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# MARKETING LEADERSHIP IN GOVERNMENT

Communicating  
Responsiveness,  
Leadership  
and Credibility

**Edward Elder**



Palgrave Studies in Political Marketing  
and Management

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# Marketing Leadership in Government

Communicating Responsiveness, Leadership  
and Credibility

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# Resolving the Listening versus Leadership Dilemma

**Abstract** This chapter outlines the changing relationship between political elites and the public. It outlines the challenges of political office contemporary leaders face in trying to both listen to the public to stay popular and make sound decisions to stay effective. This chapter does this to argue that effective communication is the key to balancing these two broad, yet sometimes contradictory, requirements of governing leadership. It will highlight how governing leaders' communication is moving away from traditional, one-dimensional, selling and issue pushing and towards contemporary, multi-dimensional, relationship building. Therefore, this chapter will highlight a new model for governing leaders' communication.

**Keywords** Communication • Market-orientation • John Key • Barack Obama • Public opinion

## INTRODUCTION

Political communication strategies continually evolve. One of the key factors in this evolution is the changing relationship between the public and political elites in Western society. The public have become less loyal to particular political parties and demand more from their elected officials than a shared ideological vision. Therefore, political elites are increasingly adopting a market-orientation, which includes greater responsiveness to

public demand in the evaluation and alteration of their overall product and brand. This is especially true for party leaders, who are often symbolic of this product and brand. However, governing leaders are faced with difficult decisions and constraints not present during their attempt to gain office. Such challenges hinder the preservation of the qualities associated with market-oriented behaviour. This can negatively affect the public's perception of not only the leader, but the government as a whole. The added challenges and restrictions of government often leave them less able to listen, adapt, and seem in touch with public demands. But the public do not expect governing leaders to follow the public whim. They expect governing leaders to show true leadership around difficult and polarising decisions. So there is a dichotomy; the public want governing leaders to lead while also being responsive to their criticisms, concerns, and overall demands. So what is the problem? Recent history shows that, once in office, governing leaders often revert to traditional communication strategies based on highlighting positives while disregarding or ignoring concern and criticism. This style of communication does not correlate with the responsiveness that is expected in contemporary political leaders.

Over the last decade, however, possible resolutions to this issue have become apparent, with governing leaders changing the way they communicate with the public to highlight how they are listening to the public, even when they do not follow public demand. This book highlights how contemporary governing leaders have used, and could further use, a new style of communication strategy in an attempt to alleviate the public image problems caused by the challenges of office through a new model, the Contemporary Governing Leaders' Communication Model.

## THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL ELITES AND THE PUBLIC

Over the last half century, the public's unequivocal allegiance to political parties has diminished. Until the late 1960s, the consistency of social structures such as religion, family, as well as socio-economic and regional positioning strongly influenced personal and political identity in many Western democracies. Most voters held a strong ideological affinity towards a particular political party. As a result, conventional wisdom was that politicians' electoral success was based on their ability to sell policies designed around their traditional ideological beliefs and principles (Buchanan, 2001: 362–5). Since the late 1960s, however, the influence of

these social structures has declined, which has contributed to the declining attachment many citizens have towards particular political parties (Norris, 2005). Voters are now more influenced by political parties' positions on an ever-changing list of key issues and the performance and personality of candidates than their broad ideological beliefs. If a party or candidate does not sufficiently satisfy voter demand, they will likely take their vote elsewhere (Delacourt, 2013).

### POLITICAL MARKETING AND THE MARKET-ORIENTATION

Therefore, political parties are increasingly applying commercial marketing concepts, strategies, and techniques to achieve their goals (Henneberg & O'Shaughnessy, 2002). This practice is seen in a number of areas including, but not exclusive to, e-marketing (see Williams & Gulati, 2014), internal marketing (see Pettit, 2012), and branding (see Cosgrove, 2007). Political strategy, which looks at how political actors design and enact product qualities in an effort to reach particular strategic end goals, is a cornerstone of political marketing. One of the major strategic theories is the market-orientation. Broadly speaking, a market-orientation involves political actors creating or adjusting their product, such as their policies, internal structures, and leaders, to better correlate with, rather than try and create, voter demand (Lilleker & Negrine, 2006: 33). Numerous models outline what market-oriented behaviour looks like, including those by Newman (1994: 32), Ormrod (2005: 4), and Lees-Marshment (2001: 30–41).<sup>1</sup> While there are differences of opinion around the specifics of what a market-orientation is, the general consensus is that a market-orientation involves being in touch, interested in, and responsive to the views and concerns of the public. This involves conducting market intelligence and developing policies and positions accordingly. It also involves being able to demonstrate this through behaviour (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 525). This does not mean blindly following public opinion. Rather, the market-orientation emphasises the need to make sure that the public voice is listened to and respected from the beginning of the product development process (Mortimore & Gill, 2010: 258). But there are many other factors that need to be taken into consideration during this process including different stakeholders, the long-term costs and benefits, the need for consistency, as well as party history and ideology. Many political parties and candidates that have adopted a market-orientation have also enjoyed electoral success, including US President Bill Clinton (Newman, 1994), the

Tony Blair-led UK Labour Party (Bartle, 2002), the Stephen Harper-led Canadian Conservative Party (Turcotte, 2011) and the Helen Clark-led New Zealand Labour Party (Rudd, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

## THE CHALLENGES OF GOVERNMENT

Politicians should continue with a market-orientated strategy once in government to maintain public trust in their brand (Scammell, 1999: 728) while allowing them to keep their ear to the ground and adapt accordingly (Lees-Marshment, 2009a). This is especially important for governing leaders such as Presidents and Prime Ministers, who, as a key symbol of the government brand, need to embody a market-orientation both strategically and in communication (Helms, 2008: 42–3). But in office, these leaders face difficult decisions and constraints that hinder the preservation of a market-orientation and a positive public image. Being in government means leaders have to take action rather than just talk about action in the hypothetical. They are privy to information not available to the public and the opposition (Hamilton, 2001) and need to look at the long-term effect of their decisions, even if they are unpopular in the short term (Cohen, 1997: 15). This limits what they can do, say, and change about their own image, policy agenda, and overall product (Ormrod, 2006). Unforeseen circumstances such as economic recessions and natural disasters can also change a government's agenda, hindering their delivery on election promises (Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005b: 25–6). But governing leaders also tend to become more remote in power, as incumbency, the work load, and time constraints do not encourage critical, self-reflective thinking (Lees-Marshment, 2009b; Norton, 1996: 235–7). In essence, the challenges of office make it hard for leaders to maintain one of the main qualities associated with a market-orientation, staying in touch with public opinion. This contributes to the decline in their reputation and positive public image. The realities of government also have an effect on the public's expectation of leaders. Despite the changing relationship between political elites and the public, there is still a public desire for true leadership (Gould, 2007: 21). When a party's product is transferred to government and the real effect they have on public life is more apparent, the public are less willing to accept a leader who follows the whim of public opinion. A lack of conviction shown by a governing leader can also result in a public image of lacking individual vision or a lack of clarity in what the government stands for (Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005b: 26).