

## Popular Appeals and Techniques of Persuasion in Political Advertising

Large scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences. Typically these efforts take place beneath our level of awareness, so that appeals which move us are often, in a sense, “hidden.” The result is that many of us are being influenced and manipulated, far more than we realize, in the patterns of our everyday lives.

—Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957)

Candidates are pretty much sold like toothpaste today, with marketing techniques taken from the business world.

—Ken Warren, College of Public Service, St. Louis University

The bottom line is that an ad has to work emotionally. Fear is a primal emotion, and if an ad strikes a deep chord, it’s effective.

—political consultant Tony Schwartz (1973)

In early May 2007, ten candidates for the Republican nomination for president appeared together at Ronald Reagan’s Presidential Library in California for their first nationally televised debate. The MSNBC network carried it live. Host Chris Matthews opened the broadcast by noting that a recent poll indicated that only 22 percent of the American people believed this country was on the right track. The question, directed to candidate (and former New York City mayor) Rudy Giuliani, was, “How do we get back to Ronald Reagan’s ‘Morning in America’?”

**Media Literacy Core Concepts:**

*Media have embedded values and points of view.*

*Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power or both.*

**Media Literacy Key Questions:**

*Who created this message?*

*What lifestyles, values, points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?*

To many in the audience, the reference to Reagan's 1984 campaign advertisement was clear. But many others were not old enough to recall it, and the reference may have gone right over their heads.

"Morning in America" was Ronald Reagan's famous campaign spot. The spot used words and images that said virtually nothing about the issues or the candidate, but instead used music and feel-good images designed to appeal to the emotions of the television viewers.

**"Morning in America Ad": Transcript**

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 at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon 6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It's morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?

"'Morning in America' set the standard for enthusiasm-eliciting political advertising and remains largely unparalleled for its combination of evocative symbolism and minimal discussion of politics."<sup>1</sup>

View "Morning In America": [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYs8KKWU\\_Ms](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYs8KKWU_Ms).

Few people realize that Reagan's media consultants were actually former advertising creators, responsible for Gallo Wine and Pepsi commercials, among others. "The makers of the [Reagan] ads quite openly modeled them on successful campaigns for companies such as Pepsi Cola and McDonald's,"<sup>2</sup> because commercial testing methods indicated voters would respond best to this style of advertising.

Running for president in the United States has become a "spectacle," according to media critic Mark Crispin Miller: "The presidency is a purely symbolic thing now, it's a purely visual thing, it's a spectacle."<sup>3</sup> Media scholar Stuart Ewen adds, "The Reagan presidency exemplified a period when image-making and merchandising techniques were coupling in nearly every arena of American life."<sup>4</sup>

**IT'S AN AD, AD, AD WORLD**

Television spots . . . create auditory and visual stimuli that can evoke a voter's deeply held feelings . . . . The real question in political advertising is how to surround the voter with the proper auditory and visual stimuli to evoke the reaction you want from him.

—political consultant Tony Schwartz

From the moment we wake up in the morning, until we go to sleep at night, we are exposed to literally hundreds of thousands of messages. Some estimates say between 1,000 and 3,000 of them pass our "radar screens" daily. Sources include radio, TV, billboards, the Internet, movies, newspapers, and magazines. Broadcasting and print journalism are advertiser-supported mediums. Without ads, they would not exist.

By the time we graduate from high school, we have been exposed to millions of ads: for alcohol, clothes, cosmetics, deodorant, food, shoes, tobacco, and more. Many people believe they are immune from the influence of advertising: most believe they have the skills to see through, and thus are protected from, ad techniques. (This is known as the "inoculation theory.") Advertisers use a variety of proven methods, all designed to get us to feel good or simply remember the product or service. So even though most people feel ads don't work on them, advertising *does* work—it helps make connections between consumers and goods. Think about the last time you went to the grocery store: why did you choose this brand of soap or that toothpaste? The answer may be that your family always uses that brand. But deep down inside, you've relied on that brand because your family or someone close to you trusted it. And they trusted it probably because they were unknowingly influenced by an ad campaign for the product.

Today, many of us are more skeptical of ads than in the past, and (in keeping with the inoculation theory) believe we are not affected by them. But in the early days of advertising, many people did not have the critical thinking or viewing skills necessary to question ad claims, so they believed them.

It might surprise you to learn that advertising has been around for quite a while. And the people who created some of the very first print ads learned one thing very quickly: if you want the customers to remember your product, you must appeal to their emotions. Consider this case history of a product that's been around more than 100 years.

**HOW LISTERINE USED FEAR IN ADS TO BOOST PRODUCT SALES**

One of the most successful campaigns in American advertising history was for Listerine, a brand name for mouthwash. "The history of Listerine dates back 120 years to 1879. The original amber-colored Listerine was formulated by Dr Joseph Lawrence and Jordan Wheat Lambert. But it wasn't designed as a mouthwash; it was actually a disinfectant for surgical procedures. It was first used as a multipurpose antiseptic. But soon it was discovered to be excellent for killing germs

commonly found in the mouth. So, in 1895, the Lambert Company extended the sale of Listerine to the dental profession as a powerful oral antiseptic.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1923 Listerine’s ad agency decided to introduce a new tactic: fear. “The famous ad campaign featured poor Edna, who was ‘often a bridesmaid but never a bride.’ It tells the sad tale of how she was approaching her ‘tragic’ 30th birthday, still unmarried because of her affliction: halitosis, which the ad explains, ‘you, yourself, rarely know when you have it. And even your closest friends won’t tell you.’”<sup>6</sup>

Using Listerine, of course, would solve the problem, and Edna could be assured of snagging a husband. Sales of Listerine took off—primarily because the advertising made women afraid to be left alone and single. The American Medical Association disputed the claim that using Listerine would kill mouth germs. But “annual sales for Listerine went from \$100,000 in 1921 to over \$4 million in 1927—a 40x increase in six years.”<sup>7</sup> The advertising message was firmly fixed in the minds of gullible consumers.



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The slogan “often a bridesmaid, but never a bride” was recognized as the 48th most popular ad slogan by the producers of *Advertising Age* magazine in their survey of the *Top 100 Advertising Campaigns of the Century*.<sup>8</sup>

## HOW ADS WORK

Some of the best questions to consider about today’s ads are:

- How does the ad attract consumer/voter attention?
- What are its emotional appeals? How do they work?
- How does the ad make the product/candidate look appealing and believable?
- What other ad techniques should I be aware of?

All advertising messages, even those produced for politicians, use specific techniques designed to make the product or candidate appealing, attractive, and/or believable. The more you understand about these ad techniques, the better you will be at seeing through the sales pitch. Thousands of studies have been conducted about advertising’s appeals and how viewers react to or comprehend these marketing techniques. Entire magazines (*Advertising Age*, *Ad Week*, *Promo*) and journals (*Journal of Advertising Research*, *Journal of Marketing Research*) devoted to this subject are published regularly. Today, intricate brain-research studies, called neuromarketing studies, are being conducted in order to give advertisers more information about how we react to visual stimuli. The results help advertisers create products that are more appealing to consumers.

Millions of dollars are spent by the people behind the product/candidate to develop, test, and produce just the right message to get the intended effect: buy me, vote for me.

Like products, candidates have become “branded.” Voters can find their preferred candidate’s name on everything from bumper stickers to T-shirts to campaign buttons to mugs. And the techniques used to sell candidates resemble commercials for the latest car, soap detergent, or cell phone. As we will see, the people behind the politicians’ ads themselves come from advertising and marketing. They’ve simply transferred to the political arena what they know about what works in conventional advertising.

## PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES USED IN POLITICAL ADS AND CAMPAIGNS

Most political ads use one or more techniques designed to appeal to voters’ emotions rather than intellect. The more familiar you are with the techniques, the better equipped you will be to comprehend how they work. Table 7.1 presents some of the more popular propaganda persuasion techniques along with some examples from present and past presidential campaigns.

Keep these in mind, because some of these same techniques have been used today by the candidates themselves during speeches and live debate situations. A further explanation of scare tactics and other appeals to emotions follows.

**Table 7.1**  
Techniques of Persuasion Used in Presidential Campaigns and Advertising

| Technique name          | Description  | Examples   |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Bandwagon               | Claiming that everybody likes the candidate. Shouldn't you, too?   | 1950: Dwight Eisenhower's early ads used the slogan: "I like Ike; everybody likes Ike." 1994: Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" implied that everyone was pleased with America under Reagan.  |
| Glittering generalities | Using emotionally appealing words and phrases that can mean different things to different people.  | 1992: George Bush's phrase "a kinder, gentler nation." 1996: Bill Clinton's phrase "a bridge to the 21st century." "Family values": a phrase used by almost every politician.  |
| Name-calling            | Attaching a not-so-kind label to an opponent, hoping that the label will stick in the mind of the voters.                                    | 1972: Richard Nixon's opponents labeled him "Tricky Dick." 2000: Opponents said: "Al Gore is a tax-and-spend liberal." "George W. Bush is an elitist who's in the pocket of big oil companies." 2002: Bill Clinton was called "Slick Willie" by his challengers.                       |
| Plain (everyday) folks  | Implying I'm one of you, or just like you, which means that you can feel very comfortable with me and my ideas; you can easily relate to me. | 2007: Former Senator John Edwards's fondness for repeating that he was the son of a mill worker, that he came from humble origins, and that he knew what life is like for those who struggle to make a living.   |
| Scare tactics           | Using words and/or images to create an immediate or lasting sense of fear in the audience.   | 1964: President Johnson's "Daisy spot" used the threat of nuclear war against GOP opponent Barry Goldwater. 1988: President Bush's "Furlough ad" painted Democratic opponent Michael Dukakis as giving murderers weekend furloughs from prison while he was governor of Massachusetts. |
| Testimonial             | Presenting an endorsement from a well-known person whom the audience will recognize and whose opinion the audience will presumably respect.  | 2007: Televangelist Pat Robertson endorsed GOP presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani. In California, Oprah Winfrey held a fundraiser for and endorsed the candidacy of Senator Barack Obama. Actor Chuck Norris appeared in an ad in support of GOP candidate Mike Huckabee.            |
| Transfer                | Referring to an event or using an image that has symbolic value—thus transferring the voter's emotion or allegiance to the candidate.        | 2007: Republican Rudy Giuliani's consistent references to his leadership and strength as New York City's mayor following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.  |

## DO ADS PERSUADE VOTERS?

So, are voters and viewers persuaded by the techniques used by political ad producers? Two long-time researchers don't think so. Writing in their 1976 classic *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections* (1976), Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure said:

Symbolic manipulation through televised political advertising simply does not work. Perhaps the overuse of symbols and stereotypes in product advertising has built up an immunity in the television audience. Perhaps the symbols and postures used in political advertising are such patently ridiculous attempts at manipulation that they appear more ridiculous than reliable. Whatever the precise reason, television viewers effectively protect themselves from manipulation by staged imagery."<sup>9</sup>

In fact, a Fall 2006 *USA Today*/Gallup Poll found that "Americans are highly skeptical of what they see in ads for political candidates."<sup>10</sup>

But others might disagree. Advertising, in general, does influence people. Some of us are persuaded more than others. Critical thinking/viewing and critical inquiry (questioning) are important strategies when considering how advertising influences consumers.

49%: The number of those surveyed who said "not much" when asked in a 2006 Gallup poll, "How much of what is said in (political) commercials, for or against candidates, do you believe?"

## USING REPETITION TO REMIND THE VOTERS

One of the things advertisers know is that if you want your customer to remember your product, you must repeat its name over and over again. In 1960 Senator John F. Kennedy was not very well known outside his home state of Massachusetts. So when he ran for president, his image makers used a commercial designed to get him name recognition. Kennedy was challenging the very well known incumbent vice president, Richard Nixon.

Kennedy's spot mixed animation with actual newsreel footage. In order to get voters to remember his name, his media experts resorted to the proven advertising technique of repetition. The one-minute ad featured a catchy jingle in which the Kennedy name was repeated throughout.

Watch the Kennedy ad: <http://www.easehistory.org/castream.asp?id=2>.

## FOUR RULES FOR MAKING EFFECTIVE POLITICAL (OR PRODUCT) ADS

Researchers have enough of a history of political advertising on TV (more than 50 years) to be able to provide guidance to candidates and their media consultants. Professor Arthur Sanders, author of *Prime Time Politics* (2002) sums up what the

research says about how to make an effective ad, whether it be for dish detergent or a candidate:

1. Ads must grab our attention . . . so the best ads are dramatic, that is, they must tell a story using techniques like good visuals, catchy music, memorable slogans and compelling images (Verizon's cell phone campaign slogan "Can You Hear Me Now?" comes to mind).
2. Use of common genres that allow viewers with limited knowledge of the details of politics (or products) to understand the message. In other words: familiar themes and storylines (examples include political ads with visuals of terrorism, poverty, dirty waterways, crime).
3. Ads that emphasize a personal quality or characteristic rather than policy (common ads include those that introduce the candidate or his family).
4. Simple is better than complex appeals (30 seconds is just not enough time to explore complicated issues).<sup>11</sup>

### TV IS A BUSINESS, AND ADVERTISING MAKES MONEY

In 1860 candidate Abe Lincoln spent \$100,000 on his campaign, and that might have been the beginning of the idea that the one who spends the most wins. Lincoln's opponent Stephen Douglas spent only \$50,000—and lost.

The idea certainly took hold. "In the 1998 elections, well over \$1 billion was spent on political advertising on broadcast and print media. More than \$500 million was spent by candidates to buy airtime on local broadcast stations, not including national networks, and cable channels, up some 40 percent from the total for 1994."<sup>12</sup>

Do the TV stations' bottom lines increase because of political ads? You bet they do. In 2006 the total TV revenue for all of the U.S. stations combined equaled \$22.5 billion, according to media research firm BIA Financial Network. According to industry trade publication *Broadcasting & Cable*, these huge numbers were buoyed by political money.<sup>13</sup>

In the 2004 election, Florida was one of the "battleground states." Polls indicated that the race in Florida was a dead heat between incumbent president George W. Bush and his Democratic challenger, former Vice President Al Gore. No wonder the TV airwaves in the Sunshine State were bombarded by political messages. Local television ad purchases in Florida during the 2004 and 2000 presidential campaigns were:<sup>14</sup>

|                     | Primary        | General Election |
|---------------------|----------------|------------------|
| 2004 (Bush v Kerry) | \$ 3.5 million | \$119.8 million  |
| 2000 (Bush v Gore)  | \$ 4.3 million | \$ 25.4 million  |

Clearly, during political campaign races, the media benefit. Those same media executives, with powerful Washington lobbyists, lead the effort against any campaign finance reforms, especially those that advocate for free airtime for candidates. After all, free airtime takes dollars away from the station's bottom line.

