Campaign Advertising in the 2020 Presidential Election

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Americans have witnessed every kind of presidential campaign advertisement possible. Whether campaigners use catchy slogans, over-promoted merchandise, or even funny campaign ads that leave the candidates in pain, Americans have seen it all. The road to get to these marketing ploys might be pure luck or a tactical move; what’s important is the ripple effect that these strategies have. Presidential candidates exhaust every single trick in the marketing playbook and even sometimes create new tricks during their campaign. By necessity, presidential candidates must use the newest and most effective marketing tools while also staying vigilant to counter the effective campaign strategies of his/her opposition. In this article I briefly discuss the challenges of modern political campaign advertising and then go on to compare and contrast the ad campaigns strategies of the 2020 presidential candidates.

Donald Trump’s MAGA Brand

As a presidential candidate in 2016, Donald Trump put the slogan “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) at the center of his campaign brand. Although Trump’s campaign rode the technological wave in 2016 and employed significant digital advertising, his campaign also employed old-fashioned techniques such as sloganeering and official campaign merchandise.

Trump’s iconic red “Make America Great Again” hat is a great, and ultimately successful, example of the latter. Initially the hat was created as swag for the Trump campaign but slowly it became an object that was present in every news shot and image of the campaigner. The hat allowed people to see and be seen promoting Trump’s message without audio. Ultimately this was a winning move for the Trump campaign because even with still photographs Trump’s message could reach target audiences.

Look at social media as a marketing tool in the 2016 elections, Trump’s success was due to a multitude of factors. Although some ads promoted Trump himself, other more negative ads sought to simply discourage Clinton’s voters from going to the polls and voting. A number of thorny ethical questions arise, but to this day there are no legal boundaries that forbid this latter marketing method nor put a limit to the amount of the budget spent on these tactics. In recognition of a job well done in 2016, Brad Pascale, the digital campaign manager of Trump’s 2016 campaign, was promoted to campaign manager for Trump’s 2020 re-election.

One of Trump’s strong suits is managing conversation during interviews. He has a businessman’s charisma and a politician’s ability to dodge unwanted questions. However, with the

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Coronavirus pandemic, as of this writing in May 2020, he hasn’t been able to take part in these interviews to the same extent in 2020 as he did in 2016, which is a blow to his campaign.4

Meanwhile, Trump’s 2020 campaign continues to update their marketing tactics and improve their digital ad campaign.5 As present, Trump’s digital advertisements are not limited to Facebook. In fact, Trump run personalized advertisements on many mobile apps. In 2020, Trump may be able to build on his first mover advantage in these new digital ad spaces.

**Financing Campaign Ads**

With the advent of increasingly technologically advanced marketing techniques and the need to get their message out in new ways, the budget spent on presidential campaigns has increased exponentially.6 The competition between candidates for the number of advertisements and their reach potential as well as the length of the campaign, which usually begins around a year before elections, has also contributed to this growth in campaign spending.7 Fundraising is therefore more important than ever to pay for campaign advertising.

**Targeting Ads and Fake News**

Unlike in the past, campaign funds invested in a digital campaign now have the ability to target specific audiences with tailored messages (micro-targeting and nano-targeting), and then track their reaction. This personalized ad technology has become a highly effective method with potential voters. However, one troubling aspect of political digital marketing that I would like to highlight is that one candidate can simultaneously run different ads that promise completely different things and promote different ideals in front of different groups of people.8

Contrast two types of political ads. Positive ads are used to paint a candidate in a favorable light. By contrast, negative attack ads aim to paint the opposing candidate in the worst light possible so that potential voters are less inclined to vote for them. The benefit of a candidate using negative targeted advertising works in effective by tarring their competitors’ reputation. As there are no special laws that restrict this type of advertising (beyond general slander laws), there are virtually no boundaries or limits to the marketing team’s imagination and creativity, which in turn can push negative campaign ads to the borders of fake news.

**COVID-19 Effects on Campaigning**

During a time where going outside and participating in big social events puts people’s health and lives in danger, presidential candidates have to use alternative ways to communicate with voters. Traditional campaigning methods such as giving speeches and rallies seem out of the question since they involve gathering large numbers of people in a confined space.

President Trump has taken advantage of his position as the president and has been using the daily coronavirus briefings to campaign for his re-election, as basically free ad time.9 Critics find it distasteful that the current President is using such a big platform to campaign and talk up his accomplishments as president rather than to more narrowly discuss strategies to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

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There has also been talk about a situation/election where the candidates might be incapacitated.\textsuperscript{10} As both Trump and Joe Biden are in their seventies, they are both at a higher risk of health complication if they contract the virus.\textsuperscript{11} Should either candidate contract the virus, it could pose challenges (and perhaps opportunities) for their advertising campaigns.

