

# Expert Interview



**«Companies can learn from Obama.»**

**Dr. des. Louis Perron**

«It is like a dating game – you also have to make yourself scarce.»

## The Interview

Dr. des. Louis Perron is a political scientist and advisor. In his home country Switzerland he has advised candidates and parties in all three linguistic areas. Clients include everything from city councilors to nationwide campaigns as well as some of the country's biggest companies. His consulting agency Perron Campaigns is also campaigning abroad, mainly in the U.S., the Philippines, Romania and Germany.

### **BrainStore: What do political campaigning and employer brand have in common?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Political campaigning is also about having people committed to oneself – both paid and above all, volunteers. Obama set the standards to a new high and found people who even took a holiday to be able to work for him. This attraction is the parallel between political campaigning and employer brand – how to get people so convinced that they get involved with you.

*«Obama set the standards to a new high and found people who even took holiday to be able to work for him.»*

### **BrainStore: You say, it has been impressive how Obama managed to win so many volunteers over. What were the most surprising insights you gained from the Obama campaign?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: The people who got involved with him, who worked online, donated 50 dollars or went physically from door to door – they did it for the same reason as the people who voted for him: because they wanted change.

That is the message which Obama represents. That is what he wanted to communicate to the people.

*«Companies also need a message.»*

### **BrainStore: What can companies learn from Obama's approach?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Companies also need a message. In political campaigning, everybody is talking about slogans and topics, but that is not how I understand message development. For me, the message is the reason we are giving to people to be in favor of us – and not of the other side. Obamas message was, «I will bring the change that America desperately needs. I will get the economy going again... it's time for a new hope and to leave the divisiveness behind us. Yes, we can!» That's a coherent message. I spoke to a friend working for a pump company and he replied: «That's it – we have to stop selling pumps and start fighting for a better world.» If you want to position yourself like for example Google does, you absolutely need a message. That means to polarize, to upset people, to build this gravity, marketing gravity.

### **BrainStore: So we see two parallels between political campaigning and an employer brand, one formal – you have to attract people – and the second contextual: You have to built your message in order to reach this aim. What about the content? The differentiation of the message is crucial – how does it work?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: It's important to focus on differences – why me and not the other party? That does not mean to be negative, not even that it is necessary to mention the other party. Concerning commercial



Louis Perron holds a Master's degree from the George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management in Washington D.C. Further, he earned a PhD in political science at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. His knowledge about elections has lead to publications in several academic books and trade journals. Perron Campaigns specializes in adapting modern campaign tools such as direct marketing, targeting strategies, surrogate campaigning or opposition research.

advertising, the people don't have to decide – they can shop here today and there tomorrow. If they had to decide for years the advertising would be completely different: It would focus on differences in a much more explicit way. Concerning employer branding, it's similar. Maybe it helps to define the difference between Siemens and ABB. If one had to decide where to work for the next ten years – why Siemens?

*«It's important to focus on differences – why me and not the other party?»*

### **BrainStore: You mean that marketing specialists tend to orient themselves on consumer goods but an**

**employer brand is a totally different good which also needs to be advertised differently?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Exactly.

**BrainStore: Having developed the message – which technical requirements are indispensable to spread the message?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Nothing is indispensable. You can communicate a message with little money and means. More is better. It also helps to involve your people. One of Obama's top strategists, David Plouffe, rarely appeared in public, but he took video shots and mailed them to his supporters. People feel involved by that. I don't know if it's realistic that the Siemens CEO sends video spots to his employees to communicate his message – it could be an inspiration.

**BrainStore: That would correspond to the people's wanting to have a look behind the scenes?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Yes, exactly. For they get the feeling to be involved, to know something other people don't know.

**BrainStore: Are there other devices from the Obama campaign to establish this identification?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: The keystone is to give something substantial to people. If you have a look at a party's website in Switzerland, you are lucky to find announced an event that happened five months ago in the «News»-category – so why should I visit this website? But otherwise, if I can get real value, I will subscribe to the list. Obama, for example, did not present his vice presidential candidate in public first

– rather, he informed his supporters via email and text message. The whole world was curious: Who is he going to nominate? And the supporters get to know it first – that's why I'm giving my email address or my phone number, because that's real value.

*«The keystone is to give something substantial to people.»*

There is this donation system in the US – a candidate can receive money from the state but he has to keep costs down. Or, a candidate can accept and dispense as much money as he gets but gets no benefits from the state. In 2003, candidate Howard Dean even asked his supporters whether he should take the benefits or not. They answered he shouldn't. Of course, the next

**BARACK  
OBAMA  
2008**

**YES WE  
CAN.**



e-mail said «okay, then send me a check». And they did, since the people felt involved and responsible for the decision. Thus, the method is to involve people, to give them power and to communicate substantial information – this applies to companies as well. If these company leaflets don't contain any substantial information, they don't interest anybody.