**Table 7.2**

The Rise in Political Ad Purchases, 1972–2004<sup>15</sup>

| Year | Network      | Spot/Local    | Total         |
|------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1972 | \$6,519,100  | \$18,061,000  | \$24,580,100  |
| 1976 | \$7,906,500  | \$42,935,700  | \$50,842,200  |
| 1980 | \$20,699,700 | \$69,870,300  | \$90,570,000  |
| 1984 | \$43,652,500 | \$110,171,500 | \$153,824,000 |
| 1988 | \$38,520,700 | \$189,379,500 | \$227,900,200 |
| 1992 | \$73,816,000 | \$225,807,400 | \$299,623,400 |
| 1996 | \$33,824,000 | \$366,661,900 | \$400,485,900 |
| 2000 | \$772,600    | \$611,172,500 | \$611,945,100 |
| 2004 | \$144,000    | \$637,831,900 | \$637,975,900 |

Figures above include presidential race years in which half of the Senate, all of the House of Representatives, and about one-quarter of the state governors were elected.

Is TV where it's at? You bet! Refer to Table 7.2. It shows the tremendous rise in ad purchases during the election campaigns from 1972–2004. Television continues to be a hot property for candidates.

So how much does it cost for a presidential candidate to purchase 30 seconds of advertising time on a local TV station? The answer is: that depends. Several factors have to be considered by the media buyer representing his/her candidate, the most important of which may be: how many people can I reach when I want to advertise?

First a little background—there are about 210 TV markets in the United States. Markets are ranked by size: that is, by how many homes have TV sets in the market. Obviously, the more homes with people watching, the larger the market. And the larger the market, the more that can be charged for ad time.

The Nielsen Company is the nation's most dominant ratings organization. Table 7.3 lists the top ten U.S. markets in 2007. Table 7.4 presents what one 30-second commercial might cost if one purchased time in one of the top network television programs listed.

**Table 7.3**

Nielsen Media's Top 10 Largest U.S. TV Markets (2007)<sup>16</sup>

| Television market rank and name    | Number of TV homes |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. New York                        | 7,366,950          |
| 2. Los Angeles                     | 5,611,110          |
| 3. Chicago                         | 3,455,020          |
| 4. Philadelphia                    | 2,941,450          |
| 5. San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose  | 2,383,570          |
| 6. Dallas-Ft. Worth                | 2,378,660          |
| 7. Boston (Manchester)             | 2,372,030          |
| 8. Washington, DC (Hagerstown, MD) | 2,272,120          |
| 9. Atlanta                         | 2,205,510          |
| 10. Houston                        | 1,982,120          |

**Table 7.4**  
30-Second Ad Costs in Network TV (2007–2008 TV Season)<sup>17</sup>

| Program title                     | Network | 30-second ad cost |
|-----------------------------------|---------|-------------------|
| <i>Grey's Anatomy</i>             | ABC     | \$419,000         |
| <i>Sunday Night Football</i>      | NBC     | \$358,000         |
| <i>The Simpsons</i>               | FOX     | \$319,000         |
| <i>Heroes</i>                     | NBC     | \$296,000         |
| <i>Desperate Housewives</i>       | ABC     | \$370,000         |
| <i>CSI</i>                        | CBS     | \$248,000         |
| <i>Two And A Half Men</i>         | CBS     | \$231,000         |
| <i>Survivor: China</i>            | CBS     | \$209,000         |
| <i>Survivor: Private Practice</i> | ABC     | \$209,000         |

## TARGETING THE AUDIENCE

One of the more popular places to place campaign commercials is around local television news. Local television news is very popular with candidates around the country. Over time, candidates have developed relationships with local TV news staffs, and stations cover candidates on the stump (free time). So it's natural that politicians would purchase airtime locally to reach their constituents. During the 2004 race for the White House, with TV continuing to reach the most people, ad time was purchased by candidates on specific TV programs designed to reach the audiences the candidates were trying to connect with. Media buyers were scooping up time (for example) during *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, watched by millions of women on local TV stations. Crime shows appealed to the Bush Republican campaign because the campaign was trying to reach men, whereas the Kerry Democratic campaign went after women heavily.

Before purchasing ad space, a candidate's media buyer must consider:

- Who is the target audience? (men, women, minorities, new, young voters)
- What TV shows do they watch? (football, soap operas, BET, Jon Stewart)
- Which TV shows attract the largest possible audiences? (reality, news, sports, talk, drama)
- How many of the target audience members are actually watching?
- Is this ad purchase the most effective use of my ad spending dollars?

In the 2008 race, Iowa, with its early January primary date, attracted a lot of candidate advertising. One ad tracking service found most of the presidential ads were purchased within these top five television programs:

1. Local News: \$16.1 million
2. *Wheel of Fortune*: \$1.4 million
3. *The Today Show*: \$862,2007
4. *The Oprah Winfrey Show*: \$577,860
5. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*: \$480,551<sup>18</sup>

In the 2008 race, the Obama campaign purchased ad time in Manchester, New Hampshire during the following ABC series: *Ugly Betty*, *Private Practice*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Dirty Sexy Money*, and *The Women's Murder Club*. The Clinton camp, meanwhile, purchased time on *Desperate Housewives*, *Boston Legal*, and daytime programs such as *The Martha Stewart Show* and *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*. According to politico.com, all of the candidates bought time on Sunday's *Good Morning America*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and the local news.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, candidate Mike Huckabee purchased ad time on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Divorce Court*, and *Dr. Phil*. John McCain placed his spots in *People's Court*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and *Family Guy*. Mitt Romney bought time during *Friday Night Lights*, *Wheel of Fortune*, and *The Tyra Banks Show*. Rudy Giuliani's ads aired on *Poker after Dark*, *Law and Order*, and *Jeopardy*.<sup>20</sup>

The *New York Times*, using data from a political ad spending firm, reported on the total number of spots (TV commercials) aired in all TV markets in the campaign through December 23, 2007.<sup>21</sup>

The list for total number of spots aired follows:

| Republicans       | Democrats       |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| Romney: 24,189    | Obama: 13,834   |
| Giuliani: 2,676   | Clinton: 10,674 |
| McCain: 2,547     | Edwards: 7,735  |
| Richardson: 5,714 | Huckabee: 1,985 |
| Thompson: 1,964   | Dodd: 3,576     |

The *Times* also reported that of the Democratic candidates, Barack Obama had spent the most in Iowa (\$8.3 million); and of the Republicans, Romney had spent the most (\$6.5 million on more than 8,000 spots).<sup>22</sup>

For the first time, Nielsen (the ratings company) and the Wisconsin Advertising Project, used audience and TV program surveys to track political ads in every one of the 210 television markets in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

## WHAT A 30-SECOND AD COULD COST A CANDIDATE

In Washington, D.C. (a top-10 market), during slower times of the year, a spot on a daytime show might cost under \$100. But the cost of a spot on a Washington Redskins game aired in prime time might be as high as \$10,000–\$25,000. The price also depends upon the available inventory, the prices charged by the competition, the size of the overall package and its component parts, the anticipated ratings, and the skill of the sales staff.<sup>24</sup>

During the 2004 election, Ohio was one of the key battleground states. Polls there indicated that the race for president was very close. Millions of ad dollars went to every TV station. As an example, prices for a 30-second commercial on WHIO-TV (Dayton, market size 58) ranged from \$185 for a low-rated program to \$5,200 for a spot on highly rated television programs such as *Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)*. Between March and September (2004), some 14,273 ads

about the Bush/Kerry presidential race aired on Toledo's (market size 71) four leading TV stations.<sup>25</sup>

One question we might ask about spending by presidential candidates is: Who benefits from their purchases of ad time? Clearly the media themselves are the primary beneficiaries. Competitive campaigns, using TV to reach their audiences, benefit by broadcasting their ads at the most opportune times. The millions of dollars in ad revenue clearly helps the bottom line of the broadcast companies who own the stations, and that satisfies board members and investors.

