

Contrasts in Presidential Campaign Commercials of 2004

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This article examines television advertising used during the 2004 presidential campaign. Based on interviews with the advertising creators and coordinators and on repeated viewings by the author and his graduate and undergraduate students, it describes, analyzes, and evaluates the ads. The study reveals massive spending totaling \$620 million—a 235% increase over 2000. Kerry, his party, and 527 groups supporting his candidacy outspent Bush, his party, and his 527 groups \$358 million to \$262 million. Kerry had double the Bush ads, mainly because of state-specific ad placement. Kerry stayed positive early and ended with more positive ads, whereas his 527s took up the negative attack against Bush. Bush ran the most negative campaign in presidential history. 527 group ads played a significant role in the campaign, both early and late in the campaign. These ads hurt both Kerry and Bush early and aided Bush in the closing days of the campaign.

Keywords: 2004 presidential campaign; television; advertising

Spending

No one won or lost the 2004 presidential campaign because of lack of money. Huge amounts of money—more than \$620 million—were spent by the candidates, parties, and groups supporting either candidate. Overall, with party and group money, Kerry outraised and outspent Bush on television advertising \$358 to \$262 million. Kerry alone spent \$146.6 million, whereas Bush spent \$200 million. Both the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and liberal 527 groups spent more than \$100 million each on behalf of Kerry. Republican 527 groups spent less than \$50 million on behalf of Bush. In 2000, Bush/Republican National Committee (RNC) spent \$134 million; Gore/DNC spent \$106 million. Political action committee (PAC) groups spent approximately \$23 million for a total of \$263 million in 2000 advertising spending (Devlin, 2001). In 2004, \$620 million was spent—an increase of 235% in just 4 years. Money has always found politics, and politics has always found money, but in 2004 there was an orgy of money.

To put political spending in perspective, \$620 million is about what Toyota Corporation spends on TV advertising for 12 months in 50 states. Candidate campaigns spent most of this money over about 7 months in fewer than 20 states. Kerry, at \$358 million, spent what Anheuser-Busch spends a year, whereas Bush, at \$260 million,

spent equal to Coca-Cola advertising for the year 2003. Some critics have long lamented that we spend more to advertise beverages or detergents than we do presidents. No more! Because of the massive money spent only in 18 battleground states, Evan Tracy of *C Mag* paraphrased Churchill: “Never has so much been spent by so many and been seen by so few” (Tracy, 2004).

Both candidates accepted Federal Election Commission funds for the general election but not for the primary/preconvention period. Both accepted and therefore were limited by the \$75 million in federal funds. If Kerry and the Democrats knew they could raise so much money in 2004, they may not have taken federal funds—in fact, 2004 may be the last election that major candidates take and are therefore restricted by federal funds. “If the next Democratic nominee has the same kind of fundraising prowess that the Kerry/Edwards campaign did, certainly they will not take federal funding” (Shrum, 2004).

Kerry accepted federal money and made a crucial decision—he would save this limited money. His media advisers anticipated having two 5-week dark periods—the period after Super Tuesday and when Kerry’s general election ads would start and the 5-week period between the Democratic and the Republican Conventions. Other Democratic groups then were motivated to fill the time vacated by the Kerry advertising hiatus.

Early on, Kerry did not know that he would be able to raise so much on the Internet. “No one had any idea how much money could be raised on the Internet” (Donilon, 2004). David Axelrod, who created DNC ads, stated, “Over \$100 million—that was quite a surprise to us. . . . We had an enormous amount of money, maybe twice as much as we originally anticipated. . . . The Internet infused us with a lot of money we wish we would have had earlier” (Axelrod, 2004).

In 2000, Gore was outspent in large and small crucial states—by 40% in Florida and outspent 2 to 1 in New Hampshire (Devlin, 2001). The Kerry campaign was adamant that they would not be outspent in any crucial state because Bill Knapp learned a lesson from 2000: “Tad Devine was a huge advocate of ‘we cannot be outspent from week one’ and we weren’t” (Knapp, 2004).

Danny Juster, Kerry’s time buyer, maintained, “The big story in the big states was that it was pretty even this year. We matched each other in Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania” (Juster, 2004). In my review of postconvention spending in three large battleground states, both candidates spent almost evenly—Florida: Bush \$22 million, Kerry \$19 million; Ohio: Bush \$11 million, Kerry \$10 million; and Pennsylvania: Bush \$12 million, Kerry \$10 million. Even in smaller battleground states, spending was approximately equal—New Mexico: Bush \$2 million, Kerry \$1.8 million; New Hampshire: Bush \$2.2 million, Kerry \$1.5 million; and Iowa: Bush \$3.4 million, Kerry \$3.5 million. There were no 2-to-1 spending disparities in 2004, but with 527 groups included, Kerry outspent Bush 3 to 2.

In the state-by-state analysis of the 15 largest spending battleground states, it is true that Bush spent more than Kerry. However, the Kerry campaign spent less money but bought approximately the same number of gross rating points because of differences in time buying during both the preconvention and postconvention period.

Table 1
2004 Spending Chart in Millions

Kerry	146.6	Bush	200.0
Democratic National Committee	110	Republican National Committee	12.8
Media Fund	50	Progress for America	26.4
Move On	22	Swiftvets	19.0
American Federation of Labor	9.4	Citizens for Growth	1.7
40 other groups	20	15 other groups	2.1
Total	358		262

Bush spent \$100 million in a 60-day period before his convention. That is phenomenal and different than any other year. . . . He ended up spending another \$100 million versus our \$68 million during the postconvention period. . . . Bush spent \$100 million rather than \$68 million because we took advantage of the LDR [lowest discount rate]. They bought expensive at fixed levels, which could cost two to three times what we bought. We were on a par when we spent \$146 million because of the way we bought versus the way they bought. . . . That was one of the main ways we could remain competitive. (Juster, 2004)

Bill Knapp reinforced this crucial lowest rate advantage to Kerry buying. “They bought fixed rate and we bought lowest unit rate and they paid 20% to 40% more for points. . . . We discovered, we got placement and that 20% more was not worth the millions more to get it. We were outspent but we weren’t outpointed” (Knapp, 2004).

Aside from smaller Internet donations, one important spending phenomenon of 2004 was big donations by individuals. George Soros gave more than \$27 million and Peter Lewis gave more than \$23 million to liberal anti-Bush groups. This massive money could fund the Media Fund and Move-On early before their smaller donations from Internet givers kicked in. But all 527 groups had to pay the highest prices for their ads with no discounts. “It cost them more to buy time and . . . their money didn’t go as far” (Shrum, 2004). “2004 saw heavy anti-Bush motivation. Fund-raising will be harder in the future without Soros and his \$27 million. Who will step up next time? . . . How do you raise money when Bush isn’t there?” (Tracy, 2004).

Bush/Cheney Advertising Campaign

The Team

Mark McKinnon was the creative director of the Bush/Cheney 2004 campaign advertising. In 2000, the campaign was run from his Austin, Texas, offices of Maverick Media and used a three-person creative team of Stuart Stevens, Russ Schriefer, and McKinnon. In 2004, the campaign moved to Washington, D.C., with an expanded team similar to the Reagan 1984 ad team star concept but using political, not commercial, ad makers as in 1984. Alex Castellanos, who had created the 2000 RNC ads; Chris Mottola from Philadelphia; Fred Davis from Los Angeles; Frank Guerra and Lionel Sosa for Hispanic ads; Scott Howell, Sara Taylor, and Matthew Dowd as strate-

gists; Mike Shannon as media planner; and Ashley O'Connor as producer with an in-house editor, Matthew Taylor, made up the 2004 Bush team.

Strategy and Execution

George Bush began his advertising campaign in early May, just after Super Tuesday and earlier than his 2000 election ads that began in July. He opened with four ads played in rotation and sent by e-mail to 6 million supporters. "Safer/Stronger" was an innovative 30-second ad using no voiceovers, just scenes with a piano playing, as phrase graphics were superimposed on the scenes and one scene of 9/11—"A day of tragedy—A test for all Americans." The ad concluded with the theme "Steady Leadership in Times of Change." In another 30-second ad, "Tested," scenes appeared as an announcer asked and answered, "What gives us optimism and hope? Freedom, faith, families and sacrifice." In "Lead," a 60-second ad, Bush talks, "I know exactly where I want to lead this country," he says sincerely while sitting next to his wife. Even Laura speaks, "The strength, the focus are characteristics these times demand." "Lead" won the Gold Poly Award in 2005.

The crucial decision the Bush team made was to contrast Kerry with Bush, emphasizing the characteristics of strong leadership and a steady predictability.

We began to focus on this idea of steady leadership. We recognized that one of the things people liked about President Bush, even if they disagreed with him, they felt that he was a guy of strong conviction who was steady and predictable. People like that, particularly in these times of change. In volatile times that's a particularly strong asset. (McKinnon, 2004)

There were two main goals of the opening ads. "What we try to do in ads with the president was one of two things," Mark McKinnon stated. "We either communicated strength or we tried to communicate humanity" (McKinnon, 2004). He emphasized that his ads focused always on three themes. "We were trying to communicate strength, trust, and values" (McKinnon, 2004).