**2020 Democratic Presidential Candidates’ Digital Campaigns**

Having now laid out Trump’s advertising record and discussed some of the central issues in 2020 election advertising in general, I now turn to review the advertising campaigns of the leading presidential candidates during the 2020 Democratic Party primary race.

*Joe Biden.* Biden was one of the very few candidates who had a substantial budget for digital marketing from the start of his presidential campaign, making up 20 percent of his $280 million ad budget.\textsuperscript{12} Although this budget may have been slowly reduced, Biden campaign staff have also noted that untraditional advertising channels such as Spotify, Hulu and Amazon have been used to spread Biden’s message.\textsuperscript{13} In 2020, Biden has “more than tripled the amount of money his campaign is spending on Facebook ads.”\textsuperscript{14} That increase was most probably due to both his Super Tuesday success and COVID-19 lockdowns.

Biden has also been a victim or target of fake advertising. In April 2020, for example, Twitter reported that it was taking down a fake Biden ad, which showed the candidate in an unflattering way with a beam of light coming from his chest.\textsuperscript{15} The source of the ad is unknown but Trump’s campaign staff wasted no time retweeting it. Former Trump campaign staff have confirmed the use of targeted negative attack ads in the 2016 presidential campaign, but as of now there is no confirmed use of that type of advertisement in the 2020 campaign.

*Mike Bloomberg.* Bloomberg spent half a billion dollars on advertisements alone, the bulk of which were television TV ads.\textsuperscript{16} Bloomberg has managed to dominate this area of marketing and was sometimes the only candidate that advertised on television.\textsuperscript{17} Yet more and more of his ads are also concentrated on social media websites such as Facebook and Google.

It is also worth mentioning Bloomberg’s Instagram advertisements. His “Meme 2020 project” involved asking Instagram accounts and influencers with a big following to post memes about Bloomberg in order to promote himself to a younger audience.\textsuperscript{18} Bloomberg asked these social media accounts to create funny memes about himself and post them in their accounts as sponsored advertisement. Bloomberg seemed to want to achieve what Trump naturally received: popularity on social media, exposure, and resonance with younger voters.


Peter Buttigieg. Buttigieg implemented a “go everywhere” strategy throughout his campaign, according to Buttigieg’s campaign strategist Lis Smith. This strategy is built on taking advantage of every opportunity and every chance of exposure even if the news and media outlets that are used are not a traditional pairing for the candidate. Buttigieg also heavily used mailing lists during his campaign to connect the candidate with like-minded individuals that are very likely to vote for him. However, mailing lists have many limitations as they are restricted to current subscribers and do not reach potential voters who are not included.

Bernie Sanders. Sanders’ campaign team used a combination of technology-driven and grassroots strategies throughout the campaign. He and his team identified a social media strategy that resonates with his young audience. Out of all the Democratic presidential candidate hopefuls, Sanders has been the most consistent with his advertisement content and messages, which has in turn garnered appreciation and respect amongst many Democratic voters.

During the coronavirus pandemic, Sanders has used Twitter and Instagram as digital platforms to connect with his audience. For example, he collaborated on a livestream on both Twitter and Instagram with artist Cardi B (who has 64.2 Million followers on Instagram) and left her fans and his supporters shocked to say the least. He has managed to initiate and maintain contact with his target younger audience but has failed to expand that kind of support and maximize his support base.

Elizabeth Warren. Warren’s advertising strategy focused on the grassroots, as exhibited through her penchant to take selfies with potential voters, engage in one-on-one conversations, and travel state to state in order to promote her campaign. Warren’s campaign relies heavily on such personalized marketing techniques. Her campaign is based on establishing personal connections with undecided Democratic voters in order for them to deepen their trust in her.

Warren also ran Facebook ads that were subject to scrutiny. These ads were mostly news articles about her and her campaign. The link to these advertisements sent the individual straight to the publisher of the article and not to Warren’s campaign website. She got some backlash for using this tactic because it appeared that these news publishers were endorsing her and that their journalists were part of Warren's advertising team. Warren also used one of Bloomberg’s news outlet to promote herself and redirect to another news website called Salon.

Conclusion
Marketing strategies and advertising can be crucial for the success or failure of presidential campaigns. Candidates should not disregard new marketing techniques because of their unfamiliarity. Technology will always serve the advertiser, so candidates should embrace new methods. However, there are ethical boundaries that candidates should not cross with negative attack ads. Better legal frameworks are also necessary to prevent the proliferation of misleading online ads.