### PURCHASING AD SPACE ON WEB SITES

Consultants for candidates are also aware that many of us get our news and information online, rather than from printed newspapers and magazines. An ongoing practice involves purchasing advertising space on Web sites that millions of people are known to visit.

### ADVERTISING BENEFITS NEWSPAPERS, TOO

Television is not alone: many candidates still use newspapers to reach voters. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, advertising by candidates has helped many newspapers' bottom lines, at a time when many papers are struggling to survive. Political consultants say that benefits of advertising in newspapers are that readers vote at above-average rates, and that newspapers allow for more sophisticated arguments than can be delivered in the typical 30-second television campaign spot.

As overall spending on campaigns doubled to \$3.1 billion between 2002 and 2006, the amount spent on newspapers, including their online editions, tripled to \$104 million, according to PQ Media.<sup>26</sup>

### THE POWER OF THE IMAGE OVER THE WORD

Throughout the history of political advertising, there are images that stick out: images that people remember. And they remember them for a long time.

Some might remember the little girl seen plucking the petals off a daisy in the infamous "Daisy Spot" ad created in 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson's election campaign. Others might recall the image of Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis dressed in military fatigues atop a tank. And still others might remember the "Dean Scream" video and images of Democratic presidential contender Howard Dean reacting to his favorable New Hampshire primary showing—a spontaneous moment seized on by the opposition and the media for purposes of their own.

Each image designed to appeal to the senses, each designed to communicate something important to the voter, each a moment in time.

### TYPES OF ADS HAVEN'T CHANGED MUCH OVER THE YEARS

Some of the first political ads aired on television more than 55 years ago. It may come as a surprise to learn that the types of political ads you see today do not differ

very much from those seen in 1952. Descriptions of the fairly common techniques follow.

#### Common Political Ad Techniques<sup>27</sup>

*Profile Spots ("the biography"):* Commonly used at the start of a campaign to introduce voters to the candidate.

Examples: The Jimmy Carter profile spot from 1976 depicted the former Georgia governor as the ultimate nonpolitician, a nonlawyer tiller of the soil possessed of common sense found everywhere but inside the D.C. Beltway; Bill Clinton's "The Boy from Hope" (1992) is a more recent example.

*Testimonial Spots:* The "plain folks" or well known personalities who talk about why they support the candidate.

Example: Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, endorsed John F. Kennedy for president in 1960, and the effort was seen as a major boost from those who respected the former first lady.

*Accomplishment Spots:* The candidate lays out what he or she has already done in office, using memorable visuals.

Example: Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" is the classic example here.

*Negative Record Spots:* Increasingly, candidates go after each other's record, using a variety of techniques. Watch for how candidates use quotations or newspaper headlines to prop up their argument against an opponent's voting record.

Example: There are so many examples that it is difficult to choose.

*Response Spots:* A candidate who has been criticized responds.

Example: Democrat Michael Dukakis responded (but too late) to many of challenger George H. W. Bush's ads (some say that led to his defeat).

*Character Challenge Spots:* Challenging your opponent's character can be a risky strategy, complex and delicate.

Example: Democrat Hubert Humphrey's "Weathervane" ad (1968) so angered Richard Nixon that he called on Humphrey to take it off the air. Humphrey did remove it. But Nixon didn't think twice about utilizing the same tactic four years later against rival George McGovern.

*Issue Spots:* Candidates do talk about issues, even if only for 30 seconds.

Examples: Take your pick: you'll find everything from crime, education, poverty, immigration, terrorism, and more. Both Hilliary Clinton and Barack Obama used health care as an issue in the 2008 Democratic primary race.

*Scare Tactic Spots:* Using fear as a vehicle has become a popular persuasive technique in ads.

Examples: LBJ's "Daisy Spot" (against Barry Goldwater, 1964); Ronald Reagan's "Bear in the Woods" spot (1984) about Soviet domination; the more contemporary use of 9/11 imagery in many political candidate ads.

## SYMBOLIC IMAGERY IN POLITICAL ADVERTISING

Every media producer knows that images and related techniques can be used as symbols. Tobacco companies show young people happy and in bright colorful settings to imply smoking will lead to friendship and fun times. Political ad producers have also employed symbols for years.

In political ads, symbols such as the American flag are often used. The colors chosen for the onscreen titles or slogans will often be in red, white, and blue, all designed to communicate American values. (The “transfer” technique in propaganda says that viewers will transfer their patriotic feelings toward the flag to the candidate whose ads use such symbols and images.)

Ads which feature ordinary people—for example, senior citizens, crime victims, welfare recipients, immigrants, unemployed workers—can heighten the sense of authenticity, identification, and emotional impact, for those of us who are exposed to these types of ads.<sup>28</sup>

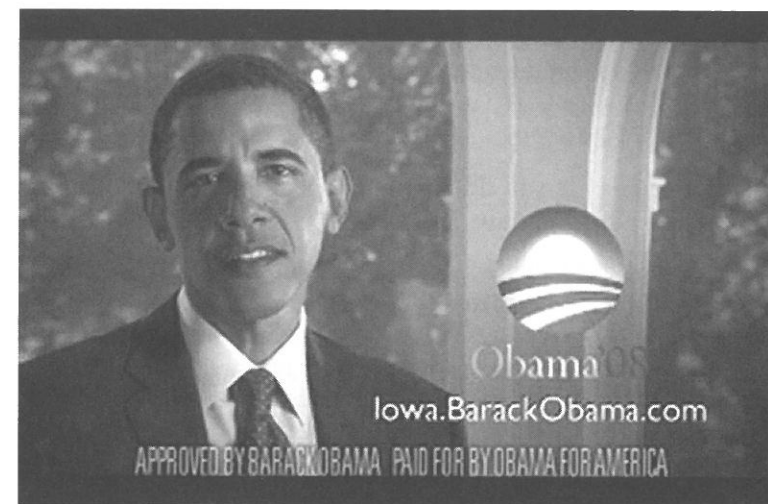
## THE USE OF COLOR AND HOW THE BRAIN REACTS TO IT

Experts also know that utilizing the right color can achieve the desired response. So the use of color both in campaign events and in advertising is given a lot of time and attention.

According to one brand executive, Chuck Pettis of BrandSolutions, Inc., “Color is one of the key tools used to communicate to the amygdala and emotional portal between the three brains. Color can evoke subconscious and unconscious emotional responses that then send signals to the cortex brain, which then comes up with rationalizations for decisions already made unconsciously.”<sup>29</sup> As an example,



At his presidential transition Web site, president-elect Barack Obama’s team made crisp and effective graphical use of the traditional “patriotic” colors red, white, and blue. The president-elect sought to adapt his highly successful Internet campaign strategy to the demands of his new office. (AP Photo/change.org)



Obama’s widely praised campaign logo “branded” the candidate on campaign ads of all sorts, from his ubiquitous Internet ads to bumper stickers and lawn signs. The logo, shown here in a TV ad, featured subtle use of red, white, and blue and an evocative emblem. (AP Photo/Clinton Campaign)

Pettis associates President George W. Bush with the “ruler archetype” (commonly known as the leader, the commander, the boss). Most “ruler” brands (Microsoft, IBM, Polo) have blue in their color palette. President Bush was often seen wearing a blue tie, for example.

