



Can't they accentuate the positive?

The negative tone of our recent political ads copies the trend in the U.S., but there is a better way to sell the message

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

The federal election hasn't even been called and the ads have already gone negative. The political strategists and ad agencies who create these attack ads insist that they're effective. Why? Because they're "U.S. style" and help the most sophisticated political machines in the world win elections.

It's ironic, however, that some of the most admired ads in modern political history weren't negative. They were created by legendary adman Hal Riney for the Reagan-Bush 1984 re-election campaign around the themes "Prouder, Stronger, Better" and "America's Back."

Over a montage of Americans going to work, you could hear Riney's distinctive voice calmly telling voters that "it's morning again in America."

"Today, more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates and inflation down, more people are buying new homes, and our new families can have confidence in the future. America today is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?"

Some claim that this soft sell wouldn't cut it next to the type of crass and demeaning ads that have become the norm in American (and now Canadian) political campaigns.

Another spot created by Riney proved you could make a strong hawkish point without hitting viewers on the head. Known as the "Bear ad," it pictures a wandering grizzly bear and made the case for Reagan's defence policies and support for the military.

"There is a bear in the woods. For some people, the bear is easy to see. Others don't see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it's vicious and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who is right, isn't it smart to be as strong as the bear? If there is a bear."

Why can't we be treated to this level of creative excellence instead of the cut and paste of headlines and video clips about broken promises and scandals?

It's more important to win the war than a battle. Yet, it seems as though war rooms are focused on a series of battles that can easily distract, get you off message and make you lose the war.

Political advertising campaigns tend to be disjointed and inconsistent. They're developed under tight timelines often in reaction to an opponent's claims instead of following a sound strategy reinforcing a relevant and differentiating platform expressed in a consistent manner through carefully crafted executions.

When a comment about beer and popcorn makes the wireless devices of every political operative in the country vibrate within a few minutes of being made, ads are promptly written and shown in focus groups often the same day.

Between elections, politicians are usually masters at choosing their words carefully and their speechwriters go through several rounds of revisions before the message gets out. Yet, when fighting battles instead of the war, their ads shoot in every direction hoping for a hit.

Marketers know the difference between brand building advertising and media relations. Both need to reinforce the same brand promise and key messages, but they operate in very different ways. Journalists' stories about a new car represent valuable and influential free media, but the story isn't always flattering. This is why paid media delivering a message the car maker controls provides a critical foundation for the campaign.

When the lines between advertising and spin blur, the basic brand building messages risk getting lost. In the private sector, one person – usually someone high up in the organization – is the final decision-maker responsible for approving advertising before it goes to air.

It's not that simple with political ads. There are so many players involved, from the party heavies to the consultants. And those who should have the final say are often too busy kissing babies to offer what is lacking: a high level, educated perspective on whether the ad makes political sense. Once the damage is done, more damage gets done when politicians running on the theme of accountability are quoted in the media saying they had not approved the damaging ads.

While there are seasoned advertising and public relations professionals in this country who have either discreetly or publicly been involved in various political machines over the years, it's not unusual for agency creative types with plenty of experience creating beer ads to get asked to make up ads about health care or the environment as a priority for Canadians.

Advertising execs with little or no experience in politics meet in a room with political strategists with little or no knowledge of what makes an ad effective. Add to that the fact that the dynamic is often very different than the typical client-agency relationship. Agencies that do political ads aren't only looking after their client's best interest. They're hoping to be well-connected after the election.

There is much to learn about political advertising effectiveness from past campaigns and from the scholars who study them. There are academic papers on the pros and cons of negative ads. There is learning from effective campaign strategies in other countries. But it seems that once the election is called, there's no time to build on this learning.

In response to a critique I wrote of the advertising during the last federal campaign, I received a letter from an adman involved with the Conservatives. He claimed they had a strategy, they followed it and it worked. It may well have been the case.

But the election of a minority government after a campaign where the RCMP went public about an investigation of a possible leak of an income trust announcement by the Liberals should not lead one to the conclusion that the ads worked. A more thorough assessment of advertising's performance would perhaps have led to a more accurate diagnosis of what worked and what didn't.

Pollsters are relied upon for an objective read of the trends and for their opinion on what policies and messages to leverage. They hope that the intelligence they provide and the hot buttons they identify get translated into actionable, creative strategies that lead to effective communications.

That's a challenge when selling soup. Imagine trying to keep everyone on the same page when the strategists are information-rich but often insight-poor, and more time is spent debating whether or not the party leader and candidates should be wearing a tie on the lawn signs.

I was briefly involved in the Liberal's French advertising campaign during the 2000 election. Despite a wealth of available data generated by some of this country's most reputable opinion survey firms, it seemed at times that the need for a commercial showing Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin pretending to talk to each other was deemed more important than a careful analysis of the data to make the ads more effective.

It's impossible to air a commercial for mayonnaise without having it first reviewed and approved by the Advertising Standards Council. Claims need to be substantiated and must follow a set of rules. But when it comes to political ads, it seems anything goes as long as the ad has been paid for by an authorized agent for the party.

In the U.S., where coalitions for and against everything can run ads accusing anyone of almost anything, politicians now sign off spots with "I am John Smith and I have approved this ad."

Whatever stamp of approval could be required for political ads, it's now a moot point. Any interest group with a digital video camera and access to YouTube can potentially have as much, if not more, impact than the party's official ads. No one can control the content or the media value of this type of advertising.

Marketing professionals know that tapping into consumers' hopes, dreams and aspirations is the most effective way to get people on your side. Unfortunately, the Karl Rove strategy of tapping into fears, nightmares and deceptions has become the formula for political campaigning.

It's often said that the best strategy is to outsmart instead of outspend your competition. Staying positive might very well be the smartest move in the upcoming campaign.

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