

Promoting the Presidential Message

The Candidates as Communicators

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Marshall McLuhan was right. The medium is the message. McLuhan was simply stating that the qualities of a medium — how messages are delivered — have as much effect as the message itself. He was talking about what he called the “electric media.” Still, it’s not a reach to suggest that the principal medium, much more than any other, is the person — the individual who both delivers and embodies the message.

A presidential candidate appealing to a nation, a CEO reshaping a multinational monolith — in fact, anyone with a message and an audience to reach — must embrace the reality that he or she is the medium, and therefore, the key to shaping both the message and the way it’s received.

Proof of this can be found among the many venture capitalists and investment bankers my colleagues and I have worked with, most of whom have told us in one way or another that their investment decisions don’t

begin with the product, the platform or the technology. They begin with the perception of the leadership’s ability to actually deliver. This comment is usually followed with the questions: “Where’s the leadership? Where’s the vision? Where’s the story?”

So how well did President George W. Bush and Sen. John F. Kerry each serve as the medium for their message? How well did each communicate his leadership qualities, his vision, his message? The answer to that would appear to be a no-brainer. It’s the guy who won, stupid. While no one would quarrel with that conclusion, there’s more to the story. Going into the election, the key imperative for each candidate was to convince the country of his ability to lead effectively, all the more important with a nation both at war and facing mounting problems at home. Each candidate needed to offer voters a distinct choice between competing visions of the country’s future and our role as a nation in this age of global terrorism —

issues requiring messages of depth and substance.

The consensus from postelection polls, however, was that the election was not won on substantive issues. Campaign strategy and the political, demographic, cultural and other variables that went into this election all played a critical part. This election suggested that communication strategy and personal communication skills

played a leading role — perhaps *the* leading role — in determining the final outcome, much like during the Nixon-Kennedy debates. Consider, for example, the following, from a *New York Times*/CBS News poll after the election, as reported in the *Times* by Adam Nagourney and Janet Elder: “Mr. Bush won despite the fact that Americans disapproved of his handling of the economy, foreign affairs

and the war in Iraq ... A majority of Americans ... believe the country is going in the wrong direction, traditionally a warning sign for an incumbent.”

Yes, Kerry was ahead on the issues. However, on the central issue of leadership, the president maintained a solid lead. Why was the president perceived as the more effective leader in spite of negative ratings on almost

every key issue? Because, if nothing else, he communicated a pure, unwavering resolve that appealed to people who were deeply worried about the country’s security.

It starts with the vision thing

The historian Henry Adams once compared the president of the United States to the commander of a ship at sea. “He must have a helm to grasp, a



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course to steer, a port to seek,” Adams wrote. Presidents are given the helm, but successful presidents effectively communicate both the direction in which they want to take the country and the port they seek. This is what we call presidential vision.

By most accounts, on the vision thing the president had the upper hand. After Sept. 11, 2001, Bush and his handlers were able to create an overarching vision built around an aggressive foreign policy leading to a strategy of preemptive war. That, argued the president consistently, required resolve — a need to “stay the course” no matter how dire the reports coming out of Iraq. Kerry, on the other hand, had the tougher job of challenging a wartime president. He had to both discredit Bush and sell his own vision. Still, Kerry had ample opportunities to articulate policies of his own. Instead, he relied primarily on attacking the president’s policies, without offering a clear, overarching vision of his own. And that, in politics as in business, is not a recipe for success.

Keep it simple

The best messages are characterized by “the Five C’s.” They’re clear and concise, while also consistent, compelling and credible. Therefore, trying to make too many points is counterproductive. As election results confirmed, the president was wise in not deviating from his basic stay-the-course message. “If America shows any uncertainty or any weakness in this decade, the world will drift toward tragedy, and that won’t happen on my watch,” became the president’s signature message. It met the Five C’s test. Again, as results showed, it appealed to voters who were simply more comfortable with what they perceived as clarity, consistency and re-

solve, even as each day produced more signs of a troubled war effort. Voters rejected Kerry’s more nuanced views. The substance of his positions may have been sound, but he did not frame his messages in a way that penetrated. He was credible and at times compelling, but not concise, and certainly not consistent in his message. That only fed the perception of flip-flopper that the Bush team put forth.

On yet another level, as Jonathan Alter wrote in a *Newsweek* column, “Bush may mangle the language, but he understands its importance and manages ... to speak in ways that have worked at home politically even as they alienate the world.” Kerry, meanwhile, kept falling back on legis-speak — the leaden style one acquires after two decades in the Senate. That was no match for the more idiomatic speaking style characteristic of the president.

None of this as yet qualifies George W. Bush as the next great communicator, a title bestowed upon Ronald Reagan. But, to give the president and his handlers their due, they did a better job of building the perception of Bush as a leader. Bush showed a better understanding of his audiences and was better at tailoring his messages to them. He showed clear purpose and a better grip on what his audiences wanted to hear. Despite his fumbling rhetorical style, he also showed a feel for language that was right for those he wanted to reach. In addition, Bush and his handlers knew exactly how they wanted him to be perceived.

The power of story

In his book “The Power and the Story,” Evan Cornog writes about the role of narrative in determining the political success of American presi-

dents. “The essence of American presidential leadership, and the secret of presidential success, is storytelling,” Cornog says. “From the earliest days of the American republic to the present, those seeking the nation’s highest office have had to tell persuasive stories — about the nation, its problems and, most of all, about themselves ... Once a president is in office, the ability to tell the right story, and to change the story as necessary, is crucial to the success of his administration.”

We’ve long known that stories improve communication — from business presentations to legal arguments to PR and ad campaigns and more. Stories marry reason and emotion, bring ideas and raw data to life, add context and

aid memory. Few things serve a leader better than a knack for narrative, an ability to tell stories and embody them. In his book “Leading Minds,” Harvard University’s Howard Gardner takes it a step further. “Leaders achieve their effectiveness largely through the stories they relate,” Gardner writes. Leaders must have a central story or message that individuals and groups can readily identify with and relate to; they will agree on the story or message even years later.

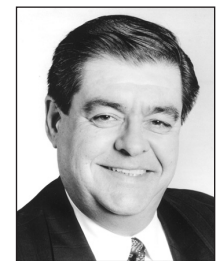
The president’s life story was crafted carefully over the years. Bush himself wrote about his years of drifting and partying, then finding God and reforming. It was a story of redemption and new resolve. With Sept. 11,

2001, the president’s story also became one of resolute leadership in the face of threats never before seen in the country’s history. In winning the election, the Bush team had first won the battle of creating and managing perceptions and wrapping it all in an effective storyline. That overshadowed Kerry’s own respectable narrative: war hero, successful prosecutor, legislator engaged in important policy issues.

A final note

As always, success begins with a sound communication strategy in the hands of a skilled communicator. That’s paramount to achieving outcomes, in business or presidential politics. Bill Clinton, at the dedication of

his presidential library last November, said it well: “I believe the job of a president is to understand and explain the time in which he serves, to set forth a vision of where we need to go and a strategy of how to get there, and then to pursue it with all his mind and heart.” ■



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