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### Clinton rebrands herself by display of emotion

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P-I COLUMNIST

News of Sen. Hillary Clinton's Trail of Tears marks what one cultural analyst calls the phenomenon of candidates as brand names.

First there was Barack Obama, who's been telling us anything is possible, to believe in change. He inspires an "idea brand" of magical thinking along the lines of Google or Apple.

Until this week Clinton was an "anxiety brand" -- marked by stiff pragmatism and caution but cocksureness. Think Wal-Mart. Or Starbucks even.

Both Democratic presidential candidates are sure to cling to brands, because to abandon them would risk losing street cred and, more crucially, votes.

Such brand-mindedness comes courtesy of Patricia Martin, author of "RenGen," short for "Renaissance Generation." Her book looks at how the confluence of art, education, entertainment and business shapes cultural consumption.

The other day, Clinton took the presidential race, which will come to Washington in caucuses next month, down another road when she rebranded herself.

"Some people think elections are a game," Clinton said Monday, her voice catching and her eyes welling up at a coffeehouse in New Hampshire. "Some of us put ourselves out there and do this against some difficult odds."

She said she didn't "want to see us fall backwards."

In a blink, the queen's ice melted. The candidate known for tenacity and smarts exuded heart. She morphed into a "compassion brand" -- like, irony of ironies, Kleenex, which just launched a successful "Let It Out" campaign that encourages people to sit on a public couch and have a good cry.

Her near-tears did move people. They certainly helped Clinton at the New Hampshire coffee shop, where a group of 16 undecided voters -- 14 of them women -- nodded sympathetically, some with eyes watering, according to Newsweek. That moment also likely helped her in the primary, where she went on to drub Obama among women according to exit polls, 47 percent to 34 percent.

And they struck an emotional, even psychic chord back here in Washington where a woman sits in the governor's mansion, women hold both U.S. Senate seats and rude public behavior that makes anyone cry is considered unseemly -- after all, we live in a place where outward politeness is the reigning civic virtue.

(Though it is anyone's guess how Washington voters might have responded if Chris Gregoire had started bawling

during her heated governor's race against Dino Rossi.)

But here's the trouble with reducing politicians to brands: While it provides digestible sound bites for the evening news, it makes candidates facile labels and pushes important and complex issues onto the back burner.

So far in the Great Race of 2008 we've learned over and over how much Obama is a candidate of change, a man of ideas. But really, folks, what does this mean? What does Obama stand for other than being a welcome alternative to President Bush? Even Dennis Kucinich fits that bill.

And what does it mean to say, as commentators have, that Clinton has just shown a warm, softer side?

Her unvarnished thoughts on universal health care or dealing with Iraq and Pakistan matter a hell of a lot more.

Clinton's choke-up -- if not a contrived show of weakness from someone who has boasted about being tough -- would have been more welcomed by me if she'd shed tears recalling her vote to go to war in Iraq. That debacle has caused countless soldiers and Iraqi civilians to lose their lives even as polls show the war is becoming a less defining issue among Democrats. Talk about having something to cry about.

I could go on, debating whether Clinton's weepy was genuine, or whether a male candidate, such as the GOP's Mike Huckabee, would be dubbed a Big Wuss if he curled up and wailed. These items pale when compared with real pressing issues such as the war, immigration and the economy.

If we don't get beyond politics as hollow rhetoric and a battle of brands, we won't get a president who keeps it real.

Worse, we might get the kind of brand we can't return to the store.

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