

Commercial Fatigue

Why bad ads happen to good voters

Whenever the subject of political advertising comes up, that giant sucking sound you hear is presidential ads from years past. If there is any less effective and less efficient ad spending than that which goes on in presidential campaigns, I'm blissfully unaware of it. And based on the early evidence, expect the usual large doses of poorly produced propaganda and nasty character attacks this year.

Both parties are working to solidify their base, and it's true that there are far fewer undecided voters than in years past. Nonetheless, a swing vote of between 3 million and 10 million independent voters will decide this election (and the majority of our competitive elections for the foreseeable future). Securing the base means close contact with the "customer": direct mail, phone calls, canvassing, volunteer recruitment, field organization, database mining and constant communications via the Internet. Persuading swing voters requires mass media. And that means advertising.

In the incumbent's corner, it's "Morning Again in America." George W. Bush's first ads were optimistic: We've been through a lot, but things are getting better. As anybody who's run a failing company knows, focusing on the future is a good strategy when you're stuck in a not-so-pretty present. Whether the president's ad makers can sell this message of optimism—even with the largest political ad budget in history—remains to be seen. In his second round of ads, Bush went negative.

In the other corner is the new JFK, John Forbes Kerry. Kerry's war-hero status is a strong con-

trast to George W. Bush's service record and powerful antidote to the president's attempts to position himself as a wartime president. But Kerry, while not nearly as wooden as Al Gore, maintains a demeanor not often seen outside a mortuary. If he is to compete against Bush's massive budget, his ads will have to be much more effective than the usual political spots, and much more effective with independent voters than his spots have been so far.

Political ads are so full of what-not-to-do's that the landscape would be immeasurably improved if they became simply average rather than risibly inept or egregiously insulting. So, to defend ourselves against still more putrid and stultifying political ads, here's a quick primer—an Advertising 101—for the practitioners of what I call Election Industry Inc.:

To be effective, an ad has to: **Get attention.** Political ads fall miserably short of this goal, especially compared with product ads. Political ads are neither creative nor interesting enough to engage the viewer. And because of political consultants' innate desire to imitate rather than create, over time political ads in any given election cycle tend to look more and more alike and become less and less effective. Election Industry Inc. tries to get around this by making the ads ubiquitous and unavoidable—a strategy as futile for effective communications as it is profitable for political consultants (and a major reason why running for office is so costly).

Political ads are also hampered by poor production values. This immediately signals to view-

ers that the commercial is a political ad and will not be worth their time or attention.

To summarize: What you're left with is advertising that is so ineffective and inefficient that it requires repeated airings just to be noticed by voters, who revile it once it's brought to their attention and then are subjected to it again and again. It's a poor way to make friends: You can't annoy someone into voting for your candidate.

Convey information. Political ads do a lousy job of this, too. It's not for lack of trying, or for lack of subject matter. Most political ads try to cram as much information as they can into 30 seconds. Somehow, political consultants have managed to not comprehend one of the most basic rules of modern advertising: each communication should have one specific point that the viewer or reader or listener will take away from the message.

Plus, most of the information political ads do offer is of no use to the viewer. Don't tell me how a candidate voted, how many bills he or she passed, his or her position on an issue. Tell me how it made my life better.

Elicit a response. Most political communication is a one-way street: someone telling you what he or she wants you to hear. But communication by definition does not exist unless it goes two ways. Only then can a voter respond to a message or take action on it.

Think of an ad as a transaction: You give me 30 seconds of your valuable time; I have to give you something back that you can consider valuable. If I fail to do this, you will come away believing I wasted your time, and you

will be that much less willing to give me 30 seconds of your attention next time.

What can I give you that will make you feel the transaction is worthwhile? Any number of things. I could touch you emotionally. I could make you see something in a way you've never seen it before (a way you consider valuable). I could give you a new piece of information—information that you, not I, consider valuable. I could show you a demonstration of something you've never seen. I could make you laugh.

When is the last time a political ad did anything like that for you?

Political advertising is over-pollled, over-focus-grouped and over-copy-tested. Political ads do not involve the audience, they do not motivate the audience, and they do not get people to respond (other than to tune it out or turn it off). And the formulaic, often negative advertising championed by political consultants has an even more toxic effect: It dissuades voters from taking part in the election altogether, thereby turning the reins of our entire democratic process over to a highly motivated minority.

If this sounds negative, it's only a precursor to what might be the most negative presidential campaign of the last half-century. When the dust clears and one candidate limps to the finish, is it any wonder that our citizens remain polarized, and governing a united country becomes harder than ever?

It might be a stretch to say bad ads equal bad government, but it might not be as much of a stretch as you'd think.