Bush's first ads, "Safer/Stronger" and "Time," created controversy because among its created scenes, it used an actual flag scene from the wreckage of 9/11. It was on screen for less than 2 seconds but created a firestorm. McKinnon used the footage because "this is the defining moment—certainly of this president, of our decade, and of our generation. . . . We discovered that 9/11 was not only powerful, but also positive; it was something that people felt that we had gone through together that tested us. There was a collective experience" (McKinnon, 2004).

September 11 and Bush's reaction to it and leadership after it were the highpoints of the Bush presidency. Bush's ad team used several interesting analogies to justify their use of 9/11. "Events shape campaigns," Russ Schriefer explained.

In 1992 there was a decisive moment and Bush 41 never brought up the first Gulf War in his campaign advertising. . . . Bush 41 was at the height of his popularity but he never reminded people of what it was that they liked about him. There was no way we were

going to avoid 9/11 in this campaign. . . . This was like Roosevelt not talking about Pearl Harbor. (Schriefer, 2004)

Highpoints and collective experiences were reminders that went deep into psyches of voters. They were powerful and positive, as McKinnon knew. Moreover, the free media coverage given to the first Bush ads and the discussion of them on talk radio and cable and network television were appreciated by the Bush team. “Controversy is not necessarily a bad thing. . . . We got \$6 to \$7 million of free coverage” (McKinnon, 2004).

September 11 became the anchor for the Bush 2004 campaign. Schriefer explained, “Take a look at your first ad and your last ad and they’re often very similar to one another—the bookends of successful framing.” McKinnon stated, “We did clearly bookend the campaign.” And Kerry’s senior adviser, Bob Shrum, lamented, “The Bush campaign figured out that this was a 9/11 election. There was a sense of identity that people had with Bush and 9/11. . . . In the end it was a 9/11 election. . . . They had to make that the frame of the election. 9/11 was the bookends of their campaign. You have to give them credit for understanding that” (Shrum, 2004).

McKinnon and Fred Davis were also able to capture a less than articulate president in a communicative and personable way. In his ads, Bush was sincere and genuine as he and Laura were seen sitting close together as Bush talked to an off-screen interviewer. “I don’t think there’s a single spot that is scripted with the president. We would get with him and the first lady because the first lady is a very powerful asset for us. . . . She made him much more comfortable, very relaxed. So we always tried to have her around when we were filming him” (McKinnon, 2004). McKinnon focused on a humane Bush, especially in a time of war. In the first ad, “Lead,” Bush talks warmly, and in a subsequent ad, “Solemn Duty,” “where he’s thinking about kids and 9/11 and kind of chokes up a little bit. So people say, ‘God, he really does care and this is a human guy’ . . . so we tried to capture human moments. . . . If you can communicate humanity into political spots, that goes a long way” (McKinnon, 2004).

But for all his emphasis on a positive, human Bush, McKinnon did not stay positive long. In less than 10 days after the opening of the Bush campaign, he went negative. In 2004, Bush used more than 80 ads in contrast to his 26 ads in 2000. Twenty-three were positive ads, but 58 were contrast comparative or attacking negative spots. Overall, Bush produced ads that were 72% negative. This is an all-time record for negativity in a presidential campaign. McKinnon noted, “I went back to the Reagan campaign in 1984 when everybody remembered only positive ads, yet close to 50% were negative. Clinton, in 1996, was close to 70% negative, so we are not too much over the range of what is typical for an incumbent.” McKinnon went on,

People really knew George Bush—both our supporters and our detractors. People have a very firm notion about who he is. That cement had dried. We tested a lot of this positive stuff; it just didn’t move the dial much. Kerry was just not as well known. So our opportunity to get a return on our investment was much greater by talking about the problems that we saw with the Kerry presidency—what he was proposing and his record. (McKinnon, 2004)

The contrast strategy was crucial because it linked Bush assets and Kerry liabilities. “Whenever you talk about your assets and your strengths, it is important that you line them up in relation to your opponent” (McKinnon, 2004).

McKinnon emphasized steady leadership. “Now it was steady vs. unsteady—the sense of not being predictable or not having core convictions” (McKinnon, 2004). Another Bush ad team member stated,

We looked at Kerry and his experience in Vietnam. He had been the antiwar guy. . . . He was consistently on the wrong side during the first Gulf War. . . . We saw he was a liberal; he was a flip-flopper. . . . He became the antiwar candidate and being the antiwar candidate in the time of war was not a good thing to do. (Schriefer, 2004).

No statement more captured Kerry as unsteady and a flip-flopper as a statement Kerry uttered on the stump in front of a West Virginia audience—“I actually did vote for the \$87 billion dollars before I voted against it.” McKinnon thought Kerry’s own statement “was arguably the most iconic moment of the entire campaign because that said more about what we were trying to say about Kerry and his flaws. And he said it about himself” (McKinnon, 2004). McKinnon had done an ad called “Troops” to be released in West Virginia in time to be shown the same day as Kerry’s speech. In the ad, the announcer says Kerry “voted for military action but later voted against funding for our troops . . . against body armor . . . against higher combat pay . . . against better health care for reservists and their families.” When Kerry thoughtfully tried to explain his vote for and against the \$87 billion, the Bush team only captured Kerry’s snippet. In less than 24 hours and for less than \$1,000, the ad was reedited to now include what would become the most used attack phrase of the campaign. The ad, now called “Troops/Fog,” was distributed to all battleground states and was shown heavily on national cable television—proving once again that a classic snippet is more powerful than a longer thoughtful statement when it comes to television advertising.

There were three types of anti-Kerry advertising. First, and most powerfully, they created ads that captured Kerry in snippets of his own words—as was done in “Troops/Fog.” In another ad, “Who Knows,” Kerry says, “We have to get back to the place where terrorists are a nuisance.” In “Searching,” Kerry says, “It was the right decision to disarm Saddam Hussein and when the president made his decision, I supported him.” Then Kerry says, “It’s the wrong war in the wrong place, at the wrong time.” This form of candidate in-his-own-words advertising saw its zenith in 1992, when both Buchanan and Clinton captured Bush in his infamous “Read my lips, no new taxes.” It is a tried-and-true form of effective negative advertising because when actual snippets are used, it makes the advertising appear to be less negative—“he said that, didn’t he?”—while creating a devastating countereffect.

The second form of negative advertising is graphics-driven and/or announcer-driven advertising. In positive or negative advertising, male and female announcers are used interchangeably to read copy as graphics of votes or proposals are flashed up on the screen. The announcer asks about a vote, “Mr. Kerry?” and the large word “No” is repeatedly used across the screen. “Policy people says it’s important that people

remember these three points. Media consultants in general are always pushing for less graphics so it is a policy versus media people issue . . . comparative spots are heavily graphic. We want to compare our health care against Kerry's care" (O'Connor, 2004).

I have noticed a trend toward more and more superimposed graphics used in presidential campaigns. Maybe it is because there has been an increase in the sheer number of ads, or maybe it is because political ads are produced fast and inexpensively or because computer use has turned us more into a generation of screen readers—but no matter the reason, I have concluded that political ad producers are “graphic happy.” O'Connor stated, “Graphic reinforcement has been tested and been proven to help people hang on the information that's reinforced through graphics” (O'Connor, 2004). But she was aware that in any graphic-intensive ad, “you still have to make them attractive” (O'Connor, 2004).

The Bush media team used created, approximated, or “staged footage—which sounds harsh but that's what it is. You get an actor raising a flag rather than a real fireman” (O'Connor, 2004). These fabricated scenes—“look shots as opposed to real shots” (O'Connor, 2004)—are the staple of political and commercial advertising. They are used as visual background for the superimposers of words or are used in conjunction with the candidate or announcer voiceovers. They became high art in the “Morning Again in America” spots of Reagan in 1984. The Bush campaign created similar visuals. “We shot in Florida and we found this sweet little neighborhood that looked like anywhere in America and we started with mom and dad, and family stuff—just like its ‘Morning Again in America’ from 1984” (O'Connor, 2004).

The third type of Bush negative advertising was stand-alone negative ads. I was impressed by the number of innovative individual ads the Bush media team produced. There were several Bush stand-alone ads that were memorable and will live on in show reels long after the 2004 campaign is over. Ads titled “Wacky,” “Surfing,” “Thinking Mom,” and “Wolves” represent these different ads. “There was a decision in the campaign to step out a little, to get out of the box a little, realizing that advertising has to be interesting. There has to be a reason that average voters would sit there and watch it” (Schriefer, 2004).

“Wacky” was their first attempt to be a little different. They used black and white, sped up footage, making the ad look like a silent film from yesteryear. “ ‘Wacky’ was just a different way of presenting information that made Kerry seem like he was from the old school,” explained Schriefer, who created the ad (Schriefer, 2004). “Wacky” attacked Kerry as advocating taxes that would raise gasoline prices to unreasonable levels. The levels were so extreme that the Kerry people created no response ad—“people just didn't buy that Kerry would do something that extreme” (Shrum, 2004). The main reason for “ ‘Wacky’ was a deliberate attempt to do something different and to cut through something creative and different with a little bit of humor” (McKinnon, 2004).

No ad captured visually the idea of Kerry the flip-flopper better than “Surfer.” Ashley O'Connor, who directed the production of the Bush ads, stated, “The minute you saw that footage you said, ‘Oh, this could be fun’ ” (O'Connor, 2004). “Surfer” captured actual footage of Kerry on a windsurfer going back and forth in Nantucket

harbor. “The second I saw the video, that ad was made, I said, ‘My God—what a perfect picture’ ” (McKinnon, 2004). McKinnon used classic music from the Vienna Waltz to reinforce the upscale nature of the sport in tempo with Kerry’s turns from left to right as an announcer provided copy regarding Kerry’s changes.

