



'The 45th': Why Trump is abandoning his iconic brand for a number

A man who spent a lifetime putting his name on things is rebranding himself as a number, and marketing experts are intrigued.



Donald Trump leaves Trump Tower in New York City on March 9. James Devaney / GC Images via Getty Images

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WASHINGTON — Donald Trump spent a lifetime putting his name on steaks to skyscrapers to stimulus checks, but now, the former president appears to be replacing the gold-plated surname with a number: 45.

Last week, the 45th president launched his new official website, 45Office.com, a URL unlike those of his predecessors, who used their names for their web addresses.

Trump's shift from his name to his digits has been across his political properties.

His PAC can be accessed at SaveAmerica45.com. His White House's old tweets can be found at @WhiteHouse45. And when his attorney Bruce Castor signed on to represent him in his second impeachment case, he said, "I consider it a privilege to represent the 45th president."

Like Prince changing his name to a symbol, Trump is defying convention. Former presidents typically use their numbers only as a shibboleth among insiders and friends. The only other president to regularly use Twitter, Barack Obama, has his old tweets archived at @ObamaWhiteHouse.

"He was a 'different' type of candidate and president and now he is a 'different' type of former president — one with a global brand to manage (as well as prospects to run again in 2024)," John Boyd, a corporate consultant who works with the real estate industry, said in an email.

Trump's 45 Office didn't respond to requests for comment. People who think a lot about corporate and political branding say it's unlikely that he made the decision lightly.

Branding is Trump's business — even Bill Clinton called him a "master brander" — and he's so protective of his name that one of his attorneys sent threatening letters demanding that the Republican National Committee and other GOP groups stop using his likeness in fundraising pitches (they refused).

"They can never take that number away from him," said Sam Nunberg, who was one of Trump's early political advisers before they parted ways. "Just psychologically, when you say President [Jimmy] Carter or you say President George H.W. Bush, you think 'one-term president.' But if you put the number, 45th president, the connection doesn't come that fluidly."

It also may help him avoid a reminder of being a loser.

Official communications from Trump, who refused to concede the 2020 election and falsely led supporters to believe he might overturn its results right up until Inauguration Day, never refer to him as the "former" president — he is always the "45th President of the United States of America."

That's not an accident, said David Johnson, a corporate branding consultant in Atlanta, who added it helps to "continue his myth that he is still the President of the United States and reinforce that message with his followers."

Trump's new website, 45Office.com, was created Jan. 12, less than a week after Trump supporters rioted at the Capitol to try to stop the counting of electoral votes in President Joe Biden's victory, according to internet records.

Many politicians are known to staffers and friends by nicknames or initials — Hillary Clinton is "HRC"; the former presidents Bush are differentiated as "41" and "43" — and Trump is "45" to many of his aides and followers.

Several supporters have even submitted trademark applications to the U.S. Patent Office for "45"-branded apparel, although Trump hasn't been one of them — yet.

"As Mel Brooks' Yogurt says in 'SpaceBalls': 'Merchandising, merchandising, where the real money from the movie is made.' Trump is a brand. '45' is the logo," Greg Behr, a co-founder of a Durham, North Carolina-based marketing consultancy that has worked with companies like Google and Uber, said in an email.

"Think of it like Michael Jordan's '23,'" Behr added. "The number becomes synonymous with the man, and for fans there is an allure to owning and displaying a piece of that. I would suspect you will begin to see '45' deployed across a range of products that you, yourself, can own."

Then there's the fact that Trump's brand could use a refresh.

"I get teased for putting my name on my buildings and casinos. Mostly it's a marketing strategy; Trump buildings get higher rents," Trump wrote in his 2000 book "The America We Deserve." But that may no longer be true after his hotel business and real estate businesses suffered from association with his divisive presidency.

"The 'Trump' brand was damaged in his election loss and double impeachment," said David Painter, who spent 20 years working in branding before joining the faculty of Rollins College in Florida. "Thus, Trump has adopted '45' (it's even his monogram on his shirts) since it is a neutral number that he would probably rather people associate with him than his actual age or characterizations of his presidential term."

Some of Trump's former top aides identify themselves in public bios as alumni of "White House 45" or leave Trump out entirely, perhaps to put some distance behind them as they look for work in a tough job market for former Trump staff members.

The embrace of "45" is perhaps a bit ironic, because it was left-wing critics who first insisted on referring to Trump by the number. "Don't use his name; EVER," Martin Luther King Jr.'s daughter Bernice King wrote in a viral Facebook post days after Trump's inauguration. "45 will do."

It was a fairly common sentiment among professional activists and liberal activists at the height of the so-called resistance movement.

"Impeach 45! Impeach 45! Impeach 45!" Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., said to cheers in July 2017 in a controversial moment that made headlines.

Then again, it might be a mistake to read too much into the moves of a man known for impulsive decisions.

"People would say it's like he's playing 3D chess. But sometimes he's just playing with blocks," said Nunberg, the early Trump adviser. "He's into 'thes' — 'The Apprentice,' the mogul, the icon, the real estate baron. The 45th president."