**BrainStore: In the business world, which rules of communication express appreciation?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Giving thanks. Forgive faults. I'm really strict to my employees but I forgive faults – otherwise it doesn't pay.

**BrainStore: What makes employees happy?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: The generation Y, born after 1970, very internet-orientated, does have a completely different lifestyle than former employees. They have other demands, want to be international, design their lives – they want to contribute to

their workplace, they want to have career options. As a company, you have to give these people what they want if you want to bind them: options, independence, and flexibility. It could pose a problem that the generation Y is very Anglo-Saxon-orientated while Siemens is a German company. When I work in Germany, I always realize the strict hierarchy in companies. If Siemens' company culture is as hierarchical, that would surely be a problem for talents of generation Y.

**BrainStore: And how can a company motivate the employees? Which patterns in political campaigns also apply to companies?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Campaigns are very chaotic. It is very hard to discipline the process. But it would be wrong to solve the problem by bringing in a rigid organization and a strict hierarchy. That stops the energy. In Bill Clinton's campaign, lots of people very constantly together, in permanent interaction. They had strategy meetings with 30 people at the table. Maybe that is not comparable to companies, but if there is a strict hierarchy, that surely would be difficult for motivation, especially for young employees.

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**BrainStore: What else can companies do to satisfy the employees?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Generally, it is already a good approach to pose this question, also during the actual economic crisis. One could be tempted to think the crisis is going to solve the problem. However, it is

not only about tying people, but also about making them happy and above all, retaining staff beyond the crisis. I am convinced that the concept of Google is completely based upon perks – there's a slide at the headquarters, I think even a swimming pool, sleeping berths – but finally, it seems more like a joke. An approach for Siemens could be to establish something similar but with more specific benefit.

**BrainStore: What satisfies today's top engineers? And how can Siemens call their attention?**

*«The top engineers want to have career options, the possibility to unfold their skills, to contribute to their workplace.»*

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Today, you don't have anybody at home to organize things – you have to clean your shoes, hang up the laundry... why not ask the employees what is most annoying, time-consuming and unprofitable? Then the company could organize shoe cleaning, laundry and cleaning service. My idea is based on the example of Emirates Airlines: Their business class passengers are always picked up by a driver. Rationally, this service is no reason to pay triple for a business class trip, but presumably, this is why I am loyal to Emirates Airlines. For Siemens, it would be an option to concentrate on services which don't cost much but are a benefit to the employees, and not a slide. And of course, the top engineers want to have career options, the possibility to unfold their skills, to contribute to their workplace. If we had to measure the effectiveness of a campaign, it would be the time elapsed between the first contact

and the next time you hear of the campaign. So when I shook hands with the candidate today, I should ideally get an e-mail from the campaign tomorrow – this applies analogously to companies. Dealing with employer branding, you also have to do new things constantly. In the beginning, the slide is fun, but six months later, nobody goes down the slide anymore, except for the new employees.

*«Why not ask the employees what is most annoying, time-consuming and unprofitable?»*

**BrainStore: Where do potential future employees inform their selves about the atmosphere of the company?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: They ask people they know who already work there. Or they already have a certain impression about the atmosphere because it has been talked about – generation Y talks a lot about work. Maybe they search their network for somebody who is working there. Is there a Siemens group on Facebook? It should be moderated constantly.

*«Is there a Siemens group on Facebook?»*

**BrainStore: From the perspective of Siemens – how should the company communicate the additional benefits? You say, potential future employees go asking today's employees – thus, it seems to be most efficient to give tools to employees to inform peers about their working environment. Which other possibilities do you see?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Peers, lead media – I wouldn't do much more. Employer and employee stand in a relation to each other like the lion and the antelope – the candidate has to hunt for a job. It doesn't have to be too easy for the people. It is like a dating game – the lion has to hunt. The people must be hungry to get to Siemens, fight to get it. Siemens shouldn't chase the people too much. Siemens can present itself but it's also about certain aloofness. You have to show accessibility but you also have to make yourself scarce. You have to be attractive but not desperate.

*«The people must be hungry to get to Siemens.»*

**BrainStore: That is to say, the attractiveness grows not only with the company being open and accessible but also through being a bit scarce and building a myth?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Yes, for you only want the best. I always give very specific regulations about how to apply for a job – everybody who doesn't comply is deleted, 90 per cent. You have to throw a wrench in their path. In the Obama campaign, there has been a huge battle for the jobs as paid campaign worker.

**BrainStore: Do you recall a campaign for a company in which values were conveyed?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Google, of course. I associate them with values like innovation, generation Y, creativity, self-fulfillment, design your life. And Orange is a great example. From the beginning, they were talking about values while others only promoted the price. Orange just spread the image:

«We are cool.» There should be further examples in the green economy sector.