Our intention with that spot was to psyche them and we were going to get a free press pop out of this. . . . Actually our original strategy was to drop that ad right before the debate and get into Kerry’s head. What happened was Progress for America (PFA) had a version of the spot and we didn’t know but as we saw it, we said, “the joke is out” so we released ours immediately because we did not want to blow the joke. . . . We did end up getting a huge amount of free press. (McKinnon, 2004)

The “Surfer” ad won the Gold Poly Award for 2005 in a tie with “Lead,” so the creativity of the Bush ads were rewarded by fellow political consultants.

The Kerry campaign responded to “Surfer” by creating an Internet ad that said the Bush ad was juvenile and tasteless. “When they responded, it told us that our ad had a huge impact” (McKinnon, 2004). Changing positions has long been a staple of television attacks. What was different about “Surfer” was that it took a visual that personified Kerry, not only as a changing candidate but also as an elitist candidate who windsurfed—a sport with which few others could identify. As a windsurfer, the ad got me to laugh, and it became one of the best watercooler spots of the campaign.

“Thinking Mom” was another Bush ad team attempt to be different. The ad captures a female driver in a mental conversation with herself as she drives her children. The ad captures her inner thoughts: “More taxes because I’m married, what are they thinking!”

That ad used a technique I call inner dialogue. In 2000 there were a series of ads where we heard a woman’s voice but never saw her. Then you would see Gore on television but you hear her thinking. This interior dialogue idea is an interesting way to communicate something because it is received a little differently. You are not telling somebody something using an announcer. Rather they process it differently. You are hearing somebody’s thought process—a thought process that a single mom with kids would go through. (McKinnon, 2004)

In their final attempt to be different, the Bush team sought a metaphor to capture an idea. “Wolves” was the ad they ultimately used, although not at first. “We worked on that for months. We challenged the team to come up with a metaphor for terrorism because if you tell a story with a metaphor, that is very powerful” (McKinnon, 2004).

The first idea by McKinnon

was using the idea of flame and fire. The idea was that there was a fire burning out of control . . . but people didn’t get it. Alex Castellanos came up with the idea of “Wolves.” We tested that and people got it immediately. Terrorism—wolves—scary stuff! They got it. Dials showed it was clear, powerful. (McKinnon, 2004)

They “knew that the comparison would be made with the ‘Bear spot’ ” (McKinnon, 2004). “Bear” was the classic 1984 Reagan spot.

“There is a bear in the woods . . . some people see it, others do not.” There was disagreement within the Bush campaign to use a spot that was so clearly a copycat spot of a classic ad idea. That internal controversy suggested to me that we should absolutely use it because anytime you get some dynamic tension about something, that means it’s going to leave an impact. (McKinnon, 2004)

They tested and retested the spot “a dozen times. And we kept tweaking it and tweaking it. We thought we had a powerful spot and we had to drop it at an opportune time so we waited until the very end. And I think it had an impact” (McKinnon, 2004). “Wolves” got a lot of free media coverage just as they had predicted. The DNC immediately released a metaphoric “Eagle/Ostrich” spot that will be discussed later. Both spots were shown on the news in the attempt to bring media balance to the competing visual metaphors.

Few ads that Bush used were played at more gross rating points than “Wolves.” In a study done by Public Opinion Strategies of ads played in key battleground states, “Wolves” was the only Bush ad to receive high, unaided recall (Public Opinion Strategies, 2004). Two other ads—“Ashley’s Story” and “Swiftboats,” to be discussed later—received higher recall. But no Kerry ads received high recall. “Wolves” did finish third overall and was rated as Bush’s most mentioned memorable ad. Bob Shrum of the Kerry campaign evaluated “Wolves” and concluded, “Wolves had no impact on the race—no data—our data, Annenberg’s data, anybody else’s data show that wolves had an impact” (Shrum, 2004).

A change in 2004 that was supposed to alleviate and limit negativity was the mandatory 5-second inclusion on camera of a candidate taking credit for his ad. “I’m George W. Bush and I approve this message.” Ad makers did not like the disclaimer.

We hated it because we only had 30 seconds anyway and now we had 25. We were worried about its impact in general but we were really worried about any effect it had in the contrast ads. But I was surprised that over the course of the campaign, the market adapted to it . . . people became immune to it, so in the end it didn’t have that much of an impact on the advertising. (McKinnon, 2004)

One big dilemma was whether it was best to put the disclaimer at the beginning or the end of an ad. With positive ads, it seemed not to matter, but with negative ads, there was disagreement within the Bush campaign. “We struggled . . . with whether or not it should be at the beginning or at the end” (McKinnon, 2004). “I prefer to have it at the beginning. They see it and sort of forgot about it, but we had a strong camp that felt just the opposite. We struggled with it and never came to a consensus” (McKinnon, 2004). Schriefer had an interesting spin on the use of disclaimers.

The disclaimer is an asset—like a Good Housekeeping seal of approval. There was always a debate about the disclaimer. . . . There was a sense that if you ran it at the end,

people would pay attention to it because they may not know it's a political ad, whereas if you started with George W. Bush, you immediately signal it's a political ad and you may click off some people. (Schriefer, 2004)

I quantified and analyzed the use of disclaimers in the Bush ads. In the positive ads, 9 were at the beginning and 14 were at the end. With the comparative and negative ads, 39 were at the beginning and 19 were at the end. McKinnon, the advocate for beginning disclaimers, thought the ad story needed to make a final impact, and thus disclaimers at the beginning, even with negative ads, seemed to be used more. Yet, if you look at the Bush ads early in the campaign, disclaimers at the beginning were used in 43 ads, with only 6 at the end. Later in the campaign, the disclaimers came more at the end—28 versus 6 at the beginning. So the campaign shifted its use of disclaimers earlier and later as the campaign went on, and its internal debate continued. However, I must admit that after watching more than three hundred 2004 presidential ads, I agree with McKinnon—people became immune to it, and it did not matter whether it came at the beginning or end.

For nine presidential campaigns, I have analyzed television advertising. One of the primary reasons for political ads was always to influence the swing voter—that crucial 10% to 20% of the electorate who are less involved and decide late in the campaign. In this polarized election of 2004, that swing vote was much smaller than usual and became smaller as the campaign went on. Although the Kerry campaign, which will be analyzed later, still claimed to be going after the swing vote, the Bush campaign faced reality.

The persuadable vote was something that we recognized that was much smaller in this election. First, that increased the importance and the premium on that vote because it is smaller, so there is less return on that investment. Second, that makes the other slice of the pie important because it is so highly motivated. You are going to get more return on that share, and increasing that share is easier than persuading a small slice of the electorate. The challenge was to do both. In addition to turning out our base and persuadable voters, we turned out 11 million new voters . . . who were part of the base. (McKinnon, 2004)

One clear in-road into the Democratic base—the Hispanic vote—was targeted by Bush. Bush had 13 Hispanic ads and ultimately got 43% of the Hispanic vote, an improvement over 2000.

However, “more and more political advertising is becoming less and less effective with swing voters,” Schriefer (2004) posited.

If they truly are a swing voter, they are not being swayed by ads. Ads are increasingly being used to let your folks know what's at stake, and how to feel. The message of the campaign is ads are great motivators of your own base rather than convincing or unconvincing people. This is particularly true in the presidential cycle. . . . In presidential races, the information is so extensive it makes it almost impossible with swing voters. We did focus groups in October. Can you imagine trying to find 10 truly swing voters in October? What does it mean on the 29th of October when someone says they really haven't made up their mind yet? (Schriefer, 2004)

McKinnon had a name for these swing voters in 2004. “I call them conscientiously ignorant,” he told me (McKinnon, 2004).

The key to 2004 was turning out partisan voters, not in convincing persuadable voters. “The key was turning out our folks. If we could turn them out in a higher percentage than we had before [2000], we would win” (Schriefer, 2004).

So advertising in 2004—both positive and negative—was largely base advertising. Negative ads were the red meat intensifiers for partisans. Positive ads, usually more appreciated by swing voters, were done more to capture the base. “Listen to that language ‘family, freedom, faith, and sacrifice.’ That’s a pretty strong base message” (McKinnon, 2004).

“The Bush strategy was let’s get our dissatisfied customers back into the store. His ground game was to identify his base and his media motivated his base. . . . It was cost effective to go after the base” (Tracy, 2004).

Buying national and local cable was one clear difference between Bush and Kerry, and it was base directed. There were two reasons for Kerry not buying cable—money and viewers. “We didn’t have the money for a national cable buy . . . and our voters disproportionately watch broadcast television. So while they put 70% into broadcast and 30% into cable, we put 95% into broadcast television” (Knapp, 2004).

The Bush campaign wisely bought cable. “We learned that there were truly different viewing patterns between Democrats and Republicans” (McKinnon, 2004). For example, more people watched the final night of the Republican convention on Fox News than on CBS, NBC, or ABC.

Evan Tracy, who monitored campaign-buying trends in 100 television markets, stated, “Buying entertainment and news on cable was to target men. Broadcast targeted women. Cable—all sports, all golf—is a format-driven audience. Broadcast is an audience-driven audience. The difference was targeting men and women. The Bush campaign was turning out their base” (Tracy, 2004).

