

Electoral Campaigns and Marketing Strategy – A Case Study of the Karel Schwarzenberg Campaign

*Authors: Miloš Gregor, PhD candidate, Masaryk University,
Anna Matušková, PhD, Assistant Professor, Charles University*

MANUSCRIPT

Abstract

The chief focus of this case study is on electoral strategy and its role in campaign strategy. Campaign strategy entails a highly complex process comprising various interdependent processes such as market analysis, research, polling, segmentation, strategic communication, opposition research, timing, ongoing analysis of the political environment and, of course, the crucial role played by the candidate himself or herself. Finally, strategy is always adapted to the type of election being run and depends upon the electoral system.

Our initial step is to define what strategy is and how it is understood from the standpoint of political consulting. We then describe a specific electoral campaign, using it to explain strategy creation and the role played by consultants. We build on this by combining a theoretical approach with knowledge gained from practical campaign experience and insider information. The campaign chosen for description is that of presidential candidate Karel Schwarzenberg. This article contributes to evolving research into political marketing and the field of electoral studies in the Czech Republic¹.

Political consulting is an evolving industry in the Czech Republic (Petrova, Matušková 2009) and the role of consultants has not yet been widely analysed. The analysis presented here is exploratory in nature and will contribute to further research.

Keywords:

Campaign, Strategy, Karel Schwarzenberg, Political Consulting, Czech Republic

¹ Fragments of the article were published in Gregor, M., Matušková, A. 2014. *The Presidential Election in the Czech Republic: a Case Study of Karel Schwarzenberg's Campaign Strategy*. In Political Marketing. Principles and Applications. Lees-Marshment, J. (ed). London, New York: Routledge, 2nd Edition. The previously published fragments represents less than 30 per cent of this text.

1.Introduction

The role of professional political consultants in campaigns is not very well understood, at least from a theoretical perspective. As a result, we know very little about how campaign strategy is developed. This article attempts to think about what strategies may be used to support candidates. Strategy is the cornerstone of the electoral campaign. But consensus is lacking among scholars on a definition for the term. A number of viewpoints exist. Some scholars view strategies in terms of the market or marketing orientation of the party or candidate (e.g., Lees-Marshment 2006, Shama 1976, Wring 1997); others see parallels with military strategy (Marland 2003, Smith 2006) or positioning strategies (Baines and Worcester 2006). But while political marketing instruments and their use by candidates now constitute a common research topic, questions to do with marketing strategy and the strategic framework of election campaigns have been neglected (Ormrod et al 2013). Many of the studies that address campaign strategy do so indirectly, taking an organizational perspective. While this body of research has been valuable in understanding how campaign strategy operations function, it has not addressed the content of campaign strategy itself (Medvic 2006).

Whatever our perception of a strategy, we may agree that having one is essential to electoral success (Collins and Butler 2002, Lynch, et al. 2006). How do we define strategy in political marketing? As mentioned above, there are plenty of definitions. Let us at least note the minimal definition put forward by Sigge Nielsen, who sees in political marketing strategy the identification of the purpose of a political entity with the scheme utilized to achieve that purpose (Nielsen 2012). This minimal definition contains three basic elements, which are common to many definitions: a political entity, purpose and scheme. In what follows, the political entity will be identified with Karel Schwarzenberg, a presidential candidate in the 2013 elections. The purpose was to attain the best possible election outcome, i.e., to win the election. The empirical portion of the paper will focus on the campaign scheme, its mechanisms and procedures for achieving the stated purpose.

2. Case Study of Karel Schwarzenberg

This study offers insight into the 2012-2013 presidential race in the Czech Republic.² Prior to this time, there was an almost one-hundred-year-old tradition of indirect presidential elections in the country. The Chamber of Deputies and Senate had always elected president. In 2012, the very first direct vote was scheduled for January 2013 (Musilová and Šedo 2013). The electoral system was a two-round majority electoral system in which a candidate is elected if he or she obtains an absolute majority in the first round of voting. If no candidate manages to do so, the two with the best result during the first round then proceed into the second round, held two weeks later (ibid.).

This study focuses on the campaign of Karel Schwarzenberg, a clear underdog who successfully made it to the second round, a great success considering his support in the polls stood at around 6%. The winner and first directly elected president of the Czech Republic is Miloš Zeman, former Prime Minister and a highly experienced social democratic politician. There was no doubt that Mr. Zeman would be a favourite in the race. But his opponent, Mr. Schwarzenberg, was a rather surprising candidate. He was Minister of Foreign Affairs and leader of the conservative TOP 09 political party. While in government, his popularity had dropped from 70% to 20% and he was a member of the most unpopular government in history. As already noted, his support stood at 6% in summer polling (Gregor and Hrbková 2013) but in the end he attained 23.4% of the vote in the first round and 45.2% in the second round. At 75 years old, Schwarzenberg was also the oldest candidate in the race and his campaign was considered the liveliest and most modern, even to the point of being shocking. It was also the most active candidate in social media, including Facebook (Eibl et al 2013).