Candidates might be shown walking or talking with farmers, housewives, business people, or children—another way of connecting with voters as the common person. Republican media consultant John Brabender pulls back the curtain on what he calls the “visual shorthand” used by ad makers to communicate to voters. If the candidate is pro-business, for example, you show him wearing a hard hat on a construction site: that’s the universal code for jobs. If the candidate is trying to influence senior citizens, he or she will be shown at a nursing home, smiling with older folks. To show a candidate’s support of K–12 education, multiracial kindergartners are preferred. And to invoke middle American values, the commercial will contain lots of flags, a universal sign of strength and patriotism, especially since 9/11.<sup>30</sup>

Music is specially chosen to make the viewer feel soothed and comforted, especially in times of stress or anxiety.

## WHY DO CAMPAIGN ADS LACK QUALITY OF INFORMATION?

Media critic and historian Robert W. McChesney maintains that political ads are “dreadful” because they emulate the best (or worst) of conventional advertising. In his *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (1999), McChesney notes that political ads are protected from regulation by the First Amendment, so their content cannot be legally challenged. Thus candidates can (and usually do) say anything in their political messages. An ad executive who compared the accuracy of presidential TV spots in 1976 to that of commercial messages found that ads for candidates



Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford would not have met the standards the government places on the most trivial product commercial.<sup>31</sup>

### APPEALING TO EMOTIONS

Most advertising today is still designed to appeal to the emotions. Advertisers and political media advisors have known for years that the best ads appeal to emotions.

Psychophysicologist Thomas Mulholland (Veterans Hospital in Bedford, Massachusetts) found that after just 30 seconds of watching television the brain begins to produce alpha waves, which indicates torpid (almost comatose) rates of activity. Alpha brain waves are associated with unfocused, overly receptive states of consciousness. A high frequency of alpha waves does not occur normally when the eyes are open. In fact, Mulholland's research implies that watching television is neurologically analogous to staring at a blank wall . . . . When Mulholland's research was published, it greatly impacted the television industry, at least in the marketing and advertising sector. Realizing viewers automatically enter a trance state while watching television, marketers began designing commercials that produce unconscious emotional states or moods within the viewer. The aim of commercials is not to appeal to the rational or conscious mind (which usually dismisses advertisements) but rather to implant moods that the consumer will associate with the product when it is encountered in real life. When we see product displays at a store, for instance, those positive emotions are triggered. Endorsements from beloved athletes and other celebrities evoke the same associations. If you've ever doubted the power of television advertising, bear this in mind: commercials work better if you're not paying attention to them!<sup>32</sup>

In his book *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work* (2006), political science professor Ted Brader describes some of the common beliefs shared by those who create messages for politicians:<sup>33</sup>

Belief #1. Politicians routinely appeal to the emotion of voters, especially in campaign ads.

Belief #2. Emotional appeals strengthen the power of campaign ads as to sway voters.

Belief #3. Much of the emotional power of campaign ads derives from images and music.

Belief #4. Emotional appeals influence voters by getting their attention and evoking emotions that will then be associated with a candidate.

Belief #5. Campaign ads that rely on emotional appeals are manipulative, lacking in substance, and antithetical to reason or rationality.

Belief #6. Emotional appeals are most effective at influencing uninformed or uneducated voters.

(Political) commercials make the American public captive in two respects. Since they occur in the midst of regular programming, they can't be readily shut off. And since their primary appeal is not to reason but rather to emotions, they are virtually unanswerable.

—Curtis B. Gans, Director, Committee for the Study of the American Electorate (1973)

### NEGATIVE ADVERTISING: HOW DOES IT AFFECT VOTERS?

Years of negative campaigns conducted almost exclusively by thirty-second television ads have gridlocked our political process and made the compromises necessary to govern all but impossible. Worse, it has soured our politics to the point that too many people no longer want anything to do with it.

—CBS newsman Bob Scheiffer

How do you feel about negative advertising? Does it turn you off? Does it confuse you over which candidate to vote for, if you vote at all? Is it possible that negative ads might actually be good for the election process?

Negative campaigning and advertising have been around for a long time, in one form or another.

One major study found that negative advertising does, in fact, drive down voter turnout. Researchers Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar documented this trend in their 1995 book *Going Negative*. Their study says that political campaign consultants intentionally use these ads to turn off voters. By their calculation, more than 6 million votes were lost to negative campaigns during the 1992 presidential election.<sup>34</sup>

Yet another study found that negative ads are actually good for the election process. Attack ads and negativity are healthy for campaigning, according to other researchers, if for no other reason than the need on the part of voters for solid information so they can make choices among partisan alternatives.<sup>35</sup>

### THEMES IN 2008 ADS

Campaign ad watcher Evan Tracey of the Campaign Media Analysis Group, a firm that tracks political advertising, says themes in the ads for the 2008 presidential race followed predictable patterns: a vote for the GOP is the same as a vote for Bush (bad) and special interest groups are the cause of both global warming and inadequate health care for all Americans. "By and large the themes (up to this point) are very similar to those of four years ago: 'GOP equals Bush equals bad.' And: 'Evil special interests in Washington are the cause of global warming and the reason we don't have health care for all,'" says Tracey.<sup>36</sup>

### CRIME SYMBOLISM—BUSH VERSUS DUKAKIS (1988)

Experienced media consultants and ad producers have also figured out how to indicate their candidate is strong on crime: showing him or her talking to law enforcement officials. This technique has been used in countless ads.

One negative ad on crime has gone down in political ad history. Many voters saw not only the ad, but also the ensuing massive press coverage about it.

The ad was created by Bush media specialist Roger Ailes, and it was used by President George H. W. Bush in his 1988 reelection campaign. The ad was designed to paint Bush's opponent, Democrat Michael Dukakis (who was governor of Massachusetts), as being soft on crime. With images of prisoners walking

through a revolving prison gate, the ad (known as the “Furlough Ad”) said “many first-degree murderers escaped” as the words “268 escaped” were superimposed on the screen. The problem was, the facts didn’t add up. Massachusetts actually had one of the best prison records among the states. But that didn’t matter. According to media scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “it depended on innuendo and visual images to link Michael Dukakis with the supposed dangers of a prison furlough program and therefore . . . a dangerous breed of liberalism.” Jamieson also charged that the media failed to challenge the inaccuracies of the furlough ad, thus failing in one of its primary responsibilities.<sup>37</sup>

#### “Furlough Ad”: Transcript

As Governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis vetoed mandatory jail sentences for drug dealers. He vetoed the death penalty. His revolving door prison policy gave weekend furloughs to first-degree murderers not eligible for parole. While out, many committed other crimes like kidnapping, and rape. And many are still at large. Now Michael Dukakis says he wants to do for America what he’s done for Massachusetts. America can’t afford that risk.

Watch the “Furlough Ad”: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lFk78R\\_qYM&mode=related&search=](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lFk78R_qYM&mode=related&search=).

A similar ad also portrayed Dukakis as weak on crime, but this second ad was not funded by the Bush campaign, but rather by an independent political action committee.

#### “Willie Horton Ad”: Transcript

Bush and Dukakis on crime: Bush supports the death penalty for first-degree murderers. Dukakis not only opposes the death penalty, he allowed first-degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison. One was Willie Horton, who murdered a boy in a robbery, stabbing him 19 times. Despite a life sentence, Horton received ten weekend passes from prison. Horton fled, kidnapping a young couple, stabbing the man and repeatedly raping his girlfriend. Weekend prison passes: Dukakis on crime.

Watch the “Willie Horton Ad”: [http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/election/index.php?ad\\_id=944](http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/election/index.php?ad_id=944) and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC9j6Wfdq3o>.