McKinnon reinforced this base motivation but also added that cable was deemed nationally energizing while also being cost effective. “Our buying strategy is that the cable strategy had a real energizing factor. . . . It was great for our campaign because suddenly everyone all over the country was seeing our ads” (McKinnon, 2004). Cable was used because “it was also cost efficient. We could buy cable in the 18 states or buy national cable for less than it would cost for spot buys in the 18 states” (McKinnon, 2004).

In an attempt to be more innovative in ads that were announcer driven, the Bush team used creative editing. It used a lateral pan technique with superimposers of printed copy laid over scenes as the camera continuously panned with no typical straight cuts. “This linear technique demonstrates what you can do when you use the best editing equipment available. When you compare our ads to the Kerry ads, you just felt that they never took advantage of all that was out there in editing” (O’Connor, 2004). The Bush team used multiple overlays and a linear progression in almost a dozen of their ads.

One particular spot, called “Agenda,” used excerpts of a Bush speech; I was impressed with how they nicely interspaced Bush and scenes. O’Connor, the produc-

tion specialist, admitted that the original Bush footage was not ideal because his face was raised and lowered:

Look at the raw footage and the straight way of editing is cut and cut. It just didn't flow. He was looking down or away . . . so we decided to surround him with other images and make these fluid interface transitions where it didn't matter that he lifted his head or looked away. This was a creative way of working with not the best footage. (O'Connor, 2004)

She was right; the speech flowed, and Bush looked and sounded strong.

Schriefer was conscious of the fact that what they created in-house with a high-end Final Cut Pro machine would not have been economic or feasible years ago. "Something complicated like that linear ad 10 years ago would take 2 or 3 days, hundreds of hours, and be prohibitively expensive . . . technology has caught up and we can do that ad in a day and it's not that expensive" (Schriefer, 2004).

In another innovative ad called "Weapons," O'Connor blue-screened soldiers, tanks, and airplanes on a battlefield. This was the only Bush ad that had state-specific changes in the copy and superimposurers. The point was to show that Kerry, as president, would weaken weapon systems. For Arizona, it was the stealth fighter; for Maine, it was the Bath Iron Works; for Michigan, it was the Tomahawk cruise missile; and for New Hampshire, it was the Apache and Blackhawk helicopter. In all, nine battleground states were targeted with weapon systems that were built or based there.

My quarrel with O'Connor was that "Weapons," which "happens to be one of my favorite ads" (O'Connor, 2004), looked more like a video game than an actual battlefield and called attention to its techniques and not simply to cuts in weapons.

Editing has become so sophisticated it can hurt us. All those images are real—the Bradley tank we took off the news feed, we cleaned it up; inserted it on a battlefield landscape with montages. We plucked out pieces and blue screened. But your criticism of it like a computer game is real. You are right with that. (O'Connor, 2004)

One financial, if not creative, innovation of the Bush ads was ads that were cosponsored by the Republican National Committee. These hybrid ads condemned "Kerry . . . and liberals in Congress." However, Kerry or the liberals were never seen or heard in these six ads. These were comparative ads—comparing Bush's record with the potential of a liberal Kerry. They were just an excuse to use the "L" word—and to get extra money. "With hybrids, the bottom line was that we found out through our lawyers that we could increase our funding. It was a simple decision that had nothing to do with anything deeper than we increase the pile of money if we worded it this way" (Schriefer, 2004).

One clear impression I got from watching more than 80 Bush ads was consistency in theme and focus.

The president was always strong and decisive. That was a constant that did not change. We were relentless and never deviating from that . . . and that drove them crazy. For exam-

ple, “name one mistake”! It just reinforced that the president was a decisive leader and we were going to win or die on that. (Schriefer, 2004)

Schriefer described earlier in this section how to judge an effective campaign that begins and ends similarly. Although the types of ads used at the beginning—a casual and communicative Bush or announcer-driven or scene-driven ads with no audio copy—were different from his final ads (e.g., “Wolves”; a comparative ad, “Choice”; or a final 60-second platform speech ad from his convention speech), Bush was laser like in his focus on strength and humanity. In “Wolves,” he ends with “weakness attracts those who are waiting to do America harm.” In “Choice,” Bush, with “strong leadership to protect America,” is compared to Kerry, who has “a record of slashing intelligence and reckless defense cuts.” In his final 60-second ad, “Whatever It Takes,” Bush states sincerely from his convention platform in a caring manner, “I’ve learned firsthand that ordering Americans into battle is the hardest decision, even when it’s right. . . . I have held the children of the fallen who are told their dad or mom is a hero but would rather just have their mom or dad. . . . I will never relent in defending America, whatever it takes.”

Sixty-second ads are a powerful way to end a campaign, and Bush had plenty of money to allow his final ad to capture his emotional themes of strength and humanity. His rival, Shrum, judged of this ad, “I think the final Bush positive from the convention had an impact. That combined with Osama bin Laden pulled stuff back to 9/11. That had an impact. We just didn’t have the money to do a 60 at the end” (Shrum, 2004).

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth

If the media had done a better job covering a press conference in May, potent ads might not have been aired in August—ads that helped sink the former Swift boat commander who wanted to be commander-in-chief. “My uncle was in town, Adrian Lonsdale. And I went to see him,” recalled Rick Reed, who created the Swiftvets ads. “I would not have gone to the press conference otherwise. I was very impressed with their accounts. I came back and wondered why there wasn’t more of a response” (Reed, 2004). The response was minimal (e.g., *The New York Times* article was buried on page A22). The lack of free media coverage led to an ad campaign that will go down in history as one of the most effective campaigns of 2004.

Several weeks later, Reed “ran into Chris LaCivita and discussed how a television component was needed to help their message” (Reed, 2004). Reed went on,

The thing that struck me was that these people were not political people. . . . They probably had no idea that this would really shake up the political process. You could have produced an ad based on the first press conference. Their inexperience gave them veracity. These people were the real deal. We wanted them to speak for themselves. Those people were credible. (Reed, 2004)

In July, Reed assembled about 30 veterans who had the closest connections to Kerry—some served in the next boat, some were his commanders, and one had treated

his wound for his first Purple Heart—and filmed them repeating their stories on a blank screen that would be filled in with visuals later.

In the first ad, “Any Questions,” 4 vets call Kerry a liar. Three use some variation of *dishonest*. A retired navy surgeon testified, “I know John Kerry is lying about his first Purple Heart because I treated him for that injury.” A retired admiral who also won a Silver Star stated, “John Kerry has not been honest.” In all, 13 veterans testified in this 60-second attacking ad.

They had limited money, so this ad “ran for a few days in a few markets . . . it got us the recognition of being remembered by 58% of those polled. That ad got us on the map” (Reed, 2004). For a limited buy of \$500,000 and playing in a few small markets in Ohio, West Virginia, and Wisconsin, the ad got the vets the coverage the press conference did not get.

A national Gallup poll documented (Gallup, August 29, 2004) that 43% of those polled nationally had seen the ad, and 38% had heard about the ad. This, more than 80% penetration was a remarkable effect for an ad that saw limited play in three states. The only Kerry good news from the poll was that 63% still believed Kerry.

The single ad had a megaphone effect well beyond the buy. First, free media—talk radio and cable news—picked up snippets from the ad and replayed it. Second, there was the nature of the charge—Kerry’s heroism was not real or deserved, and he had turned his back on his buddies in Vietnam when he returned to America. Third, the timing of the charge was crucial because August was the doldrums period between conventions, and the press had little else to cover. Fourth, the Kerry campaign did not answer promptly because it wanted to remain positive, conserve resources for later, and did not want to give the charges the added coverage an answer would provoke.

One experienced observer commented, “Swiftvets were the best ads of the cycle. The ads were nothing special, but the message and timing were amazing . . . because they made Vietnam the centerpiece of their convention, the Swift Boat stuff took off like a rocket . . . the press was sitting in August with nothing to cover . . . cable TV used it and it exploded” (Tracy, 2004).

Even larger than cable TV was the megaphone effect of talk radio and the Internet. “The biggest megaphone was talk radio and the Internet—only later was it picked up by cable news. . . . The echo chamber gave us 2 weeks of coverage, forcing the networks to cover the story . . . we had 6 solid weeks where we dominated the campaign story. It was incredible” (Reed, 2004).

Ultimately, the vets gave 1,000 interviews on talk radio, generated \$19 million for nine ads in 10 battleground states and on national cable. Heavy buys were the following: Ohio, \$5.1 million; Florida, \$3.6 million; Pennsylvania, \$3.6 million; and national cable, \$3 million, after money came rolling in from the Internet. Swiftvets alone spent over a third of what Kerry spent in these crucial battleground states.

The second ad, “Sellout,” released in late August, was probably the most potent of the nine ads because it captured Kerry in his own voice in 1971 testifying about atrocities. “The second Swift Boat ad was devastating. The first ad seemed like a bunch of people with an axe to grind. The second ad was John Kerry in his own words. It was

taken out of context but it was extremely well done,” admitted Mark Putnam (2004), cocreator of the DNC ads. “Sellout” won a Silver Poly Award for 2005.

