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Rebranding Before the Digital Age: 4 Strategies Used by the Sheraton New York Hotel and Towers During the 1992 Democratic National Convention

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When a New York City tourist arrives at Times Square, the territory from 40th street to 53rd between 6th and 8th avenues, they become one of the other 330,000+ monthly visitors (Times Square Alliance) of the city's most popular destination. The pedestrian-only square is consumed by upscale hotels, themed restaurants owned by celebrity chefs, the iconic TKTS booth selling tickets to the 40 Broadway theaters, an array of usual and unusual street performers, and towering neon lights flashing varying content like celebrity news, stock prices, and McDonald's ads.

In the early 1990s, Times Square and New York City was not the ideal tourist destination that it is today. A fiscal crisis in 1975 was followed by power outages, increased drug usage and crime, and a declining population. By 1990, the city experienced peak homicides of 2,245 in one year. In 1993, Times Square alone reported close to 4,000 crime incidents. While the streets were lined with flashing lights and signs, these risqué attractions, however, were not for the tourists and their families that the area caters to today.

In 1992, New York City Mayor Rudolph "Rudy" Giuliani and the Times Square Alliance made drastic efforts towards the revitalization of the city, combating both poverty and crime. The hospitality industry had much to contribute to these efforts by building new luxury properties, and revitalizing existing New York properties like the Sheraton Centre Hotel. This hotel in particular was not only part of the city's drastic efforts to turn out its safety and public image, but it simultaneously leveraged its connection to the 1992 Democratic National Convention to lift its own rebrand.

Today, the 38,960,000 annual Times Square visitors account for \$4.5 billion in food, retail, and entertainment spending. The downtown destination also provides 385,000 jobs, and fewer than 800 instances of crime occur every year.

4 Hotel PR Strategies

Used at the 1992 Democratic National Convention

In 1992, Sheraton was wrapping up remodeling and rebranding of its Manhattan properties in time for its Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers to serve as a headquarter hotel of the 1992 Democratic National Convention (DNC).

1

Create Media Buzz

- 300 employees participated in ribbon cutting ceremony with branded scissors
- Three-day taxi driver promotion with food, coffee, giveaways, & branded clipboards
- Hosted local media broadcasts from the hotel
- Used Sheraton branded microphone for Governor Bill Clinton arrival

Promotional Opportunities

- Used Sheraton branded microphone for Governor Bill Clinton arrival and on-camera press coverage
- Secured photo opp with Governor Clinton and hotel staff

2

3

Craft Iconic Moments

- Chocolate saxophone desserts made by hotel catering to connect to Governor Clinton's performance on Arsenio Hall Show; served at the DNC closing night dinner and covered on national morning television show
- Created a "Delegate Survival Kit" for guests checking in on Friday, July 11, 1992
- Post-convention, Sheraton waiter, Dimitrius Theofanis, was selected as one of President Clinton's "Fifty Points of Light" that he met during the campaign.

Meaningful Relationships & Strong Operations

- Consulted management teams regarding protocol operations
- Trained staff and management for delegate events and logistics
- Achieved 100% occupancy by utilizing media, delegate, and Governor Clinton room blocks

4

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The Sheraton Ready for a Rebrand

In 1990, the 7th Avenue Sheraton Centre Hotel in Manhattan was a tired property in need of rejuvenation. Owned by International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT), the property experienced high occupancy rates and was the leading revenue generator for Sheraton. However, Fodor's and Frommer's guide books validated the guest point of view: it was an outdated hotel where guests only stayed if deemed absolutely necessary due to its central location and affordable rates. The guests' perceptions and negative public stigma were indicative of many of the United States Sheraton hotel properties, which included a mixed collection of large city hotels, suburban properties and highway locations. The company instituted a strategic plan focused on renovating existing properties throughout the U.S. and Canada in order to remain competitive in the market.

