

Political Advertising Gone Wild!

By Bruce A. Love

Less than six months remain until the general election. I can't wait! It is not my sense of civic duty that prompts this attitude, but rather my realization that a great deal of mud (and other stuff) will be slung over the next several months from both the left and the right. When it's all over, the only things left standing will be a large mountain of public cynicism heaped against the American political system, and the politicians that manage to garner one vote more than their opposition.

Politicians have become marketing animals. They have learned to use and abuse the time-honored principles of marketing without having to adhere to ethical guidelines that regulate marketing efforts in private industry. One example of this is the alarming amount of negative advertising that we see this early in the political campaigns. Comparative advertising is used effectively, and tactfully, in other industries to demonstrate distinctions between one company's products and those of the competition. If this approach to advertising were used in politics, political commercials would simply describe the honest differences between candidates.

But the negative attack ads that have emerged as the advertising weapon of choice in politics, attacks the very character of the other candidate. These ads usually include a grainy unflattering video of the political opponent, distressing music, and disturbing commentary. Campaign managers justify the use of this malicious form of comparative advertising by reporting that it is the most effective way they can influence voters in thirty seconds. Studies show, however, that the long-term effect of attack ads fuel public cynicism toward politics and is a cause for declining political participation.

Studies have also shown that negative political advertising adversely affects both the target AND the sponsor of the ad. Obviously, it would be better not to be associated with the ad at all, but it is required by law that the sponsor be identified. If, on the other hand, an independent organization sponsored the negative advertising, the candidate could theoretically be insulated

from the backlash against the sponsor of the ad. This appears to be the next frontier of negative attack ads. Look for such advertisements coming from ghost organizations as we get closer to the general election!

Negative advertising goes back many decades. One factor contributing to the upward trend in political attack ads is the 1934 Communication Act, which made an important distinction between political ads and those for products or services. It stated that broadcasters could refuse all deceptive advertising except for political commercials. In other words, politicians had the vision to pass a law that gives them exclusive permission to lie to us!

In contrast, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) also established guidelines for businesses that states:

- advertising must be truthful and non-deceptive or misleading
- advertisers must have evidence to back up their claims; and
- advertisements cannot be unfair.

Two weeks ago, I was pleasantly surprised to see a very positive, upbeat political commercial. A fit young candidate jogged through the streets of his hometown while listing his very admirable credentials. He commented as he ran past his wife that having graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, he was an "officer and a gentleman" and continued on his run to find more hands to shake. I thought to myself, "How refreshing! Such a positive attitude deserves my vote." A week later, our "gentleman" launched a new commercial depicting his opponent as a clown/puppet and suggested that the opponent's political camp had engaged in practices reminiscent of the Watergate Break-in. The commercial concluded by saying that it was time to cut some strings. Oh well, the positive message was nice while it lasted!

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