

Dirt Cheap Marketing

By Dr. Carl S. Milsted, Jr.

"Grow! Grow! Grow! We need to grow so we can have enough money to do anything." Again and again Libertarians are subjected to this cry. And indeed, growth and a bigger donor base would be nice. But there are other ways to free up money, such as not spending it.

Consider this item in the budget passed last December by the LNC: \$75,000 to begin *initial research* into the process of creating a Libertarian Party "brand" identity. Admittedly, coming up with a better brand image *is* a good thing. But do we really need to spend 75 kilobucks to do it?

Consider what our current brand image is. When we hand out Ayn Rand novels and rants, we are projecting the brand image: "crusty nerds who don't believe in giving to charity." It is really hard to come up with a worse brand image without using the word "axe-murderers". Let's see, we believe in free market economics, the Second Amendment, and legalizing recreational chemicals. How about this: "The Libertarian Party: the gun-toting economists on drugs." Even such an intentionally bad branding effort would appeal to people's inner sophomore, a significant step up from appealing to their inner nerd.

And speaking of sophomores, consider the outreach book that LPHQ has promoted all these years: *Libertarianism in One Lesson*. It has the word "lesson" in the title. That sounds like a textbook. The first sentence in Chapter one starts: "Government is not an entity..." **It is a textbook!!!** How many people voluntarily read textbooks without expecting to get college credit for it? Talk about targeting a tiny demographic!

A straightforward listing of our product without any attempt at branding would be an improvement over the above. Let's see what we have in the LPHQ catalog. Hmm, bumper stickers; you can't be verbose and boring on a bumper sticker. And unlike the efforts of the American Liberty Foundation, these are certainly cheap outreach. "Enough is enough/Vote Reform." Just kidding, that's "Vote Libertarian." "Don't Blame Me...I Voted Democrat." Whoops! I mean, "I Voted

Libertarian." Oh wait, here's one that actually implies an issue: "I'm Pro-Choice on Everything!" Of the three measly choices available from LPHQ, only one addresses an issue and that is *the* most controversial issue in the LP platform.

Where the #\$(%* is "Abolish the IRS!?" Do we need to spend \$75,000 on brand imaging before we have produced such extremely basic messages such as the fact that we want to abolish the IRS? I bet we could have found a volunteer to come up with basic messages on drugs, gun rights, school choice, war and other core issues. It is not as if it would be all that expensive if we came out with a few mediocre slogans. An economical print run of bumper stickers is only a few hundred dollars.

I finally decided to take matters into my own hands a few years ago and bought a print run of 2500 "Legalize Hemp/Vote Libertarian" bumper stickers. I did them primarily to give out at the marijuana smoke-in that occurs each July 4th in Washington, DC. The bumper stickers did prove to be a useful outreach tool for dooper outreach, but as a bumper sticker "Legalize Hemp" is suboptimal; those who partake are generally afraid to put such a sticker on their car. I made a mistake, but it was still cheaper by far than hiring a marketing expert and focus groups to figure this out. And the stickers did prove to be quite useful in many situations.

Now consider the yard signs generated by the typical Libertarian cardboard candidate: "Joe Blough for Congress." Or, if we are lucky, there might be a "Vote Libertarian" somewhere on the sign. Such a sign tells nothing about what the Libertarian Party stands for, other than that it nominated Mr. Blough. This is poor brand building unless the LP intends to run Mr. Blough several more times. How about throwing in a yard sign that says "Abolish the Income Tax/Vote Libertarian" with the same layout as the Joe Blough sign? Come next election, the LP will still be calling for abolishing the income tax; and this fact holds true at all levels and in all electoral districts.

In 1999, I decided to try out this concept. I bought two print runs of issue signs and Bill Lawry (still of Northern Virginia) bought another. These were mixed in with candidate signs with the same font and layout. The results were worthwhile, (but this is not a magic bullet). For a full report see

<http://www.quiz2d.com/essays/scale> . If this idea was to be done nationally, larger print runs of signs could be bought, saving significant money. More slogans would also be possible. So I decided to go to my first national LP convention in 2000, to see if I could interest either the presidential campaign or the HQ staff in doing the idea nationally. When this failed, I ran for LNC alternate and, surprisingly, won. Then, I ended up on the Strategic Planning Team in order to push this idea. And yes, this idea *is* in the Strategic Plan, but first we need to spend 75 kilobucks and a year's time to determine what slogans to put on those signs.

I got impatient and decided to start a small sideline business to make these materials available this year. Yes, this essay is a blatant capitalist plug for Tools for World Liberation, my online business located at <http://www.quiz2d.com/tools>. It is organized as a for-profit business so it can be overtly partisan in the propaganda produced; however, I expect to make far less profit than some who start up non-profits. I am not quitting my day job. Indeed, I would be happy to get return *of* capital, much less return *on* capital.

Even without a degree in marketing and a \$75,000 dollar budget, methinks it is possible to come up with a better than basic "brand" identity. Let's see, Libertarians believe in legalizing recreational drugs, gambling, and prostitution. These things are fun but dangerous. We want to get rid of public schools and tax forms; these things are the antithesis of fun. How about "fun" as our brand identity? I bet we can find a large number of people who like to have fun -- or at least a larger number than those who like to read philosophical textbooks.

So, in addition to the basic "Abolish the IRS," I am working on propaganda with a bit of silliness. A couple of the bumper stickers currently in the catalog are a bit light-hearted, such as "Save the Guns" and "for Free Range Humans." Sillier T-shirts are on the drawing board. And silliest of all, are the radio spots, that are available for free on the condition that you let me know when/where you play them and what response you got. And I didn't need to start a foundation or raise funds to produce them. I did, however, get the free use of the facilities at SunSpots Productions, and the free labor of Bernard Carman, audio engineer. Thanks dudes.

