

Selling The Candidates

Presidential Campaigns Offer Wide Variety Of Merchandise

BY ANTHONY MAN

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FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Carrie McDonnell, a Democrat who lives in Fort Lauderdale, figured out the perfect holiday gifts for her parents: each will get an autographed copy of Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson's latest book. McDonnell prefers Hillary Clinton, but she crossed the political divide to get their Christmas presents.

McDonnell waited about five hours to get the candidate's signature on copies of "A More Perfect Union: What We the People Can Do to Reclaim Our Constitutional Liberties" at a Barnes & Noble store. Mom and Dad in North Carolina will also get a picture of McDonnell at the book signing, proving the signature actually came from the candidate.

There's a non-brick-and-mortar way to get politically themed merchandise for the holidays: the online stores of the presidential candidates. All the big names have them, with an assortment that ranges from the mundane (signs and stickers) to the creative (the \$75 guacamole bowl from former Florida Republican Gov. Jeb Bush) to the funny (the \$30 water bottle from U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla.).

Many candidates are selling water bottles, but Rubio's is different. He offers the "Water Great Nation Marco Rubio Water Bottle," a refreshing bit of self-deprecating humor from a candidate who famously lunged for a bottle of water during his first big exposure on national television, something that led to widespread jokes at his expense.

Everyone has shirts, including the "2016 women's form-fitting short sleeve T-shirt" from billionaire Donald Trump. Almost every candidate comes offers a hoodie — embellished with the candidate's name, of course.

Baby clothing and bibs are common. The onesie from Carson, the retired neurosurgeon, says "future neurosurgeon & president." The baby one-piece from Rubio proclaims "my parents love me, so they are voting Marco Rubio 2016."

Trump, Carson and Democrat Hillary Clinton all have items for dogs. Trump offers a dog shirt emblazoned with his slogan. Clinton offers both a dog bandanna and a charm to attach to a pet's collar. Carson has a bandanna and a dog collar. The Carson campaign's pitch: "Your pooch will be the envy of his or her fellow canines with this adjustable dog collar. Woof! Woof!"

The online stores reflect the candidate's trademarks and political leanings.

Trump for example, who often sports ball caps proclaiming he'd "Make America Great Again," offers a big selection with that slogan, 16 versions.

Bob Scott, of Wilton Manors, said Trump hats are



ABOVE: Hillary Clinton's campaign site offers a throw pillow for \$55. BELOW: Bernie Sanders' campaign site offers a coffee mug for \$15. (Courtesy photos)



an ideal gift. He's bought a dozen so far, with plans to keep many for himself, hoping they'll someday become collector's items. But some family members and co-workers at the Miami-Dade County gas transportation plant where he's a project engineer will get Trump hats. "The hats are real high quality," he said. "I would definitely recommend (them) and his prices aren't out of line for the quality you get." The hats cost \$25, except for the camouflage version, which is \$30.

Bush's camo hat — "Jeb! 2016" — is \$25. Carson offers a six-pack of camo can koozies (insulated holders) — "Heal, Inspire, Revive" — for \$25. U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, offers the "ladies camo short sleeve shirt."

All the selections are fused with politics.

Candidates in both parties emphasize their products are made in America.

Sen. Bernie Sanders' website goes even farther, proclaiming that "Every item in our store will always be made and printed by union workers right here in the United States." Clinton doesn't go that far to cater to organized labor, a critical Democratic Party constituency. Her selection is much larger than Sanders, and some items — such as the "H is for Homemade" plated steel cookie cutter in the shape of Clinton's campaign

logo — aren't union made.

Made in the U.S.A. is new for Trump. Before his controversial statements as a presidential candidate resulted in the severing of his relationship with Macy's, Trump branded ties were made in China and Trump branded suits were made in Mexico. He frequently talks on the campaign trail about how he thinks China is damaging the U.S. economy and Mexican immigrants entering the country illegally are hurting the U.S.

Political and cultural differences are also evident.

Clinton and Sanders offer rainbow-themed stickers, buttons and shirts in their pride sections aimed at gay and lesbian voters. Republicans don't have items promoting gay pride on their sites.

Carson appeals to religious conservatives with a Christmas section. His offerings include a Christmas sweater, Christmas T-shirt and a glass Christmas tree ornament painted with the message "Merry Christmas from the Carsons."

On the Democratic side, Clinton offers a "Hillary for the Holidays" sweatshirt in her holiday section. Sanders doesn't offer holiday-themed products.

Neither party has a monopoly on humor. Clinton offers a T-shirt with an outline of the pantsuit — her often-mocked wardrobe staple — and a "Grillary Clinton" spatula with her logo. Sanders has four different coffee mugs, including one that warns that the "contents may cause a serious Bern" and a tote bag for "schlepin' the progressive agenda ... and some groceries too!" Rubio has his water bottle and a "let freedom ring" phone case.

U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, R-



COURTESY PHOTOS

ABOVE: Donald Trump's campaign site offers a dog shirt for \$15. BELOW: Ted Cruz's campaign site offers a bumper sticker for \$10.



said, allowing the contender to tell people "I'm just a normal guy or a normal gal that's running for office. And I can kid with you like I can kid with my friends."

There is a serious side to such merchandising, Zimmerman said.

"It's huge on two fronts. It accentuates the brand in a bigger, more robust way, and that's very important today. But it also is a revenue generator," he said. "They're so brilliant, because they're touching the consumer in ways they haven't been touched before."

Zimmerman said candidate-branded goods aren't going to sway people's votes. But, he said, they can help advance their brands by starting conversations about the candidates.

Paul Sergius Koku, of Coral Springs, a marketing professor in the Florida Atlantic University College of Business, said it's similar to any company gives away coffee mugs with its logo.

"The coffee mug is advertising, or is speaking to the person on your behalf. Even though you have had a business transaction with the person and is no longer with you, you are always on the person's mind when you have a cup of coffee," Koku said.

It's the same with candidates' merchandise. "When you are feeding your baby, you think of Donald Trump. When you are barbecuing, you think of Jeb Bush."



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