Between 1990 and 1992, ITT spent \$1 billion on capital and renovation efforts in order to elevate hotel quality in North America. Sheraton re-positioned their television and marketing messages, announcing,

“We’re spending a billion to make you feel like a million.” ITT allocated 10%, or \$100 million, of renovations to its three New York City properties: Sheraton Centre, Sheraton Squire, and Sheraton Park Avenue (respectively renamed Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers, Sheraton Manhattan, and Sheraton Russell). In 1992, the Sheraton Centre and City Squire properties collectively totaled 2,400 rooms. The Sheraton renovations and rebranding concurrently aligned with the rejuvenation of Manhattan’s Midtown West and tourist-driven 42nd Street. This made for an additional opportunity that the Sheraton Centre’s public relations department incorporated into its property’s strategy.

The Sheraton Centre and the Democratic National Convention

The 1992 Democratic National Convention was set to take place in New York City from July 13th-15th. The 1,650 room Sheraton Centre and its primary competitor, the New York Hilton located two blocks away, served as the official hotels of the DNC. The Sheraton Centre publicly capitalized on its DNC connection to help lift its rebrand and renovation messaging. For example, public relations and advertising stated, *“The hotel was spending \$100 million to renovate and become the new Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers; and we are completing the renovation in time to serve as the headquarters for the Democratic National Convention.”* The renovation and DNC connected messaging was further shared with stakeholders, potential guests, and business bookers during the period leading up to the convention.

From Internal Customer to External Customer

Develop an Internal Narrative for Employees

It is important to use a common message to communicate renovation updates to all employees. It was most important for front-of-house employees like bellman and front-desk agents who frequently come in contact with guests; it was also important for back-of-house employees working behind-the-scenes like engineers and sales staff to be familiar with the changes. When employees were knowledgeable and up to date, the internal word-of-mouth assisted in telling the rebranding story.

Without the widespread use of internet and corporate intranets, the public relations and human resources departments developed an internal television channel called the Sheraton Employee News Network (SENN); the station delivered a weekly update on the renovations occurring at both the Sheraton Centre and Squire properties. “Renovation Updates”, a printed periodic internal newsletter also included renovation, rebranding, and DNC updates. Eventually, as the comfort with internet and email grew, department heads sent the newsletters electronically to their respective staff and departments.

Pre-Convention Public Relations Moments

Beginning in February 1992, monthly communication tactics were planned for both properties, some already leveraging the DNC connection.

- On Thursday, February 13, 1992, the Sheraton Manhattan Hotel property re-opened with nearly 300 uniformed employees surrounding the city block for the its ribbon cutting ceremony. The ceremony served as a memorable visual for reporting media, pedestrians, and surrounding traffic.
- During March 3-5, 1992, the hotels conducted a taxi driver promotion that was advertised in taxi and limousine commission newspapers. The goal was to ensure taxi drivers were aware of the new hotel names, especially drivers transporting guests from the three regional airports. A Hawaiian-themed promotion stood out during the middle of a New York winter; Hawaiian-shirt clad hotel staff at the Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers handed out complimentary muffins, Kona coffee, and clipboards embellished with the new hotel names to taxi drivers. Taxi drivers were further incentivized to stop by the property for a chance to win a one-week stay at the Sheraton Hotels of Hawaii, including airfare. The promotion wrapped with a visit from Good Day New York morning show and its host Gordon Elliot. The show brought hula dancers and ukulele players to broadcast its entire two-hour live show from the property.
- On Friday, March 20, 1992, Democratic Party candidate Governor William (Bill) Jefferson Clinton arrived for a three-week stay at the newly renovated Sheraton Manhattan Hotel. The PR team created a microphone adorned with the Sheraton “S” logo to be used during all of the governor’s press and on-camera speaking engagements. One day after winning the New York State primary election on April 8, Clinton took photos with the hotel staff and the PR department ensured the “S” microphone was visible by the Good Morning America, CBS Early Show, and NBC Today Show camera crews that arrived to cover the primary win.

Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers Rebrand for the External Customer

Hotels draw customers from out of town, traveling for both work and pleasure; it is imperative to employ local public relations efforts and community connections to spread the message when rebranding. For the Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers, visually appealing images of hotel employees on the construction scaffolding and positive relationships with the neighborhood and taxi drivers helped put the property in the public eye.