The first ad, with words such as *liar* or *dishonest*, hurt the character of Kerry. As one DNC ad creator stated, “Character always trumps issues” (Axelrod, 2004). “That first got us on the map. . . . In the first ad we came right out and called him a liar” (Reed, 2004). Even the much maligned Move-On ads never called Bush a liar, just a “misleader.” “And the effect of saying it on camera made it real—even truer. ‘I’m ready to say this and say this on camera.’ It makes it true and truer because we had so many—13 saying it in the first ad” (Reed, 2004).

The charges took hold because Kerry had made his heroism such an important part of his biographical story during his convention. His “reporting for duty” now came back to haunt him. “The thing that hurt with the initial Swift Boat ads was the implication that Kerry hadn’t done what we said he had done and they hoisted him on his own pitard,” admitted Kerry’s chief strategist, Bob Shrum (2004).

Move-On did a Swift Boat response ad before Kerry. “Kerry didn’t react to the Swift Boat ads and that was a huge blunder on their part” (Zimmerman, 2004).

Bill Knapp responded to the lack of an early Kerry response. “We were going to lose points in August regardless. . . . It was ascribed to our error of not responding quick enough to Swift Boats. That was a piece of fiction” (Knapp, 2004).

We ran two response ads—“Rassman” and “Man I Know.” . . . We totally disqualified them as a credible source of information. Voters in groups told us, “I don’t want to hear anymore about this Vietnam stuff.” . . . The people they used were the most easy to discredit. . . . But the genie was out of the bottle and the poison began to spread. When we attacked them, they ended up getting massive press. And they started raising money on the Internet. That gave them the ammunition to run more ads in September and October. Their most effective late ad was the “Widows.” (Knapp, 2004)

Kerry’s response—his personal response, the response of his ads, and the Move-On response ad—was not equal to the Swift Boat attacks, largely because free media never gave Kerry the coverage on the issue that they gave the attacks. Shrum argued, “I was violently in favor of stopping the Swift Boat ads but right-wing talk radio has changed the nature of campaigns. It is clear that right-wing talk radio and Fox TV can amplify a message very powerfully. We are going to have to find a way to amplify our message” (Shrum, 2004).

The truth was the Kerry campaign never found a way to stop the attacks on Kerry’s character. Initial ads challenged his Vietnam War heroism. Subsequent ads accused him of hurting the returning vets by throwing away his medals and testifying about atrocities. Two widows testified in a late Swiftvet ad, “John Kerry came home and accused all Vietnam veterans of unspeakable horrors. . . . I will never forget John Kerry’s testimony. If we couldn’t trust John Kerry then, how could we possibly trust him now?”

Ultimately, Kerry, the candidate who fought in Vietnam and was given medals for heroism and Purple Hearts for wounds, lost the veterans’ vote. He lost to a candidate

who served in the Guard stateside and was absent for several months. This was in part because of the power of the Swiftvet attacks in their nine ads and “because there was no comparable \$19 million effort by the other side questioning Bush’s service” (Reed, 2004). Reed disclosed that his ads raised questions within his base supporters.

Even conservatives thought, “Why bring up Vietnam?” They thought it would hurt Bush because of the focus on the Vietnam-era military records. The difference was the Bush story was known. The Kerry story of a war hero who was not a war hero was not well known. That one ad, “Texans for Truth,” had one vet saying he never saw Bush. That was not the same as 20 people—Kerry’s entire chain of command—saying Kerry isn’t truthful. (Reed, 2004)

A test of 1,000 voters in 12 battleground states by Public Opinion Strategies found that 75% recalled the Swiftvet testimonial ads. “That is a big bang for its demagogic buck,” Bill Knapp judged (Knapp, 2004). In another poll—a recall test of individual ad scripts—72% recalled the ad questioning Kerry’s fitness to be commander in chief. In the same recall test, 68% remembered “Ashley” and 64% remembered Bush as a “Misleader,” from a Move-On ad, whereas 61% recalled Bush’s close ties with the Saudi family (Fabrizio, 2004).

The creator of the Swiftvets ads summed up their effect this way, “Essentially, we rocked the very foundation of his persona and candidacy by saying John Kerry isn’t who he says he is. . . . The Swiftvets for Truth had a branding name that took on an establishment of brand recognition—for truth! Our people, any of them, could take a polygraph on any of their statements and pass. It was a credible message” (Reed, 2004).

There is little doubt that the Swiftvet ads hurt Kerry early in his general election campaign. They did have a 6-week run and were not a 1-week story. The strength, timing, and coverage of their accusations made them a big story in the paid advertising story of 2004.

Progress for America

If the Swiftvets hit and hurt Kerry early, one ad by the 527 group, Progress for America, “Ashley,” was crucial at the end of the campaign. It was a unique ad—a positive ad, a 60-second ad, an ad from a 527 group, an ad aired late in the campaign, an ad with almost \$20 million spent on airing and promoting it, “which is what Swiftvets spent in totality on all their ads,” declared Brian McCabe, the political director of PFA (McCabe, 2004). In a postelection survey by Public Opinion Strategies of 2,050 actual voters in six battleground states, more voters responded seeing the “Ashley” television ad than any other 2004 ad. And they agreed the television ad gave them a more favorable image of Bush. In an unaided test of recall, “Ashley” was the most mentioned ad in five of the six states. At 35% recall, “Ashley” outscored the Swift Boat ads at 23% recall and the Bush “Wolves” ad at 22% recall. The survey concluded, “Despite the massive volume of campaign ads running in these hotly contested media markets . . .

the ad was the most memorable ad they saw during the campaign season” (Public Opinion Strategies, 2004).

In all, Progress for America aired 10 ads, but none of their ads even came close to equal “Ashley.” The ads were created by Larry McCarthy, who created the 1988 Willie Horton ad. “Now I have two ads in the first line of my obituary,” he jokingly told me (McCarthy, 2004).

“Ashley” started with me seeing the picture on Drudge . . . and it was such an unusual picture, you feel compelled to go to the story. The story was in the *Cincinnati Inquirer* and basically that newspaper story became the ad. I thought this was a great ad that would never happen. I recognized the emotional content. I recognized the link to 9/11. I recognized the Bush team or nobody else could do this ad. . . . To raise money for the ad, PFA did a heavy round of fund-raising, and a lot of the fund-raising was at major donor events—people who give \$50,000, \$100,000, \$500,000, or \$1 million or more. . . . Literally, there was not a dry eye in the house from these groups of very sophisticated, very wealthy, very cynical contributors. Everybody immediately saw the power of “Ashley.” That immediately loosened up a large amount of money. I think we raised over \$6 million, which you could directly attribute to “Ashley.” (McCarthy, 2004)

There was a vigorous internal debate that lasted around 6 weeks about when to release “Ashley.” “Some of us, myself included, advocated for doing it at the very end because this ad was a powerful closing message” (McCarthy, 2004).

A lot of people saw this ad “at dog and pony shows around the country, 5, 10, 20, 30 people at a pop at the convention . . . and it never leaked, which was shocking” (McCarthy, 2004). “The total amount behind ‘Ashley’ was \$20 million. . . . We cut ‘Ashley’ in June; we used it as a fund-raising piece, knowing we wanted to go late with it” (McCabe, 2004).

“Ashley” was an ad with Bush giving a 16-year-old girl a hug because her mother had been killed in the World Trade Center collapse. McCarthy stated that “Ashley’s father felt a debt of gratitude, not for the hug, but for what the hug did for Ashley. . . . We said this would not be easy to do because . . . we are going to ask questions that are going to relive unhappy ground. Ashley said she wanted to do it” (McCarthy, 2004). McCarthy went on,

It was a long and emotionally difficult shoot. . . . You’re never quite sure what to expect when you interview about a subject that is real painful. . . . She did very well. She is articulate; she likes the president and she knew she was doing something to help repay the president for something that he helped her with. (McCarthy, 2004)

Ashley voiced the power of the hug by repeating what Bush said, “I know that’s hard. ‘Are you all right?’ ” She concluded, “He’s the most powerful man in the world and all he wants to do is make sure I’m safe.” Both Ashley’s father and aunt were included in the ad. Her father concludes the ad by saying, “What I saw was what I want to see in the heart and in the soul of the man who sits in the highest elected office in our country.” “They gave us a spectacular interview. The whole ending about a heart looking into the

mind and soul of the man was all natural . . . you could not have asked for three believable, articulate, warm people. The odds of that happening in any commercial are huge” (McCarthy, 2004).

McCarthy cut the ad into a 60- and 30-second version. “It really wanted to be about 4 minutes because we had so much material. I waited to tell PFA that I’m going to make a sixty. We may not have the resources to run it, but its power far exceeds what you would get in a thirty” (McCarthy, 2004). McCabe continued,

Even after you saw it two or three times it was still incredibly emotional and it had credibility. Ashley was intelligent. Everybody in the spot was articulate and sincere. It cut through the clutter and it was something positive. . . . There was no way the Bush campaign could do that ad and get away with it. . . . They would have been accused of exploiting Ashley. That ad hit on leadership, character, and compassion in the same spot. And it helped that she lived in a battleground state—Ohio! (McCabe, 2004)

The creator of the ad reacted modestly. “In a race that was as close as it was in Ohio, you can point to a lot of different factors that contributed, but I would modestly say that perhaps ‘Ashley’ was the leading factor in Ohio that swung the election to Bush” (McCarthy, 2004). His rival in the Kerry camp, Bob Shrum, was emphatic: “When all is said and done, and all this money was spent, it was an ad that he [McCarthy] made that determined the outcome of the race! ‘Ashley’ was real, was human, people could relate to it. ‘Ashley’ probably cost us Ohio and cost us the presidency!” (Shrum, 2004).

