

TITLE

“Fingerlicking and Politicking”

INTRO

During a watershed political year, people want their voices heard. But national conventions have become closed, scripted, pageants. Thousands of citizens are literally shut out.

In response, CNN breaks industry expectations to transform a restaurant across the street from each convention hall into a forum—a space where every convention visitor can voice an opinion heard by insiders and the nation.

Politics happens at the CNN Grill. *The Washington Post* deems it the real hub of political activity at the conventions. *Advertising Age* declares, “We need year-round CNN Grills.” *Communication Arts* applauds it as a top design for 2008.

BACKGROUND

James Earl Jones said it best: “This is CNN.”

Historically, CNN’s presence in the cultural consciousness has been so dominant that its tagline needed only to mention the name to evoke powerful imagery and admirable values.

But nothings lasts.

Escalating media fragmentation eroded CNN’s audience. FOX dethroned it as the most watched while a bullish MSNBC began nipping at CNN’s heels. Niche media such as *Current* and *The Huffington Post* lured away TV viewers and online readers.

Knocked down, the icon took action. It invested in technology to spice up its broadcasts. It sharpened its tagline from “This is CNN” to “CNN=Politics” and launched a media blitz touting it.

But CNN believed no moment was more influential in its fight for redemption than the upcoming national party conventions. Here, the world’s media would converge on a historical story jockeying for position.

CNN aimed to reclaim relevance among its domain’s gatekeepers: pundits, politicians and the politically passionate.

Our assignment: create prominent visibility for the “CNN=Politics” message among pundits, politicians and the politically passionate.

RESEARCH

To reclaim relevance, CNN had to go beyond visibility. We believed it had to answer one question: “What do the gatekeepers want that they cannot find anywhere else?”

POLITICS IS SPORTS

To answer it, one must understand this group’s relationship with politics and sports:

“My interest in politics comes from my earlier love of sports so I’m proud to admit a connection.”

—Andrew Lee, politically passionate student

“If I’m not thinking about politics, I’m thinking about sports.”

—Author of political blog *The Daily Kos*

MSNBC’s Keith Olberman formerly anchored SportsCenter.

Richard Nixon admitted to the *New York Times* that if he lived his life over, he would’ve been a sportswriter.

As a result of these overlapping passions, the “Politics is Sports” metaphor shapes political culture:

1. Sports terms convey political ideas.

“Race,” “contest,” “push through,” “game plan,” “playbook,” media “training,” “players,” “comeback,” campaigns are “marathons,” “sprint to the finish,”...

2. The metaphor is institutionalized.

Republicans and Democrats have team colors and mascots. News programs have election night scoreboards. News programs leverage the metaphor: MSNBC’s *Hardball*, FOX News’ *The Line Up*, and *LittleGreenFootballs.com*. FantasyCongress.com lets players draft members of congress and earn points based on their news coverage, passed legislation, voting record and attendance record.

But this isn’t just fun and games. This group believes the metaphor helps regular folks overcome the opaqueness of gerrymandering, boondogling, quorum calls and appropriation committees:

“If we can make politics as fun as sports and people care as much about politics as they do sports, then we will have a better government. It’s a way to promote activism.”

—Founder FantasyCongress.com

RESEARCH (CONT.)

A SCRIPTED PAGEANT

As the group recognized, the sports metaphor sticks because of its “democraticness.” Anyone can toss a ball; anyone can influence legislation.

However, conventions embrace rather undemocratic values. Elitism is visible as rings of security permit entrance only to those with connections or hard-to-get credentials. Once inside, parties are often private events requiring more credentials.

Restricted from most activities, many attendees are left passively watching a scripted pageant that celebrates one man and one man’s ideals.

STRATEGY

The gatekeepers believed the sports metaphor drove broader civic engagement, yet conventions lacked such activity.

So what do the gatekeepers want that they cannot find anywhere else?

We believed they quietly yearned for an evolution to the neighborhood sports bar—a space blending the open enthusiasm of sports with the analysis of politics. In other words: CNN could build the world’s first “politics bar.”

Against the backdrop of closed pageants celebrating the politics of one man, CNN’s political bar could stand out as an open forum celebrating the politics of everyone.

We translated this vision into our strategy:

The CNN Grill invites everyone to share a beer and their politics.

A LEGACY OF INVENTING AND EVOLVING POLITICAL FORUMS

CNN had permission to execute this audacious idea thanks to its long history of innovating new ways for politicians, journalists and the public to interact. For example:

1980: CNN becomes the first 24-hour news network. This public awareness and scrutiny it cast changed the nature of politics.