Convention delegates checked in to the newly rebranded Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers on Friday, July 11, 1992, two days before the official kickoff of the DNC. In an effort to avoid the common practice of only reacting to media inquiries, the hotel’s public relations team proactively capitalized on its role as an official convention hotel prior to the delegate’s check-in. Faxes and direct phone calls, the most available large-scale electronic communications at the time, were used to ensure local businesses and on-air reporters received media advisories of the hotel’s DNC delegate activities and calendar of events.

In addition, Sheraton created several marketing tactics to support the strategy of leveraging the national convention to rebrand the property.



1 The Delegate Survival Kit was given to each guest as they checked-in two days before the 1992 DNC kicked off. Each bag included a hand fan to use during the warm temperatures of the July convention, an NYC subway token, a map of New York City, and a cup

Actions Used to Support the Strategy

1. Delegate Survival Kit: Red, white, and blue canvas bags with the logos of the newly-named hotels were given to each delegate on the first day of check-in. Each bag included a hand fan to use during the warm temperatures of the July convention, an NYC subway token, a map of New York City, a cup for free lemonade in the hotel lobby, a copy of the “Sheraton Chronicle” detailing hotel DNC activities, and recommended tourist attractions. This merchandising tactic permeated throughout the city; tourists were seen walking with the bags on the first day of check-in.
2. Red, white, and blue banner bunting was hung proudly from the exterior of the building. While appearing as a Grand Opening banner, it also signified that the hotel was “the place” to be during the convention.
3. A Dixieland jazz band, barbershop quartet, lemonade stands, and doormen dressed in straw boaters and pin-striped vests were deliberately placed at the hotels’ street level entrances. News crews zipping by looking for DNC related activities naturally stopped at the hotel with the help of these activities in full visibility. Guests and passers-by were also intrigued to come inside.
4. Politically-themed movies like “All the President’s Men” and “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” aired on loops in the Sheraton New York lobby sports bar.
5. During the convention week, wines from the Clinton vineyards of upstate New York were added to the hotel menus. New York State apples were offered at the front desk along with other small touches to show appreciation for each of the present state delegates.

S The Sheraton Chronicle

THE SHERATON

Sheraton New York
HOTEL & TOWERS

1992 Democratic National Convention Issue

Sheraton Manhattan
HOTEL

New York Rolls Out the Red, White and Blue Carpet

WELCOME TO THE 1992 DEMOCRATIC National Convention! We at the Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers and Sheraton Manhattan are proud to throw open our doors to greet you — our very important delegates and guests.

History will be made at Madison Square Garden and here, too, at our hotels as the important events of the Democratic National Convention unfold. It will be an exciting and momentous week in New York City. Special hotel services and events are at the ready to ensure your convention experience is as pleasurable as it is, well, political.

"Our role as headquarters hotel for the Convention is an important mission, marking the launch of our 'new' hotels," says Jürgen Gieseler, managing director of the 1,750-room Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers and 650-room Sheraton Manhattan. The Convention marks the celebration of a top-to-bottom \$190 million renovation that began 18 months ago.

"Our staff — from the doormen who first welcome you to housekeeping and catering — is eager to share the excitement and pride we've felt in working together to achieve this dramatic transformation," comments Gieseler.

Extensive planning and special staff training laid the groundwork for a grand and glorious convention week. Preparations included draping, decorating and customizing — even the Seventh Avenue facade of the Sheraton New York is dressed in red, white and blue bunting. Special menu creations include the "Democratic Landslide" platter and "Camp David Accord" snacks. Service hours for restaurants, lounges, the health club and

the newly-installed business centers are extended to ensure convention guests are welcomed and well-served.

The days to follow will be exhilarating, the pace equally hectic. We plan to do our small part by answering some 15,000 phone calls, delivering 2,000 pages of faxed documents and washing 60,000 pounds of laundry during your stay.

Our staff will be on hand 24 hours a day to make sure your 1992 Democratic National Convention is a success. We hope you enjoy all of the new facilities, restaurants and special services that our hotels have to offer.



The doormen of the Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers extend a festive welcome to delegates arriving at the DNC 1992 Headquarters Hotel.

Conventional Wisdom

TEST YOUR POLITICAL KNOW-HOW with these facts about the history of our U.S. conventions. You never know today what may make the history books tomorrow....