In Ohio, 70%% of those polled by Public Opinion Strategies reported seeing “Ashley.” That is powerful penetration. In Ohio, Bush spent \$11 million and Kerry spent \$10 million, on all their advertising. PFA spent \$2.9 million, mainly on “Ashley,” and that is almost a third of what each candidate spent in Ohio alone. Brian McCabe released an executive summary of PFA’s campaign. He stated, “Ashley’s Story was the largest political television advertising campaign in history. The Progress for America Voter Fund spent \$16,517,725 million on 29,875 television spots in eleven states and national cable television” (Progress for America, 2004).

“Ashley” eventually won a Gold Poly Award in 2005 as the best independent expenditure 527 ad from the 2004 campaign. Yet it was the power of its 7,000 plays in Ohio that probably won the election for Bush.

Another PFA story needs to be told about its ad, “Surfer Dude.” “This was an unrelieving humorless campaign. We wanted to inject a note of humor. . . . I thought the most humorous bit in the campaign was Kerry’s soundbite of the \$87 million line. I thought that was hilarious and you couldn’t show that clip enough” (McCarthy, 2004). PFA used the clip in three of its ads, including “Surfer Dude.” But it was the visual of Kerry windsurfing that McCarthy chose to emphasize in one stand-alone ad. “I love the idea of Kerry windsurfing. . . . However admirable a hobby it is, it is not something that’s common. . . . This is odd about him because he was trying to make himself a man of the people” (McCarthy, 2004).

PFA released its windsurfer ad before the Bush windsurfer ad discussed earlier. Rather than actual footage, they used cartoon-like computer-assisted footage of Kerry in wrap-around sunglasses and spandex. McCarthy had a casting call for younger

female voices and picked a young woman announcer with “the perfect valley, beach girl sound to her voice” (McCarthy, 2004). McCabe disclosed, “We were first with ‘Surfer Dude,’ and they came out with their Surfer ad later. No ad better speaks to how there was no coordination than the two windsurfing ads. Who in their right freaking mind would put the same ad on in the same day and be open to all this criticism?” (McCabe, 2004).

The power of “Surfer Dude” was that it was a humorous, visual ad that got plenty of free media play. The Bush surfer ad won the Gold Poly Award, but the PFA surfer ad ran for 2,500 gross rating points on national cable and in selected battleground states. Although McCarthy admitted that they ran it on cable, thinking it would help fundraising, it did not accomplish that goal. “Our contributors didn’t particularly care for it because a lot of contributors are older and more staid and didn’t quite get the humor” (McCarthy, 2004).

There was one other PFA ad McCarthy thought important, titled “Finish It.” As pictures of 9/11 pilot Atta and villain Osama bin Laden flashed, and scenes of terrorist attacks in Spain and Russia, in addition to 9/11, were shown, an announcer chastises Kerry for “a 30-year record of supporting defense and intelligence cuts.” The ad concludes with the question, “Would you trust Kerry against these fanatic killers?” “Kerry reacted the most to our ad ‘Finish it’ . . . they went berserk over that. They had a press conference denouncing this as the most heinous commercial of the campaign . . . because it most starkly asked the question better than any Bush ad asked that dark question about Kerry’s character” (McCarthy, 2004).

“Finish It” was the quintessential example of the extreme negativity in visuals and copy of the 597 campaigns in 2004. No wonder Kerry reacted strongly. The Kerry camp anticipated a negative ending to the PFA campaign, but ‘Ashley’ was the positive surprise. The Kerry campaign was ready to respond to a \$16 million negative buy but “after seeing ‘Ashley’ what are they going to say?” (McCabe, 2004). McCarthy concluded, “ ‘Ashley’ will always get the most attention from this campaign and ‘Surfer Dude’ is the fun ad. But our ‘Finish It’ ad was something that they reacted to the most” (McCarthy, 2004).

Republican National Committee

In 2000, the Republican National Committee spent more on television advertising on behalf of Bush (\$71 million) than Bush spent on his own television advertising (\$63 million), for a total of \$134 million (Devlin, 2001). In 2004, soft money spending on party television advertising was prohibited by McCain/Feingold. So the parties spent hard money contributions (\$2,000 or less) on behalf of their candidates. The end result was that the Republican Party spent much less—\$12.8 million on stand-alone ads and much less than the Democratic Party’s \$110 million. In addition to stand-alone ads, both parties used hard money to finance hybrid ads—ads that were more like the jointly sponsored ads of previous campaigns—but this time Kerry or Bush did not appear in the ads. Instead, the Republicans paid for ads that simply attacked “Kerry and his liberal Democrats.”

The Republican Party had two independent ads, six hybrid cosponsored ads, and longer Web videos and games for their voter base to enjoy. Their two stand-alone ads, titled “Who Knows” and “Risky,” aired late in the campaign. Both were negative ads. “Risky” aired first in mid-October. It attacked Kerry for being the most liberal in Congress and reviewed several of his proposals for cutting spending. “Who Knows” took on Kerry for implying terrorism could be reduced to a “nuisance.” Both ads were made by Kurt Anderson, and neither would make it to a highlight reel. The only highlight was that so much money (\$12.8 million) was spent airing them on national cable and battleground states.

Bill Knapp commented,

The Republicans did hybrid ads. . . . They had very peculiar language that said, “George Bush and the Republican leaders in Congress have a plan. . . .” They were peculiar because they were not something you would run with hard dollars. It took us about a week to figure out that because they mentioned Congress, 50% was paid for by the RNC and 50% by Bush . . . by having to do the “John Kerry and the liberal Democrats” language. We did some hybrids but we found it less effective. . . . We wanted our guy speaking to camera, and you can’t use your candidate in the hybrid ads except at the end. (Knapp, 2004)

Jim Dyck, director of communications for the RNC, explained, “We concentrated on the Web. We made Web videos, documentaries, and games . . . and roughly 9.5 million people viewed the documentaries. We would mail out a CD to people who requested it from the Web site” (Dyck, 2004). Just as other campaigns did, the RNC could use the Web for inexpensively delivered longer videos. Their “Kerry on Iraq” documentary went through several generations and ended up being 13 minutes long.

“We had over a million hits on our Web site from the beginning to the election” (Dyck, 2004). Dyck was particularly proud of RNC games on the Web. “This is the first election which we saw games as an active tool on either side” (Dyck, 2004).

The RNC was not a major player in the 2004 ad wars. Its role in the advertising was minimized by its role to fund much of the Republican voter turnout effort. The Democrats “could outsource their turnout effort to Americans Coming Together” (Tracy, 2004). The Republicans had no comparable 527s or labor unions to help them with money for their turnout effort. Turnout money was spent by the RNC, and proportionately less of their money was spent on advertising. The big advertising story came from two other Republican 527 groups—Swiftvets and Progress for America, not the RNC.

Kerry/Edwards Advertising Campaign

The Team

Kerry had a creative shift from his primary campaign advertising to the general election advertising. Jim Margolis was the creative director of Kerry’s primary ads.

Kerry used two advertising firms—Greer, Margolis, Mitchell, and Burns and Shrum, Devine, and Donilon—for his primary advertising. For the general election, Greer, Margolis, Mitchell, and Burns dropped its creative direction but kept its time-buying role. The firm of Squire, Knapp, and Dunn joined Shrum, Devine, and Donilon for the general election. Bill Knapp had created and coordinated ads for the 1996 Clinton and 2000 Gore campaigns. In 2004, Knapp, along with Michael Donilon, became the chief production duo directing many other contributors among their partners and others during the general election campaign.

Strategy and Execution

John Kerry's media team produced and played more ads than any campaign in presidential history. They had 160 total ads—124 by the Kerry campaign and 36 hybrid ads paid for by both Kerry and the Democratic National Committee. The sheer number of ads is mind-boggling! They produced and played almost twice as many ads as Bush. Kerry did this because his strategy was a localized, state-specific, battleground strategy. In all, he produced 54 separate ads for key battleground states such as Ohio or Pennsylvania.

Kerry did ads in Wisconsin with fired Maytag employees and in Ohio with fired Timkin employees. They were some of the best ads because they brought a human face to outsourcing. Kerry used surrogate ads—Byrd ads in West Virginia, Randell in Pennsylvania, and Richardson in New Mexico. The downside of that is it makes you sound like you're running for city council or state government. The upside is with 10,000 spots a week, if a voter hears Ohio, there is a better chance of connecting with an Ohio voter. Kerry ran economy-centered ads in the bad economy states. He ran quality-of-life issues, like health care, in better economy states. But there wasn't a national theme like there was a Bush national theme. . . . "All politics is local!" was the Kerry approach. (Tracy, 2004)

There were three phases to the Kerry ad campaign.