2006: CNN launched iReport becoming the first network to use citizen news-gathering. Others soon copied.

2008: CNN and YouTube transformed the Democratic presidential candidate debate by empowering netizens, not moderators, to pose debate questions.

BRIEFING

To help our creative team, we developed an experience blueprint:

1. INTRIGUE

How can we make people so curious they seek the experience?

2. INITIATE

How will we make visitors feel they've stepped into a different world?

3. PARTICIPATE

a. Eat: What twists can we add to the food names, drinks and menu?

b. See: How much visual information can we pack into the Grill?

c. Contribute: What and how will we ask visitors to contribute to the experience? How can people at home contribute?

4. LEAVE

What will visitors take away with them?

5. SHARE

How can we help visitors share their Grill/convention experience?

CREATIVE

Our firm partnered with a special events agency that contracted the three-day use of two sports bars. One in St Paul. One in Denver. But both across the street from each party's convention hall.

In August 2008, these refurbished sports bars re-opened as The CNN Grill—the world first politics bar.

INTRIGUE

Early in our research phase, we surveyed Americans asking, “What does politics mean to you?” The responses spanned from the practical to the pithy:

“Speaking and being heard.” ←—————→ “Simply everything.”

Compiled to spark strategic thinking, this survey data actually sparked visual thinking. Since The CNN Grill was a forum of political engagement, our creative team painted these responses on the exterior—literally wrapping it in Americans' opinions.

To contrast the exterior's informational layer, we added an entertaining layer. Leveraging the star, a primary political symbol, we designed an oversized, flashing neon sign for the Grill.

Together these layers made the Grill eye-catching, day or night.

INITIATE

To reinforce the idea of sharing opinions, we placed a video installation at the entrance. As visitors entered, their real-time image appeared on a wall of TVs. Below their image was CNN's broadcast graphics creating the perception the network was interviewing them on live TV.

PARTICIPATE

Once inside, visitors ordered a bottle of CNN Red Ale. Or maybe a meal prepared by New York chef Michael Romano. While they waited, they watched convention coverage on one of 32 TVs. Over their shoulder, they watched CNN reporters sitting in a booth interviewing Spike Lee or, later, Nancy Pelosi. Over the other shoulder, they watched Roland Martin conduct a live broadcast of CNN radio or, just beyond him, watched Campbell Brown deliver a televised report from the broadcast desk.

CREATIVE (CONT.)

LEAVE

Visitors were given CNN Grill T-Shirts and pint glasses.

SHARE

Before walking out, many visitors logged onto the CNN iReport station to post thoughts about the Grill and convention.

RESULTS

Prior to the convention, CNN was determined to reclaim relevance among pundits, politicians and passionates. Our assignment was to create prominent visibility for the “CNN=Politics” message among these gatekeepers.

The CNN Grill delivered on this ambition by establishing CNN, as *The Washington Post* praised, “the real hub of political activity” at the conventions.

ATTENDANCE

At each convention, the line to enter The CNN Grill wrapped around the building. Once inside, visitors mixed with Denis Kucinich, Nancy Pelosi, Tommy Thompson, advisor Paul Begala, John McCain’s campaign staff, Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, CBS’s Jeff Greenfeld, *NYPPost’s* Cindy Adams, *Time’s* Rick Stengel, Pat Boone, Caroline Kennedy, Maria Shriver, Charles Barkley, Susan Sarandon, Jaime Foxx, Naomi Judd, Charlize Theron and many more.

In its six days of operation, The CNN Grill served 5,650 meals and 5,500 draft beers. Given hours of operation, this equates to 72 meals and 71 beers served every hour, or about a meal and beer per minute.

PRESS

The Washingtonian.com summarized that “one of the hottest credentials is turning out to be the All-Access pass to the CNN Grill” and claimed that “The CNN Grill brings all the bloggers to its bar.”

Advertising Age applauded, “We need year-round CNN Grills.”

Top political sites such as Politico.com, DemocraticUnderground.com, Talklet.com, TheHill.com, and NPR.com offered coverage on the Grill.

Nonpolitical sites also praised the Grill. CultureKitchen gushed, “The food, the drinks, the journos, politicos and the pundits were fantabulous to consume and watch.” The author of the popular foodie blog, SoGoodBlog.com, gave the thumbs up: “One of my favorite parts was getting to hang out in the CNN Grill.”

PRESS CHANGING COMPANY CULTURE

One the most important effects an agency can have on a business is to expand their organizational capabilities. That’s why we were proud that CNN applied what it learned at the conventions: it successfully recreated The CNN Grill in its Atlanta office for the national election.