The impact of both the “Furlough” and “Willie Horton” ads was devastating: Bush surged ahead of Dukakis in the polls. The shift in public opinion was widely attributed to the broadcast of these two ads and the subsequent media coverage of them.<sup>38</sup>

### IMPRESSIONS OF NEGATIVE ADS

A Pew research poll<sup>39</sup> found that voters and consultants had very different concerns when asked about the impact of negative ads.

What bothers the American public:

|                             | Very much | Somewhat | Not much/Not at all |
|-----------------------------|-----------|----------|---------------------|
| <b>Negative campaigning</b> | 69%       | 17%      | 21%                 |
| What politicians promise    | 53%       | 25%      | 21%                 |
| Amount of money spent       | 56%       | 17%      | 26%                 |
| Political ads on TV         | 32%       | 24%      | 43%                 |
| News coverage               | 15%       | 26%      | 57%                 |

What consultants say causes voter cynicism:

|                             | Very much | Somewhat | Not much/Not at all |
|-----------------------------|-----------|----------|---------------------|
| News coverage               | 63%       | 28%      | 9%                  |
| Politician performance      | 27%       | 46%      | 26%                 |
| Fundraising practices       | 25%       | 36%      | 38%                 |
| <b>Negative campaigning</b> | 24%       | 43%      | 33%                 |

### REAGAN AND SYMBOLISM OF FEAR IN POLITICAL ADVERTISING

The Reagan campaign ran a commercial during the 1984 campaign that subtly told voters that Democrats of the era didn’t appreciate the dangers of the world in which they lived. It suggested that Reagan’s opponents were convinced the woods were safe because they harbored no bears, but asked a simple question of those watching it: What if they’re wrong, and there *are* bears in the woods?<sup>40</sup>

#### “Bear in the Woods Ad”: Transcript

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 . . .

The ad ends with a visual: a photo of Reagan with the words: Ronald Reagan Prepared for Peace.

Watch the “Bear in the Woods Ad”: <http://www.4president.us/tv/1984/reagan1984bear.htm>.

Media scholar Ted Brader explains, “The entire script is a metaphorical reference to the Cold War standoff with the Soviet Union (the bear is a traditional symbol of Russia.) Like *Daisy*, the Bear ad counts on viewers to fill in what is missing. The audiovisual packaging of the ad does nothing to help clarify the message. For nearly thirty seconds, a bear lumbers over the rocks, through bushes, and into streams, until finally meeting a man with a gun atop a grassy ridge. At first, the bear walks directly toward the man but then pauses several feet away and takes a step back. The ad never cuts away to images of Soviet tanks, missiles, or other visual evidence that might help viewers who miss the point. Just as the *Morning in America* ads use a sentimental tune to elicit an emotional reaction from viewers, the Bear ad uses disquieting string chords with the ‘thump-thump’ of a drum at regular intervals.”<sup>41</sup>

The ad is impressive for what it *doesn't* show or say:

- It never references Reagan's Democratic opponent, Walter Mondale.
- It never mentions the Soviet Union (the "bear," then thought to be the threat).
- It says nothing about nuclear powers or weapons.
- It makes no reference to spending on American defenses.

The ad was created by renowned adman Hal Riney, the same man who produced Reagan's "Morning in America" spot. Many critics are fond of Riney's approach: "Riney has the ability to cloak a strong message inside of a softer approach . . . . Most political advertising hits viewers over the head, while his work makes just as strong a point but in a less confrontational and a more soothing manner."<sup>42</sup>

In 2004, the Bush-Cheney campaign took a page directly from Reagan's campaign playbook, creating an updated version of the bear ad. Their version showed wolves, preparing to strike, in the woods.

#### "Wolves Ad": Transcript

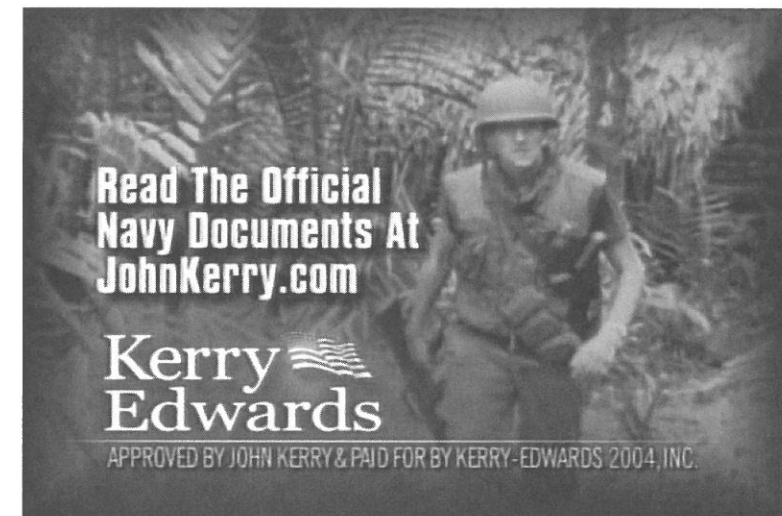
In an increasingly dangerous world . . . . Even after the first terrorist attack on America . . . John Kerry and the liberals in Congress voted to slash America's intelligence operations. By 6 billion dollars. Cuts so deep they would have weakened America's defenses. And weakness attracts those who are waiting to do America harm.

Watch the "Wolves Ad": [http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/election/index.php?nav\\_action=election&nav\\_subaction=overview&campaign\\_id=178://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/06/09/BUGBI72U8O1.DTL](http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/election/index.php?nav_action=election&nav_subaction=overview&campaign_id=178://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/06/09/BUGBI72U8O1.DTL).

This time, the Republicans were not referencing Russians as our foes, but rather terrorism. The ad used ominous music and implied that Democratic challenger John Kerry would not be strong on terrorists. Kerry's response to the wolves ad: "Instead of giving voters even one good reason to vote for him, George W. Bush has chosen to scare the American people with images of wolves."<sup>43</sup> But as Kathleen Hall Jamieson notes, such "allegorical" ads can be powerful.<sup>44</sup>

#### SWIFT BOAT VETERANS NEGATIVE AD CAMPAIGN CHALLENGES DEMOCRAT KERRY

In May 2004, a "527" (independent interest) group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth unveiled a campaign designed to discredit Vietnam veteran and Democratic presidential candidate Senator John Kerry. The group, partially composed of veterans who had served with Kerry, raised millions of dollars to create a Web site and to broadcast their "issue ads" claiming Kerry had lied or misled voters about his war record and events that had occurred during Kerry's Vietnam War tour of duty. In August of that year, several ads sponsored by the group aired across the country. The ads created a great deal of controversy and publicity, both in



In August 2004 the John Kerry campaign countered Swift Boat Veterans for Truth attack ads impugning Kerry's military record with this ad showing Kerry in action in Vietnam in the 1960s. (AP Photo/Kerry-Edwards 2004)

newspapers, news programs, and online. Senator Kerry was slow to respond to the charges in the ads, and some claim this hurt him in his bid to unseat President Bush.

Charges made in these ads, and others, caused many in the media to return to their roles as "fact checkers." Tom Hannon, CNN political director, says, "I think the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth [ad campaign] is really what caused the rebirth or certainly the explosion of fact-checks. It sort of gave a second life to some of the tools that maybe hadn't been used as much in recent campaigns."<sup>45</sup>

#### THE AD WATCH: NEWS MEDIA ANALYSIS OF CAMPAIGN SPOTS

How are voters supposed to know what's accurate and what's not in a candidate's slick 30-second commercial? Careful and critical viewers apply a good deal of skepticism when they watch. The negativity of the 1988 presidential campaign bothered a lot of people. The result was a move to provide the electorate with a new tool for analysis: the ad watch, which was designed to help voters see through manipulative, inaccurate, and misleading information in ads.<sup>46</sup> In this digital media age it is important for unsuspecting viewers to understand the unique techniques of persuasion used in polished political advertising.