*«From the beginning, they were talking about values while others only promoted the price.»*

**BrainStore: Who sets the trends for innovative campaigns? Where do you get ideas for political campaigning?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: I think it's rather vice versa. Trends are adopted from political campaigning to be used in commercial advertising – to show differences, to upset people, to polarize. Especially in viral marketing, when you want the people to forward your spot. That only works when you succeed in disturbing people, when you don't match their expectations, when you are surprising, creative. It also has to be technically well made, looking nice, beautiful images, good sound – like the Malaysia campaign on CNN.

**BrainStore: Through which channels are potential future employees reached? Which channels do they assume? Which are already a dead duck?**

*«Good campaigns consist of the right mix of instruments.»*

Dr. des. Louis Perron: People always look for the one and only device, the knock-out-tool. But that doesn't exist. Good campaigns consist of the right mix of instruments. Every new instrument nothing but an addition, it doesn't replace the old ones. The mainstream media are still crucial.

You have to be on TV. Podcast, blogs are important and you certainly have to be game for it, but that is supplemental.

**BrainStore: How do companies succeed in making their staff identify with them?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Concerning political campaigns, they establish identification because people really believe in the message, because they are convinced. And they also succeed because people can obtain a certain status in political campaigns. There are different categories depending on how long one worked for the campaign. In the Bush campaign the categories were related to the money: If one dug up 100,000 Dollar – they were a «ranger», and were allowed to attend the conference call. If one digs up 500,000 Dollar, he can talk to the pollster individually afterwards. Companies now also establish categories for employees like a «young professional program» etc. These are close corporations creating a feeling of togetherness. Identification is needed with the brand or the product – so what does Siemens stand for? I was impressed by this friend saying: «We have to stop selling pumps and start fighting for a better world.» Selling pumps is not sexy – nobody beats a path to my door if I'm selling pumps.

*«Identification is needed with the brand or the product – so what does Siemens stand for?»*

Siemens could celebrate their inventions. Are there Nobel Prize winner who worked for Siemens? Which awards are given in this sector? One could appeal to the pride. Maybe it's possible to say

something like „Siemens has more Nobel prize winners than ABB“. Today, people want to work for somebody who is worth it.

**BrainStore: How would you communicate these facts in a credible and sustainable way in order to motivate employees?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: Keep talking about it. It has to be put into practice and talked about it.

**BrainStore: Where is the difference between keep talking and annoying?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: You must have something substantial to say – like somebody was given an award. It's useless to send a daily newsletter reaching out for straws to find something to tell. There has to be a real value, otherwise you are rather annoying people.

**BrainStore: What is the most peculiar feature you saw in a company?**

*«In Politics, it is very important to be as close as possible to the top guy – that surely also applies for companies.»*

Dr. des. Louis Perron: The driver. In the Philippines, for example, good law firms provide their new staff with a driver. In politics, it's reputation and prestige you get for good work. Clinton allegedly invited people to go back in his limousine to reward them for good work. In Politics, it is very important to be as close as possible to the top guy – that surely also applies for companies. But it is crucial that the measures go with the company, that they are authentic and that



what people want. That needs a lot of listening, discussing and watching.

*«And one has to communicate it over and over in new and creative ways.»*

**BrainStore: What makes a brand successful?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: The brand has to clearly stand for something, own something, an issue or an idea and to convey it intensely. It has to be strong, big. And one has to communicate it over and over in new and creative ways.

**BrainStore: Regarding Siemens from the outside – which values do you associate with the company?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: None. I don't know anything, maybe technology.

But I am only interested in election campaigns. I think the people Siemens wants to address, know a lot about Siemens. I neither have an idea of ABB.

**BrainStore: What can Siemens put into account to properly position itself as an employer in the media? How do employers get media coverage?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: By giving the media what they want – news value. Something what has not been there before. That's quite simple. But it is crucial to hit the main media, otherwise you won't be noticed. One should not be content with less.

**BrainStore: If you were a Human Resources Manager for Siemens, what would you change first?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: I don't know the situation. One should do focus groups with students from Technical Universities and analyze how they

think about Siemens. One should celebrate having the best technicians in the world – the staffs are certainly proud of what they have constructed and invented. People should get the impression that every successful engineer began with Siemens. I would rather operate with the company's image, not only with perks: We made this certain number of inventions, we constructed that number of trains. Here you have to start with constructing the message. Thus you can build up this marketing gravity, not only as an employer but also as a company. And that marketing gravity effects that people want to come to Siemens.

**BrainStore: How does a campaign generate success?**

Dr. des. Louis Perron: The message has to be coherent, has to be short and has to show differences to the competitors. It has to be credible and important – something the target group cares about.