A military leader wins a series of battles, altering the geopolitical balance and bringing new wealth and security to his country. Eyewitness dispatches from the front confirm the leader’s brilliance, bravery and humanity. Upon returning home, the military leader dives into politics, employing multimedia and memorable slogans to gain support and enhance his reputation. He sweeps aside all opposition to take the highest office in the land. His very name and image become synonymous with supreme leadership.

This familiar scenario describes military heroes who claimed the American presidency, from Andrew Jackson to Dwight Eisenhower. It is a well-trodden path to power: Two millennia earlier, Julius Caesar originated this plan, using his era’s media to sway public opinion and climb to power. Caesar’s genius in projecting his image helped him dominate wealthier and stronger rivals, securing his place in history.

Throughout his career, Caesar had to address two primary stakeholders: the Roman senate and the Roman populace. As his military victories and political ambitions grew, Caesar sought more than supremacy within the Roman system; he meant to redefine Rome politically and socially. At his zenith, he melded the myriad changes of the new Rome into his own image—an early form of branding. Caesar used three communication channels: Commentaries—compilations of his battlefield observations; public spectacles such as gladiatorial games and processions; and coinage, an enduring mass medium.

Beginning his career as a military adjutant and prosecutor, Caesar ascended the political ladder to the senate. Bribery and public spectacles—mandatory undertakings for an ambitious Roman politician—put him heavily in debt, so he formed a financial and political partnership with Marcus Licinius Crassus, one of Rome’s richest men. Once appointed governor of Farther Spain, Caesar set the pattern that would propel him to power: subjugating new territories, securing wealth and reporting his achievements in regular dispatches to the senate. Caesar won the consulsiphip in 59 BC, thanks to successes in Spain and his triumvirate with Crassus and Pompey, military hero of the east who was newly married to Caesar’s teenage daughter.

At the end of his consulship, Caesar was appointed governor of Illyricum and Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul. Caesar turned his attention farther north to Gaul Comata, dubbed “Hairy Gaul” for its unshorn inhabitants. This vast area, comprising what is now Belgium and the bulk of France, held enormous material plunder and human capital. Caesar entered these lands under the pretext of stopping the migration of the Helvetii across Roman territory. His conquest of Gaul had begun.

As his deployment in Gaul stretched on, Caesar had to ensure the senate would renew his command. He had money and operatives at work in the capital, but he augmented these with a public relations masterstroke: his Commentaries on the Gallic War, a vivid account that persuaded lawmakers and inspired the populace. Each of the eight volumes was outlined as a yearly report to the senate during his service from 58 to 50 BC. Throughout the Commentaries, Caesar imparts a solid, journalistic tone, and like a good documentarian, he entertains as well as informs, presenting Tableaux of unusual settings and rich characters. The climactic rebellion by the Pan-Gallic leader Vercingetorix receives extensive coverage: Caesar shattered a rebel relief army, captured Alesia and sent Vercingetorix to Rome in irons. Caesar’s earlier consular decree to publicize the senatorial record had done more than glorify the body; it had turned the curia into a broadcast station. His dispatches ignited public fervor that countered challenges to his growing power.

The First Triumvirate unraveled when Caesar’s daughter, Julia, died giving birth to Pompey’s child, and Crassus was killed in battle. Despite his continued public image efforts, by 49 BC Caesar was on the defensive, ordered to resign his military commission, while Pompey received command over all forces in Italy. On Jan. 10, 49 BC, Caesar took his troops to the river Rubicon, the boundary that separated Cisalpine Gaul from Italy proper. “The die is cast,” declared Caesar in his second most famous tagline as he led his men across the waterway into civil war.