We therefore perceive this campaign to be a very successful example of grassroots campaigning and the successful implementation of various campaign

²Both authors were involved in the campaign. Anna Matušková worked as chief strategist and Miloš Gregor was involved as an analyst.

strategies normally found in American campaigns (such as fundraising, GOTV, endorsements, door-to-door campaigning and direct marketing, including e-mails and phone calls). Well each of these elements is important in developing a sound strategy, the foundation of the strategy is the candidate. According to most existing marketing strategy approaches, a sequence of analysis, options, choice, and implementation is regarded as appropriate (Baines and Lynch 2005). The emphasis on strategy shifts the focus from the techniques of promotion to the overall strategic objectives of the candidate (Scammell 1999). This was indeed the case with the presidential campaign of Karel Schwarzenberg.

3.The Campaign Strategy

From a marketing point of view, most important is the market analysis. The Schwarzenberg campaign was officially launched on October 24. But Schwarzenberg had already announced his candidacy in the May 2012 party gathering. The first step was to differentiate him as a candidate from his party, TOP 09, since the party was a member of the highly unpopular centre-right government coalition.

The core team consisted of 20 people under campaign manager Marek Vocol. Subteams were created, including a strategic team, creative team, logistics team, scheduling team, events team, social media team and PR team. During the campaign, the team totalled 40 members in concert with hundreds of volunteers.

The teams started to work in mid-August 2012, facing many obstacles. The electoral law came with a few obligations including that candidates be nominated, that accounts be transparent, that an electoral committee be in place, etc.

The nomination process for party candidates whose parties were represented in Parliament differed from that of independent candidates. Schwarzenberg was a party candidate, so all he required for nomination were the signatures of MPs in his own party. Independent candidates had to collect 50,000 signatures (Franko et al 2013). Many teams had thus been in action since summer 2012, gathering the necessary number of signatures. This created an interesting situation. The

deadline for collecting signatures was the second week of November 2012, complicating polling, opposition research and timing because of the uncertainty as to who would run and who the chief opponent would be. It is clear that no professional campaign should develop its strategy in the absence of polling.

The campaign was divided into four phases (three as part of the first round and the fourth as part of the second round). The first phase was to introduce Schwarzenberg as a solid, genuine candidate. Polling showed that the media and the public did not consider him to be a proper candidate – he was perceived to be too old, not to be taking his candidacy seriously and as being distant from the electorate. Schwarzenberg hails from one of the oldest Czech-Austrian aristocratic families. His family had been forced to leave the country in 1948, so he had spent most of his life in Austria.³ He returned to the Czech Republic in 1990 after the Velvet Revolution, serving as Chancellor to President Václav Havel.⁴ Havel was an exceedingly popular politician and Schwarzenberg was his close friend. Unfortunately, Havel died in November 2012 and one strategic step was to present Schwarzenberg as Havel's logical successor.

The description of the campaign offered is based upon authors' own actual experience. Materials cited are inside campaign sources.

3.1 First Stage – Schwarzenberg: A Solid, Genuine Candidate

Throughout the campaign, the team worked with various polls, surveys and data sources. Some polls were provided by Schwarzenberg's party, TOP 09, in the form of standard monthly omnibus surveys. But it was necessary to understand why Schwarzenberg was losing popularity and was not considered a genuine candidate.

First off, the team ran a benchmark survey with the Millward Brown agency. The results were very interesting, showing Schwarzenberg was number two for a huge section of society, something which was a bit frustrating in the beginning but gave the candidate a huge chance. The crucial need was to analyze the

³ By family tradition, he holds both Swiss and Czech citizenship. He has never held Austrian citizenship, but in spite of this was later characterized as "an Austrian" and a foreigner.

⁴This means he served as an advisor and Chief of Staff for the President.

country both politically and in terms of values, to ask who should be president and what values he should represent, then to cross-reference these responses with the candidate. This data proved exceptionally important. It gave Schwarzenberg a very clear picture of how the political forces were divided, as well as the general mood in the country.