Since 1992, the news media has sought to help readers and viewers deconstruct these sophisticated visual production techniques and claims made by candidates (and their public relations/advertising agencies) in commercials. "Some political ads leave out important information that would help voters make a better decision about which candidate they prefer or which position on an issue to support. Others provide confusing information that misleads voters. The job of a good 'adwatcher' is to find ads that are misleading or uninformative and correct any misinformation."<sup>47</sup>

One of the pioneers of the advertising watchdog was Cable News Network reporter Brooks Jackson. His bosses at CNN offered him a chance to review misleading or false ads by presidential candidates. "The news media had been letting candidates and their paid consultants get away with it. We covered the often high-toned speeches the candidates were making to audiences numbering in the hundreds and thousands, while ignoring the down-and-dirty statements their ads were making to audiences numbering in the millions and tens of millions."<sup>48</sup>

And so the "ad watch" was born. (Some television and news operations simply call their analyses "truth checks," "truth tests," "for the record," or "just the facts.") The ad watch is an analysis, typically prepared by a reporter who deconstructs the words and images of a 30- or 60-second commercial. Typical elements in a print ad watch include a transcript of the ad script, one or more images taken from the commercial, an explanation of the techniques of persuasion used, and an explanation of the claims made. Many newspapers also publish "ad watches" on local campaigns as well as on the ads of the presidential candidates. Elements of a broadcast ad watch include snippets of the ad itself. Typically, the broadcast ad watch is part of a station's local news.

### HELPING NEWS VIEWERS UNDERSTAND BROADCAST AD WATCHES

Studies have proved that TV viewers are more likely to remember the campaign ads in political news stories, even if the reporter in the story is critical of the information in the ad. Researcher Kathleen Hall Jamieson asked groups of voters during the 1988 presidential campaign what they remembered seeing from the news of the previous week, during which ABC News had debunked distortions in ads used by both the Republican nominee, George H. W. Bush, and the Democrat, Michael Dukakis. Surprisingly viewers remembered the content of the ads, but *not* what the ABC reporter said about those same ads. A subsequent study found viewers likewise recalled more about the ad than the reporter's commentary of the ad. Why did this occur? Jamieson says ABC filled the TV screen with the ad while the reporter was commenting on it. To help solve viewer comprehension, Jamieson and the Annenberg Public Policy Center have recommended that future news reports place the ad within a smaller box on the screen, so that viewers don't confuse the ad's message with the reporter's message. Another recommendation: superimpose graphics over the ad to reinforce criticism.<sup>49</sup>

Researchers say the success of the broadcast ad watches lies not simply in replaying the ad being analyzed and offering commentary, but rather in interrupting the ad with commentary and repositioning the ad on the screen.<sup>50</sup>

Broadcast news organizations have been encouraged to conduct and air ad watches by the large Radio-TV News Directors Association. Brooks Jackson of CNN, co-creator of the FactCheck.org political ad watchdog Web site, provides recommendations and guidance to those news journalists who might be ready to label an ad as either "false" or "misleading":<sup>51</sup>

"False." This is the most serious charge you can make about an ad, and I have used this word in only a very few cases. I use it when I can prove a statement is factually incorrect, and when there is no reasonable way it can be interpreted otherwise. In the 1996 presidential campaign Bob Dole ran an ad accusing Lamar Alexander of raising Tennessee's sales taxes 85% while he was governor. In fact, sales taxes increased only 22%. Dole's ad was false and I said so.

"Misleading." Much more often an ad uses facts selectively, or quotes out of context, in a way designed to leave an incorrect impression. Not a lie, exactly. But the sort of dishonesty that might get a journalist fired in a heartbeat if presented as a news story. Example: in 1992 Pat Buchanan ran a primary ad accusing some key George Bush advisers of being "foreign agents" whose names appeared in "Justice Department files." Wow! And it was all true! But the Bush aides were not spies or criminals, as the ad seemed to imply. They were merely lobbyists for foreign corporations, and had filed the required disclosure reports with an obscure office of Justice. A classic case of an ad that was factually true, but clearly misleading. And I said so. I probably use the word "Misleading" ten times more often than the word "False."

### WAYS TO CONSIDER AND QUESTION POLITICAL ADS

- Understand the type of ad you are watching
- Identify any claims made by the candidate or issues made
- Look for evidence in the ad for the claims that are made
- Find outside evidence for the claims
- Verify that evidence presented in an ad is true
- Correct any misleading statements
- Figure out if there are any visual arguments
- Identify the sponsor

While many believe ad watches help voters better understand these spots, not everyone agrees. One study disputed the contention that ad watch columns are good for the electorate. In *Going Negative, How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate*, the researchers found that ad watch journalism fails, because the candidate whose ad is being profiled gets more support rather than less from viewers who see the analysis.<sup>52</sup>

### WAYS OF DECONSTRUCTING AND ANALYZING POLITICAL ADS

Project Vote Smart, a national election education initiative, invites us to consider these questions<sup>53</sup> when studying political advertising:

- What are the key messages communicated in each advertisement?
- Which type of ad was more memorable? Why?
- Which do you think would be most effective in convincing viewers to vote for (or against) a candidate?

- Did you learn from the ads? Did they help you to decide which candidate to support?
- What do all types have in common? Do they provide factual information or do they evoke an emotional response?
- During which programs do the ads play? What time of the day do you see the most ads?
- What are the limitations of a 30-second commercial?
- How important is a candidate's look in these ads? What type of image are they trying to create?
- If you were the campaign manager for a candidate for Congress in your district, what type of ad would you try to create?

So what do you need to know in order to see through the spin and techniques of persuasion in political advertising? University of Maryland political science professor and media educator John Splaine offers advice on how to better understand what you see. Dr. Splaine suggests two models<sup>54</sup> for better understanding political advertisements. The TAPPER Model is presented in Table 7.5.

Splaine's SNAILS model is as follows:

### Symbols

What symbols are being used to convey the candidate's message (flags, monuments, etc.)? What meanings do the symbols have?

### Narration

What is the narration? What qualities does the narrator's voice have? What effect does that voice have on your perception? What effect do the words have?

**Table 7.5**

The TAPPER Model

|   |          |   |
|---|----------|---|
| T | Target   | Who is the target audience?   |
| A | Affect   | How do viewers respond to the ad emotionally?   |
| P | Proof    | Was any proof offered for the claims in the ad?   |
| P | Pictures | What did pictures convey? Images? Symbols? Music? Do these elements work together to support the central message of the ad? |
| E | Errors   | Are there any errors of fact or omissions? How can you find out?  |
| R | Remain   | How many different images did you see and how long did those images remain on the screen? Was the ad fast-paced or slow?    |

### Angles

What camera angles are used in the ad? What effect do they have?

### Implied

Sometimes the most important message is not openly stated. Instead, it is implied. Is there an implied message? If so, what? Is the implied message so clear that you can't miss it or do you have to look for it? Do the individuals or groups that appear in the ad represent an implied message?

### Lighting

What kinds of lighting are used? What effect does the lighting in the ad have on your perception and emotions? Is anyone or anything spotlighted? If so, how does this affect what you feel?

### Scare Tactics

When a commercial is negative, is it trying to scare you? How does it attempt to scare you (what scare tactics are used)? Were the scare tactics obvious or did you have to look for them?