The first one was to introduce Kerry the person. . . . Then we wanted to lay in some agenda stuff about what he wants to do. . . . The third phase was to say "new directions" and to force a choice. This is a very critical point. People wanted a change in policy domestically; they didn't necessarily want a change in leadership because it was a risky, uncertain time. So we tried to thread the needle by making the case for change without saying it is time for change. This wasn't a time for change electorate. . . . The third phase didn't happen until after the last debate. Then we began more forcefully to argue for change. (Knapp, 2004)

To emphasize the first two phases, Kerry stayed positive. His first 28 ads were positive ads stressing his biography, experience, and the agenda for a Kerry presidency. Two things were unique in contrast to recent ad strategy of a two-track simultaneous showing of both positive and negative ads. First, "there was an unprecedented commitment to run two 60-second bio/documentaries with the theme of a lifetime of strength and service" (Knapp, 2004). "We had \$27 million in bio spots in May that was huge

and changed our numbers. That was an amazing buy” (Juster, 2004). Second, Kerry opened positive and stayed positive for 3 months. That was unprecedented, especially because he stayed positive while Bush attacked. “People were thirsty to know about us. They discounted the attacks. They saw them as politics as usual and they wanted to know what we were about” (Knapp, 2004).

Bush opened positive but soon went negative. Kerry stayed positive because he learned during the primary campaign that “traditional negative ads aren’t working this time” (Shrum, 2004). Knapp disclosed, “It was tempting to respond, but we decided we had to tell the story about who this guy was. So we methodically committed ourselves to spending about 5 weeks . . . to show this guy had strength and courage and was committed to service” (Knapp, 2004). The second reason they stayed positive was that they knew the Bush negative attacks were not working. “Our tracking showed that we didn’t need to do that. . . . We dial tested all of Bush’s attacks. . . . Most of them weren’t hurting that much” (Knapp, 2004).

There was plenty of Kerry in his ads. He was the star of his own ads. In contrast to Gore in 2000, when Knapp relied on announcer-driven ads because Gore’s talking heads did not test well, Kerry had many talking head ads. Twenty-seven of his ads had him talking—12 with him talking alone to the camera and 15 with scenes and cutaways of people shown as he talked. “The ones where he is talking straightforwardly and directly to people—in all of the research we did, proved to be the most powerful ads we had” (Shrum, 2004).

The second type of Kerry ad heavily used was town meeting ads. “On outsourcing, jobs, security, terror . . . we needed to provide ads where the viewer could imagine this guy in the White House in a time of enormous fear and uncertainty. . . . One of the assets of Kerry is he had a presidential aura about him” (Donilon, 2004).

Kerry used seven town hall ads.

One of the ads that had the most points behind it was on outsourcing—an emotional story about what it means to one worker to unbolt his own machine and pack it up for someone who is about to take his job. Another ad dealt with terror and bin Laden and how the Republicans were misleading the country—that he would be committed to track down terrorists. (Donilon, 2004)

Kerry had two 5-week dark periods—one after Super Tuesday in March through his ads starting on April 21 and another dark period after his convention in July to the Republican convention in August. Kerry was dark during the early period because he did not have the money and dark later because he wanted to conserve his public financing money. “We had no option. Early we had \$2 to \$3 million versus their \$100 plus million” (Donilon, 2004). The second dark period “was a fact of life. We had a 13-week general election; the president had an 8-week general election” (Donilon, 2004).

Mike Donilon counseled,

Look at the money issue not in totality, but in increments of time. The Bush campaign believed they could use the early period through the convention to attack and effectively

destroy the opposition. . . . That didn't happen. It didn't happen because we were able to spend substantial sums and withstand a pretty unprecedented barrage of negative advertising. (Donilon, 2004)

Along with his focus on increments of time, Donilon stated, "The Democratic 527s ran a lot of ads early and relatively little TV late. The Republican side got a late start but spent a lot of money late" (Donilon, 2004). To Donilon, the crucial period was the 5-week Kerry dark period in August. "Our hands were tied in the August period. If we spent early, no one knows what would happen in October—especially with the heavy spending of the Republican 527s at the end. Money mattered" (Donilon, 2004).

The Kerry campaign relied on its 527 groups—the DNC, Media Fund, Move-On—to carry the air wars during their dark periods. In reality, Kerry was not dark because he relied on 527 groups. "That was a problem because we don't keep control of the message" (Shrum, 2004). Shrum went on, "There were a lot of assumptions that were completely wrong—like the Democratic nominee would have to limp along after the convention—all the 527s pitched in and raised an unbelievable sum and spent a tremendous amount of money" (Shrum, 2004). In retrospect, Kerry learned he could have raised that money himself and had no need for federal financing—with its spending restrictions. "And no one will ever schedule conventions 5 weeks apart" (Shrum, 2004).

The first dark period proved not a problem, but the second period became a problem, not simply due to the Bush campaign ads but primarily because of the airing of the first Swiftvet ad in August. Knapp always had the reputation for a quick response strategy—but not with Swiftvets. Kerry's best response ad, "Rassman," did not air until the first Swiftvets ad had been airing 2 weeks. A second ad, "Shame," with McCain denouncing the attacks on a veteran by veterans, did not air until 2 weeks later. These responses were too late. Kerry's effort to stay positive, conserve money, and not give the attacks added notoriety discussed earlier were the rationale for his meager response. But as the DNC's Axelrod proclaimed earlier, "character always trumps issues" (Axelrod, 2004). And the Swiftvets ads badly hurt Kerry's character.

One lesson was learned from the limited response to Swiftvets. That lesson was not to be caught without a quick response again. So when another devastating ad, "Surfer," came from the Bush campaign, Kerry instantly responded on the Web with an Internet ad accusing Bush of using "juvenile and tasteless" tactics.

In all, Kerry aired nine response ads at various times during the campaign, but he was most innovative in his use of Internet response ads. The innovation was that he never aired any of these Internet ads. "They would produce an ad and send it out to reporters to make it a news story. That was absolutely brilliant" (Tracy, 2004). The media and I never caught on until the end, until several newspaper stories exposed the technique. The nonaired response ads were called "video news releases" or "phantom ads" (Kurtz, 2004). Kerry used these phantom ads about a half dozen times. For example, he responded to a Bush ad attacking Kerry's health care plan as "outright fabrications." Jim Dyck of the RNC charged, "There is an unquestionable ethics problem. We would have been extremely hesitant to present our Web videos as broadcast videos" (Dyck, 2004). Ads that have limited play in few markets mainly aimed at the media

have been around for years, but in 2004, Kerry brought the technique of manipulating the press to a new level by using response ads that never aired.

The Internet came of age in the 2004 campaign. Even though the Internet was used by both candidates, and Bush won a Poly Award for his Web site, the Internet helped Kerry more. First, because he raised more money. “Kerry outraised Bush 7 to 1 on the Internet. The DNC and Kerry used the Internet as a fund-raising vehicle—click here if you hate Bush” (Tracy, 2004). Bill Zimmerman, who created anti-Bush ads for Move-On, proclaimed, “The Move-On campaign should be remembered because for the first time in history a major advertising campaign was funded by small contributions” (Zimmerman, 2004). Second, although both candidates communicated to their base through the Web, Kerry had more hits—3+ million in August and 2.7 million in September, with the average on-site stay of 7½ minutes. Third, although both played longer ads on their sites to appeal to their base, only Kerry played phantom ads to appeal both to his base and, more important, to the media for a megaphone effect of free media.

Cosponsored ads, ads that are paid by the party and the candidate, have been around for four or five presidential cycles. In 2004, both sides called these hybrid ads. Kerry had 36 hybrid ads. The Bush people earlier admitted that these were ads simply to get more candidate ads on, paid for by the party.

The formulas of these ads were graphics, and scenes flashed up on a screen as an announcer presented the copy of the graphics verbally. Because they mentioned “Congress,” they could be partially paid for by the party. “Bush could say ‘Kerry and the liberals in Congress’ and it had more punch . . . for us it was George Bush and the right-wing Republicans and it wasn’t as successful” (Knapp, 2004).

The fundamental problem with these ads was not punch; rather, their formula was boring. I would prefer to call them wallpaper ads—a repeated pattern that blends in so you really never see it. Anyone who has to sit through 3 or 6 of these ads, much less 36, would be bored. Hybrid ads represent the worst of political ads—announcer driven, graphic dependent, with predictable scenes and no candidate voice except the disclaimer at the end or beginning. They are simply bad advertising—no creativity, no ingenuity, no memorability—just a way to get more ads on—and at 160 ads, Kerry was not well served by 36 boring ads.

In 2000, I criticized Gore’s state-specific battleground ads because his campaign lost 8 of 10 states, where state-specific ads were used. In 2004, Knapp, the champion of a state-specific strategy, proclaimed,

We won the popular vote, if you put all the battleground states together. We won 50.7% of the vote in battleground states. . . . But for 60,000 votes we would have won despite losing by three and one half million nationally. That tells me our battleground strategy was a good one—an individualized strategy almost overcame a sizable wave at the end. (Knapp, 2004)

Kerry’s ads have been criticized as ads with no branding. “Kerry camp dropped the ball on branding. Experts’ lack of unifying message hindered effort,” proclaimed a

headline in *Advertising Age* (Tienowitz, 2004b). His ads had plenty of Kerry, but plenty of Kerry also meant multiple issues and multiple positions to remember or be confused by. “It would be very hard to come up with a memorable Kerry ad. They were all Kerry. He would change his topic but not his format” (Tracy, 2004).