Subsequently, the analytical team ran a series of focus groups in large Czech cities (Prague, Brno, Olomouc and Plzen). The results were once again crucial. Generally the candidate was well known, but people could not associate any political outcomes with him (which was quite frustrating since he was Minister of Foreign Affairs); secondly they criticized his participation in the current government. On the other hand, they had a positive perception of his wealth, with the focus groups reasoning that he would therefore not steal and would be above corruption. Another criticism was that he mumbled in speech, making it difficult to understand him; in fact, he suffers from a speech impediment. Schwarzenberg was also known for falling asleep in Parliament⁵. We asked questions about his family, his wife, Theresa Schwarzenberg, residing in Vienna and other issues. The biggest problems for voters were his presence in the government, his speaking issue and the fact that they found in distant from the common people, too "high-class". Another criticism was he does not understand the life of ordinary citizens. Briefly put, the results were devastating and implied a great deal of work ahead. Marketing strategy lies at the heart of electoral success because it forces a campaign to assemble a winning, relatively stable coalition of diverse, sometimes irreconcilable groups in a very short timeframe (Kotler and Kotler 1981). So the optimal time to fire up the campaign machine had come.

The team's first step was to publish his health status report to prove he was healthy and fully capable of focusing on his duties. This fairly revolutionary step for the Czech Republic was received quite positively. Schwarzenberg's team also focused intensively on explaining why the candidate was running and he himself delivered numerous speeches on the topic. The next step was to get out the story

⁵On a couple of occasions, Schwarzenberg was caught sleeping or dozing during parliamentary sessions or governmental negotiations. He himself made reference to this, saying "I sleep when they talk nonsense." The statement brought a positive perception.

of his life. Schwarzenberg refused to talk about his success or his charitable activities, presenting a complication. The solution was to have other people talk about it. YouTube videos with his supporters were put up: Schwarzenberg had the largest number of supporters in the show business community, as well as academics and scientists.

3.2 Second Stage – Why He Would be the Best President

The second phase of the campaign was launched in October 2012. It was focused on introducing the presidential program. In essence, marketing strategy represents a broad general set of principles – or, in Kotler’s words, a ‘game plan’ – that will achieve the marketing objectives of the candidate (Baines and Lynch 2005). But benefits must also be declared to the voters if one wishes to obtain their votes. At the same time, a new website was launched, a social media strategy implemented and intensive efforts devoted to a door-to-door strategy. As for fundraising, the final campaign budget came in at CZK 30 million (roughly €1,250,000). Two million was donated by the candidate himself, six million came from the party and the rest came from large donors (fundraising was a major effort of the campaign manager). Fundraising is very uncommon in the Czech political environment, since political parties are essentially financed by the state. Small donors donated some money but that was rather unusual. For a presidential campaign our budget was rather small.

The candidate insisted on a program which referred strictly to the Constitution. The Czech constitution clearly defines the rights of the president. Schwarzenberg’s program was based on that. All the while, the team was working on opposition research, analyzing all opposing candidates. Consultants also prepared a huge data set containing all possible media attacks and a list of possible topics the candidate might face. From the PR point of view, media relations went smoothly and the candidate had extensive coverage as a Minister and Member of Parliament.

3.3 Third Stage – Vote for a Change

The third phase of the campaign was launched in mid-November 2012. By November, it became clear who was in the race and who was not. There were nine official candidates – independent and party-based. The candidates, in order of popularity in the polls, were Jan Fischer (an independent and former Prime Minister), Miloš Zeman (former Prime Minister, founder of the Social Democratic party), Jiří Dienstbier (Social Democrat), Pavel Franc (independent candidate, professor of law and art, with whole-body tattoos), Přemysl Sobotka (Centre Right Candidate – Civic Democratic Party), Zuzana Roithová (Centre Right Candidate - Christian Party), Jana Bobošíková (Sovereignty Party – Populist) and Táňa Fischerová (independent candidate). The candidate pool was unclear in that there were only two left-wing candidates, Dienstbier and Zeman, but the centre and centre-right of the spectrum was overcrowded. This presented a big problem for Schwarzenberg. The team needed to explain to people that only a single candidate really had a chance. They needed to know that the electoral system mandates that only two candidates may enter the second round – people have to make a clear decision. Basically, Schwarzenberg had to get others candidate votes. This part of the campaign was thus less about Schwarzenberg's human qualities as a candidate and more about the values he represented and a change of political style.

Much time and money was invested in a door-to-door campaign entitled "City-to-City, Village-to-Village". More than three hundred volunteers travelled across the country to work for the candidate. That number may look small, but it represented the largest grassroots campaign in the history of the country. Another project was launched entitled "Beer with Karel", which involved the candidate travelling across the country to visit cities and drink and talk with local people. The fact that many musicians and actors supported Schwarzenberg played a substantial role. As an example, the team organized a "Clubbing with Karel" night in which popular music clubs featured bands playing to support Schwarzenberg.

Another crucial factor was that of television debates. Their key role in the campaign deserved attention. Thus a significant chunk of time was organized to prepare for debates. The team organized media training sessions, keeping in mind a simple principle: always have your supporters visible on screen. More than ten large debates were held in the last week of the first round.