DID YOU KNOW:

* New York has been a convention city four times prior to the 1992 Democratic Convention — in 1868, 1896, 1909 and 1961. New York City has never hosted a Republican Convention.

* The first appearance of the pin-back campaign button was in 1896. It was also in 1896 that the first "whistle-stop" campaign was launched by William Jennings Bryan, a Democrat. He delivered nearly 600 speeches from the back of a train.

* The longest nominating convention was the Democratic Convention of 1924. According to *The New York Times*, it was in session 17 days, with 59 different

nominances and required 100 ballots before a presidential nominee was agreed upon.

* The only nominating convention of a major party which did not decide upon a presidential candidate was the Democratic Convention of 1860. After ten days in session and 57 indecisive ballots the convention was adjourned until some months later.

* January 15, 1870 — Harper's Weekly — The donkey symbol first appears in Thomas Nash's cartoon, "A Live Jackass Kicking a Dead Lion." Nash used the donkey to typify the "stubborn" Democratic disposition.

* United States presidents born in New York include Martin Van Buren, Millard Fillmore, Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt. However, eight first ladies claim New York as their birthplace. (continued on page 2)

Creating Your Own
Wake-up Call, page 2

Caucus Cuisine, page 2

Press the Flesh, page 3



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2 The Delegate Survival Kit also included a copy of the "Sheraton Chronicle" detailing hotel DNC activities, and recommended tourist attractions.

Leveraging Unexpected Opportunities

Despite strategic planning and preparation, seizing unplanned moments are often the most impactful. On June 3, 1992, Governor Clinton appeared on Arsenio Hall's popular late night talk show in what became a successful attempt to appeal to young voters. Donning dark sunglasses, Clinton enthusiastically played his saxophone resulting in a successful national performance and campaign milestone. Although presidential candidates may have appeared on late night talk shows in the past, this was the first time a candidate showed a lighter side or less formal 'presidential image' that is more common today. The Sheraton's PR department quickly capitalized on this iconic moment.

- On Thursday, July 16th the Sheraton New York Hotel & Towers' catering department created 3,000 chocolate saxophones served with red, white, and blue sorbet to be served at DNC closing night dinner.
- A few hours before the dinner, *CBS This Morning* filmed a segment at the hotel to show off both the saxophones from its large walk-in freezer and the aforementioned Delegate Survival Kits.
- On route to the closing dinner through the banquet kitchen, Clinton took time to speak to hotel waiters, including Dimitrios Theofanis, a Greek immigrant. Clinton was so impressed by Theofanis that he was invited to Inaugural Day on January 20, 1993 as part of Clinton's "Fifty Points of Light" honoring individuals he met during the campaign.

2016: The Republican and Democratic National Conventions

During political conventions, while hotels are sold out and host cities are abuzz, a hotel's public relations, marketing, and operations department's goals include leveraging its connection to the event while maximizing rate and occupancy opportunities. In addition to the immediate profitability any convention offers, a national political convention may also provide the opportunity to gain greater countrywide recognition for a longer term positive impact.

With the 2016 Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio and the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, upon us this summer, hotel marketers and their public relations campaigns will focus much more on digital and mobile strategies to leverage the impact these conventions provide. Already, the Democratic National Convention Committee and its host city led a Twitter chat to answer questions specifically for the surrounding food and beverage industry. They also partnered with Google to prepare workshops aimed at helping small businesses enhance their online presence before and during the convention.

The Hilton Cleveland Downtown, the RNC's headquarter hotel, will find itself in a situation similar to that of the 1992 launch of the Sheraton New York. The brand new \$272 million Hilton hotel with 600 guestrooms will open its doors on June 1, 2016, just seven weeks before the convention kicks off. The goal of branding (or rebranding) a hotel by leveraging the exposure of a national convention can bring is the same in 1992 or 2016. Although this summer the available tools are more varied and diverse than

24 years ago, so is the competition for attention with the multitude of media channels and fragmented interests of the country. From a hoteliers marketing perspective, the intrigue of the democratic and republican conventions battling for which candidates and political platforms will represent their respective parties will contend with professional interest as to the public relations success of the host hotels.



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