Caesar reigned on the battlefield and in the court of public opinion. A ruthless general beyond the Alps, Caesar won bloodless victories in his march south, capitulations spurred by PR that proclaimed his mercy and honor. Chronicling his ensuing military adventures, Caesar authored three volumes of Commentaries de Bello Civili (Commentaries on the Civil War). The message from Gaul had been that if Caesar should fail, Rome would be doomed by
the northern hordes. The message of these Commentaries was that if Caesar should fail, Rome would be doomed from within. The civil war became a world war as Caesar swept Pompeians from Italy, then fought a battle that ran from Spain to Greece. In Egypt, a routed Pompey died, and Caesar formed an alliance with Cleopatra. In Asia Minor, he crushed King Pharnaces' rebellion in Pontus; Caesar's terse summary there became one of history's most memorable phrases—Veni, Vidi, Vici. (I came. I saw. I conquered.) Caesar completed the civil war by defeating Pompeians in Africa and Spain. He then selected a form of communication even more dramatic than the Commentaries to demonstrate the rise of a new order.

"Bread and Circuses," coined by the Roman satiric poet Juvenal, is the classic definition of Rome's policy to placate the masses. Entertainment—including feasts, plays, animal hunts and exhibitions, gladiatorial games, and staged naval battles on artificial lakes—was the most dynamic outreach to the populace. Many people were illiterate, relying on spectacle to absorb a politician's message. The free food and diversion appealed to all levels of Roman society. From his first days in public life, Caesar spent extravagantly on entertainments. The four triumphs of 46 BC were the pinnacle of Caesarian showmanship, a living multimedia experience. Each celebrated a specific victory: Gaul, Egypt, Pontus and Africa. The Romans paraded treasures, jewels and exotic animals from subjugated lands. Statues and artwork highlighted locations, battles and personalities of the conflicts. There were 20 paintings specific to the civil war, some three to four stories tall and borne on wheeled floats. An exaggerated King Pharnaces II was depicted fleeing Caesar's army, a mammoth political cartoon that elicited laughter.

Special guest stars, both invited and incarcerated, appeared at the triumphs. Cleopatra sat in the review stand. Vercingetorix, having languished for years since his defeat in Gaul, was a chained curiosity. Upon fulfilling his purpose of public humiliation, he was finally executed.

Caesar himself marked the parade climax in a triumphal chariot drawn by four horses. During the Pontus triumph, a large panel displayed his slogan for the ages: Veni. Vidi. Vici. The extravaganza was best remembered for its low point: As Caesar's chariot approached the Temple of Fortune, an axe snapped. Salvaging the moment, Caesar ascended the Capitol steps on his knees, acknowledging his subservience to fate.

Prior to the celebration of Caesar's four triumphs, the cowed senate conferred absolute power. Caesar was named demigod, dictator and prefect of morals, giving him jurisdiction over virtually all matters in public and private life. One change was small but influential: coinage, a medium offering greater retention and more daily impact than any celebration or dispatch.

Until Caesar's time, Roman coins did not bear the likeness of living leaders, avoiding a practice associated with the hated kings of Rome's antiquity. Caesar broke the taboo in 44 BC when his face appeared on Roman coins. Beyond their obvious function as currency, the coins equated Caesar with the new city, the new empire, the new way of life. It was the ultimate branding campaign of an illustrious marketing career.

On March 15, 44 BC, knife-wielding senators assassinated Julius Caesar, his death leaving a chaotic political vacuum. Mark Antony, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus and Caesar's great-nephew and adopted son, Octavian, formed the Second Triumvirate. Thirteen years after Caesar's death, Octavian assumed complete of the Roman Empire, taking the name Augustus Caesar.

Julius Caesar's victory over his enemies was now complete. In keeping with his Popularist sympathies, Caesar had concluded that true power rested in the people, not in the insolated aristocracy of the Optimates. He knew then what we know now, that inventive, consistent marketing is the way to elicit positive responses from the public. While he manipulated one group of stakeholders, the senate, he focused on his primary stakeholders, the populace of Rome.

During a festival in early 44 BC, Caesar had worn the purple robes and red boots of royalty. Supporters cheered him as "Rex." But the crowd disapproved of the demonstration, prompting Caesar to insist, "I am Caesar, and not Rex!" Beginning with Augustus, Rome's rulers would also call themselves Caesar, not Rex. Caesars would rise in many other centuries and cultures as the Arabic qaysar, the Russian czar and the German kaiser.

"Caesar" thus became a brand, a generic term for an all-powerful leader. Julius Caesar's marketing genius has stood the test of more than 20 centuries.