Another big change in the country was the fact that people openly supported candidates. Schwarzenberg had a rather unique campaign symbol – he was the candidate with a pink Mohawk. The well-known Czech artist David Černý, a close friend of the candidate known for controversial art, did the image. It gradually mutated into a campaign symbol and was replicated on more than 20,000 badges and 5000 t-shirts. Of course the campaign also had a more classic, conservative look, but somehow the pink and yellow image became the symbol. So the oldest candidate ended up with a visual look inspired by the punk group the Sex Pistols.

The first round of campaigning culminated in a huge concert in Prague. Many Czech popular musicians played. Also rounding things out was a television debate featuring all nine candidates, won by Schwarzenberg although each candidate ended up with less than five minutes of time.

24 hours before the election, four out of five major newspapers came out in open support of Schwarzenberg and his campaign flooded the country. He hit 200,000 fans on Facebook, the highest number of any candidate (the winning candidate had less than 50,000 fans).

The first round was successful in Schwarzenberg came in second, with a difference of only 200,000 votes. Strategically, it was a huge success. From having been an underdog candidate, he was now a dark horse. But the second round proved dramatically different.

3.4 Second Round – The Real Game Has Begun

The second round lasted only two weeks. Shortly after the election result, the team had to regroup and come up with the fourth and final phase in its strategy. The problem was that almost all the team's energy had been spent on the first round. This time, the strategy was to show that Schwarzenberg was not his

opponent, Miloš Zeman, a political matador who had been involved in many affairs but was also considered to be one of the most successful Czech politicians. The strategy was to continue with push marketing, using volunteers and online channels. The remaining energy was dedicated to television duels. Zeman is an exceedingly good speaker, in some respects stronger than Schwarzenberg. As already noted, the dynamics and atmosphere in the second round were dramatically different. The campaign became more intense and attacks got tougher. In one of the debates, Schwarzenberg broached the topic of the Benes Decrees⁶. He was highly critical of the former Czechoslovak president, drawing the ire of his opponent. This probably mobilized a certain section of the electorate. Some see it as the watershed moment in the campaign, the point of no return.

Here we should focus on the opponent – current president Miloš Zeman. He is a tireless campaigner, a very tough opponent and perceived as a "people's man". His team also successfully portrayed Schwarzenberg as a "foreigner" and "German" who would not look out for Czech interests. Schwarzenberg had decided to run a clean campaign with no negative elements, leaving the team unsure how to respond to these allegations. The team was also too slow on its feet, having used up all its energy in the first round of the elections. A day before the election, the media was flooded with advertising stating that Schwarzenberg was a German agent who would support German interests in the country. Surprisingly, then, sixty-year-old issues were resurrected and proved crucial.

The content of any campaign strategy is a complicated mix of emotional and cognitive appeals. Much of the emotional component is based on the connection the candidate makes with voters. That connection may be based on a variety of factors, but the most important (and most obvious) is 'likability'. (Medvic 2006). The candidate may make use of it in a positive way to promote himself, or it may be used negatively and directed toward his opponent. And as was mentioned above, Mr. Zeman is a skilled campaigner and he and his team were aware that these negative emotions could be their decisive advantage.

⁶ These were presidential bills known as Benes Decrees. One legalized the process of expelling Germans from former Czechoslovakia after WWII.

4. Judgement Day – What Is the Lesson for Campaign Strategy?

And so it happened: Zeman won by a 10-point margin. If anybody had told Schwarzenberg (and his team) that he would lose the second row by 10 percentage points, they would not have been believed. From this standpoint, the campaign was a great success thanks to the campaign strategy employed. But still, the candidate didn't win and the emotions reflected that result. One should never underestimate the mood of the country and never cease analyzing data or asking for feedback. One the decisive issue was that Mr. Schwarzenberg's opponent framed him as a foreigner. This should have come up in the pre-campaign analyses. The team underestimated the importance to voters of the fact that he had lived outside the country for 40 years. Another problem lay in the fact that the candidate could reach voters in large cities, leading the team to essentially isolate the campaign from the countryside. The campaign was trapped in the bubble of being the most successful online effort.

As noted at the start of this paper, campaign strategy is a crucial part of election success. The Schwarzenberg campaign had a plan, was divided into three phases and, when the candidate succeeded in the first round of the elections, initiated a fourth phase. Clearly this did not culminate in a winning strategy, since Zeman won the elections. But still, if one remembers the chance Schwarzenberg had in the summer of 2012 and compares that to the election result of January 2013, the strategy was successful. If there is a take-away bit of advice from this article, it would be: never miss partial tools or aspects of campaigning, but rather keep the overall strategy in mind. Know who your candidate or party is, know its purpose and mould the campaign to these goals.

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