the team behind Johnson was in firm control of the brand. Fast-forward six months and the world is very different. The public are losing confidence and trust in Johnson's ability to manage the coronavirus crisis. Voters are questioning his credibility, trustworthiness, decisiveness and leadership. Johnson has faced calls to sack his chief political adviser Dominic Cummings after he broke UK lockdown rules during the pandemic. Johnson's government was also forced into a series of u-turns, such as the decision to end funding for free school meals for England's poorest families over the summer holidays. And above all, people want to know why so many have died from COVID-19.

Boris the 'Comic' or Boris the 'Commander'?

All this switching around, changes of mind, carelessness for the rules is more in line with the brand of Boris the joker. Johnson has become attached to this brand over the years – and it has been successful for him, so perhaps it's no surprise to see the old brand seeping in. Unfortunately, though, this brand is wholly unsuited to this moment of global crisis, when the public is looking for a steady hand. The last six months may have given the public first-hand experience of "Boris the commander" and it seems to have delivered him lower levels of approval and confidence. And yet the original Boris brand won't work now either. Team Johnson could still have time to reposition his political brand, address the confusion of two distinct identifies and could create a new identity for voters to fall in love with again. After all, Johnson is still perceived as "likeable" and "best placed to get things done". This suggests the brand can be salvaged.

But a hybrid approach, blending joker with commander, would merely add to the confusion and chaos. Johnson needs to reflect on his current brand and vision for the nation. Johnson needs to commit to either the "comic", "commander" or a completely new brand identity rather than flit between the two. And he must do this sooner rather than later. The longer the confusion festers, the longer it will damage his electablity.