## HOW VIDEO CONFUSES VIEWERS

Media scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson, who has studied how TV viewers comprehend political ads, found that television's use of visuals and editing techniques does not click with voters. According to Jamieson, "Rapid intercutting of visuals can short circuit the normal logic of viewers' thought processes. Viewers are also slow to recognize that most ads feature actors and are highly sophisticated marketing tools using professional directors and the latest high-tech editing techniques. As viewers, we react mainly to their emotional content."<sup>55</sup>

To be better prepared for political campaign messages, Jamieson recommends that we:

1. *Be informed.* Because it enhances the ability to evaluate campaign advertising knowing what goes in the body politic is the best protection against misleading communication of all kinds.
2. *Watch for counter advertising.* A responsibility of the candidates and their supporters, well-planned and produced responses to unfair attacks have a good chance of reaching the same low-involvement, inadvertently exposed audience that has been influenced by other ads. But—they require money and expertise that may not be equally available to both sides.
3. *Watch debates.* Although often criticized for shallow questions and self-serving answers, debates do provide a televised opportunity for viewers to hear candidates' arguments face-to-face. When candidates are willing to take the risk, they also provide a forum for making opponents responsible for unfair political advertising.
4. *Watch the news.* Political analysts do serve a watchdog role over unfair political advertising. Some drawbacks: their criticisms usually only air once while ads appear

repeatedly; most vulnerable viewers may not follow news programs; critics may give additional exposure to unfair criticisms; and commentary may not be as visually evocative and effective as the ads themselves.

### ***Common Ad Techniques of Persuasion***<sup>56</sup>

What are the common ad techniques and what do you need to know about them?

In general, these are some of the techniques of persuasion commonly used by advertisers:

**SYMBOLS** are larger than reality, usually emotional, idea-conveyances; symbols can be words, designs, places, ideas, music, etc. They can symbolize tradition, nationalism, power, religion, sex, or any emotional concept. The fundamental principle of persuasion is to rub the emotional content of one thing onto another. Thus, a beautiful woman can be used on TV to promote lust, romance, killing of police, or Snickers' nutrition.

**HYPERBOLE** is exaggeration or "hype." Glittering generalities is a subset of hype that utilizes impressive language. Vague and meaningless, it leaves the target impressed emotionally and, therefore, more susceptible to the next sales pitch. For example, "The greatest automobile advance of the century . . ."

**DEFENSIVE NATIONALISM** uses fear (usually of an enemy) although it can be a political opponent, sickness, or any threat. For example, calling statements "McCarthyism" or "communism" brings up fear of demagogues and dictatorship.

**SCAPEGOATING** is a powerful subset of defensive nationalism that blames many problems upon one person, group, race, religion, etc.

**HUMOR** is a powerful emotion. If you can make people laugh, you can persuade them.

**LIES** work—on cereals boxes, ads and on television "news." Most people want to believe what they see. According to Hitler, people are more suspicious of a small lie than a large one.

"**MAYBE, MIGHT, AND COULD**" can make outrageous claims sound okay. Listen to infomercials.

**TESTIMONIALS** use famous people or respected institutions to sell a person, idea, or product. They don't need to have anything in common. A dangerous trend: we seem to be increasingly conditioned to accept illogic as fact.

**REPETITION** drives the message home many times. Even unpleasant ads work. Chevy trucks are "like a rock," and smoking Marlboro can make you tough and independent (fact: it used to be a cigarette for girls.)

**PLAIN FOLKS RHETORIC** is popular with advertisers and politicians: it's the strategy of promoting oneself or one's products as being of humble origins, common—one of the gals/guys. Unfortunately, plain folks reinforces anti-intellectualism (a common tendency of all electronic media), implying that to be "common" is good (an' hit ain't, dude, ya no?)

**FUHRERPRINZIP** means "leadership principle." (The term was first used in this manner by Josef Goebbels.) The idea is basically, "Be firm, bold, strong; have dramatic confidence." Many cultural icons emphasize the strong, yet plain, super-hero (for example Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger). Some think this role modeling leads to a great deal of male aloneness, and, perhaps, less ability to cooperate. The strategy is frequently combined with plain folks.

**AD HOMINEM** is name calling. It can be direct or delicately indirect. Audiences love it. Our violent, aggressive, sexual media teaches us from an early age to love to hear dirt (just tune in to afternoon talk TV). Name calling is frequently combined with hype, truth, lies, etc. Remember, all is fair in love, war, political dirty tricks, and advertising, and suing for libel is next to impossible!

**FLATTERY** is telling or implying that the members of your target audience are something that makes them feel good or, often, something that they want to be. And, I am sure that someone as brilliant as yourself will easily understand this technique.

**BRIBERY** seems to give something desirable. We humans tend to be greedy. Buy a taco; get free fries.

**DIVERSION** occurs when one seems to tackle a problem or issue, but, then, throws in an emotional non sequitur or distraction. The straw man technique is a subset that builds up an illogical (or deliberately damaged) idea which one presents as something that one's opposition supports or represents. Then one proceeds to attack this idea, reducing one's opponent.

**DENIAL** is the practice of avoiding attachment to unpopular things; it can be direct or indirect. An example of indirect denial was when Dukakis said, "Now I could use George Bush's Willie Horton tactics and talk about a furloughed federal (the President's jurisdiction) prisoner who brutally raped a mother of five children, but I would not do that."

**CARD STACKING** is using statements or facts in a context that gives a false and/or misleading impression—telling only part of the story. Read the quotations from the critics in any movie ad.

**BANDWAGON** is the persuasive strategy that says "everyone is doing it." It plays upon the universal loneliness of humankind. In America with our incredible addiction to sports, it is often accompanied by the concept of winning. "Wear Marlboro gear."

**SIMPLE SOLUTIONS** avoid complexities (unless selling to intellectuals). This strategy attaches many problems to one solution.

"**SCIENTIFIC**" **EVIDENCE** uses the paraphernalia of science (charts, etc.) for "proof," which often is bogus. A classic example is Chevy's truck commercial chart of vehicles on the road after ten years.

**GROUP DYNAMICS** replaces that "I" weakness with "we" strength—concerts, audiences, rallies, pep rallies.

**RHETORICAL QUESTIONS** get the target "agreeing," saying "yes," building trust; then try to sell them.

NOSTALGIA is the idealization of and longing for the past. A nostalgic setting can make a product seem more attractive—Forrest Gump!

TIMING can be as simple as planning your sell for when your target is tired. In sophisticated propaganda, it is the organization of multiple techniques in a pattern or strategy that increases the emotional impact of the sell.

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## 8

## Analyzing Campaign Events

TV, of course, has transformed the primaries from regional popularity contests into national image-making shows.

—Marshall McLuhan (1968)

It looks dazzling.

—CBS News analyst Jeff Greenfield (2008)

Stagecraft has always had an essential role in presidential conventions—and this is no exception.

—Steven Heller, *Staging Obama* (2008)

In every political campaign, candidates appear at events that are highly choreographed. These staged events are designed like clockwork, with specific things happening that are intended to appeal to and attract potential voters and viewers.

The events can be neighborhood gatherings, "town hall" meetings, press conferences, or even debates. In media circles, these events are sometimes labeled "photo-ops," short for photo opportunities.

Controlling every aspect of an event is very important to the candidate and his or her media consultant. By controlling the event, you almost guarantee that the media will document what you want them to see and hear. For example, every day, candidates—and their aides—decide to concentrate on one issue, and so all campaign appearances on that day are designed around the "topic of the day." The campaign might even distribute a press release to local or national media that not only emphasizes the topic but also draws attention to the candidate's previous record or quotes dealing with the issue.