In the final week, Bush outspent Kerry \$6 million versus \$3 million. “Bush was spending over a million a day on ‘Wolves’ over the last 10 days” (Tracy, 2004). But it was not only the money difference—more important, it was the creative difference in the ads. I asked all ad creators interviewed, How did Kerry end the campaign? It was not a trick question, but few could remember. Too many mirrored PFA’s Larry McCarthy’s comment, “I don’t know how Kerry ended” (McCarthy, 2004). There was no crescendo ad or momentum ad or even a final 60-second convention excerpt like George Bush used. Instead, they went with a 30-second ad “Your Hands,” where Kerry asked voters multiple times—a “if you believe” repeated series—“If you believe we need a fresh start in Iraq . . . to create and keep jobs . . . get health care costs under control . . . promising stem cell research . . . our deficits are too high . . . too dependent on Middle East oil. . . . I hope you’ll join me and we will change America.” There were two problems with this ending ad. First, it had the typical six-point John Kerry laundry list of issues—probably four too many (e.g., Why stem cell research or Middle East oil?). Second, the ad left me flat. It was not innovative in creativity or a powerful way to get voters to join Kerry. As Bill Carrick, who handled the Gephardt campaign, concluded, “The Kerry campaign lacked a transcending spot” (Tienowitz, 2004a).

The Kerry campaign seemed more interested in quantity over quality. Rather than anchor spots or memorable spots, they set a pace of productivity, making it difficult for any ad or series of workhorse ads to cut through. Their talking head ads were good, if you liked Kerry, if you wanted a change in Iraq or in health care. You would like his ads. But if you did not, 160 ads were not going to win you over if you lived in a battleground state, and if you did not, you never saw a Kerry ad because he did not use cable.

As I sat downloading candidate and 527 ads from their Web sites for 4 months, I kept asking, Why is Kerry cranking out what seems like three ads in one day rather than releasing one good one a week? I was numbed by the sheer quantity of Kerry ads. Where was that one good anchor ad? “Our ending spots focused on coming together and making a real choice” (Donilon, 2004). “In the final week, except in Michigan, we just didn’t have the dollars” (Knapp, 2004).

Mike Donilon was philosophic.

Ohio was the ballgame! There were lots of different pieces . . . the gay marriage amendment . . . Ashley being from Ohio . . . job growth in October came up a tick. . . . But the most important thing for history is this was an election about 9/11. This country has changed because of it. Fear has been introduced into the electorate that has never in my lifetime been there. Fear of losing a job has been replaced by fear of attack. Obviously, Bush has a relationship to that event. (Donilon, 2004)

As I talked to Donilon, a fellow Rhode Islander, who is also a Catholic, I commented that the hardest realization for me was that Kerry lost the Catholic vote. I could

understand how he lost the veterans' vote or the power of 9/11 for Bush. But the harder question for me was how does the first Catholic since John Kennedy lose the Catholic vote? Answering the Catholic question solved the election for me. Kerry is an enigma. Does he go to church? Does he have an annulment? Are his wife or daughters Catholic? Who knows? I certainly don't, and I follow news closely. I asked a class of 30 Rhode Island students. How many are Catholics? Twenty were. Then I asked how many knew Kerry was Catholic—only 3 knew. What was Kerry's position on Iraq, jobs, and medical care? His positions were complex and therefore not memorable because they were so complex. Kerry was a complex Catholic, a complex campaigner, and a complex man. In advertising, simplicity trumps complexity.

Democratic National Committee Ads

The Democratic National Committee hired two firms to do its advertising—David Axelrod, a Chicago-based ad creator who created the Edwards ads during the primary, and Mark Putnam, an Alexandria, Virginia, partner of Murphy, Putnam, and Shore. “We worked well together and worked as a team. We collaborated. We did some spots. They did some spots—a rough diversion of labor. . . . It is pretty unusual to throw two groups together and have them work together as effectively and harmoniously as this group did. If you look at our spots from start to finish, there was a coherence of message” (Axelrod, 2004). In all, they created 23 spots, spending close to \$110 million. “That was quite a surprise to us,” Axelrod admitted.

We had an enormous amount of money—maybe twice as much as we originally anticipated. The Internet infused us with a lot of money we wish we would have had earlier. Once we got the money we were “flooding the zone,” to use a football term. We just tried to reach everyone we needed to reach and we went heavily into the cable market—both national and spot cable. (Axelrod, 2004)

The reason for the DNC buying cable was threefold—Bush was on cable, Kerry was not, and it was available. “We spent a lot of time monitoring what Bush was doing and he had a steady cable buy. We were concerned that he was reaching people we weren't reaching. So we wanted to reach those people, especially as time went on and we had more resources” (Axelrod, 2004). Putnam poised other reasons for cable. “We went on cable because Kerry wasn't on cable. We wanted to expand his buys. But we also put a lot of money in targeted states because that's where you reach people that matter. We went to cable late because it was an evolving strategy because we got a lot of money late” (Putnam, 2004).

2004 was the year of no coordination and no contact between candidate campaigns and independent 527 campaigns. “We were being very careful to not have any coordination—none! . . . But we were always trying to put in our heads the thought of ‘what would the Kerry campaign want us to do?’ ” (Putnam, 2004). “The difficulty is when you are trying to help but can't communicate, we were operating in a vacuum. . . . We didn't want to go into states that the Kerry people seemed not to be competing in. Our

job was to follow their lead, not step on their toes and to follow what they were doing. . . . We didn't want to substitute our judgments for theirs" (Axelrod, 2004).

The key judgment of Axelrod and Putnam was that they would carry the heavy water against Bush while Kerry made the positive case for his candidacy. Ninety percent of the DNC ads were negative. "We all understood that John Kerry was going to have to make the case for John Kerry. It is very hard for 527 independent campaigns to carry the positive piece of the candidate message. . . . Our basic feeling was it was that the Kerry campaign had to define Kerry and it was up to us to define Bush" (Axelrod, 2004).

I was taken by how creative the DNC spots were in 2004. In previous campaigns, the Democratic Party ads, whether jointly sponsored or stand-alone ads, were far from innovative. "I think both shops were chosen because we both tend to be a little more creative. . . . We come out of the perspective that you have to move people. You really have to try to grab people with increased voter skepticism" (Putnam, 2004).

The consistent creativity was evident in the DNC negative ads. First, the 19 negative ads were consistent in their theme—attacking the negative character traits of Bush. "One of the things that occurred to all of us was that Bush was raising points about Kerry's character, and character trumps issues, especially in a presidential election" (Axelrod, 2004). Axelrod went on, "If you look at our spots from start to finish there was a coherence of message. . . . If you look at our spots and their messages in totality, it was against Bush's character and pretty coherent from start to finish. That's the hallmark of a decent media campaign. That's an accomplishment because we were operating in the dark" (Axelrod, 2004).

Axelrod was not operating totally in the dark. He had the services of a pollster, Mark Gerin, who had an excellent reputation. He just could not coordinate with Kerry. But polling data provided him with clues to Bush's vulnerability.

We got into the character phase with the ad "Mission Accomplished" that finished with the words, "how can you solve problems when you can't admit they are even there?" We saw in the research Bush's certaintude about everything and his unwillingness to concede that there were any mistakes. So I did a "Mistake" spot and Mark did one saying "no one can tell him he's wrong with the face of Bush"—all of these spots went to Bush's character as a leader. (Axelrod, 2004)

Putnam created another spot called "Broken Record." "If there is one ad that sums up the case it was that ad," Putnam stated. In the ad, Bush talks in a monotone, disavowing problems with jobs, education, or health coverage. "It was done creatively, in a very reasonable tone. We didn't try to find an unattractive picture. We tried to find a neutral face and an expression of quizzical penetration. I never showed him in an exaggerated bad visual. The voice over is very reasonable" (Putnam, 2004).

Putnam captured one key characteristic of the DNC ads—reasonable negativity. "Our campaign never rubbed noses in smearing pictures. Even if you listen to the music, which is a key to the mood of an ad, most of music is moody but it is not a horror movie" (Putnam, 2004).

The DNC ads also captured Bush in his own words and used his statements against him. “We always believed that using a candidate’s voice is always effective . . . just using his voice to build the case against him. So in ‘Broken Record,’ you have this voice saying the same things over and over again in the face of reality” (Putnam, 2004).

I questioned why the DNC did not produce an ad capturing Bush in one of his worse campaign moments—the first debate. Kerry could not use debate footage, but his 527s were not so prohibited. “Our research showed people were resistant to the message that Bush was distracted or uninformed or angry. They just think anybody can have a bad day or a bad moment. A debate ad is difficult to pare down to 25 seconds . . . and if you were to do an ad that said that Kerry did win, you aren’t telling anybody anything they didn’t already know” (Putnam, 2004). So no debate ad was done by the DNC, even though Bob Shrum would have done an ad if he had been in control of the DNC ads. “I wrote several in my head, one would have been ‘It’s hard work, hard work,’ over and over” (Shrum, 2004).

Above all else, Putnam and Axelrod did innovative work but were realistic. For example, one ad that got heavy play late in the campaign was “Eagle,” an ad depicting the metaphor of an eagle and ostrich—to counteract the Bush “Wolves” ad. “‘Eagle’ was in the can for months,” Axelrod stated. “We found for those who got it, it was effective, but there were people who didn’t get it. So we shelved the spot. But when ‘Wolves’ went up, we decided to get it into the mix . . . the media played both side by side in an interesting way to cover the story. But it was not a heavy lifting spot for us” (Axelrod, 2004).

When I was making my show reel of the best ads from 2004, I was surprised that I included so many DNC spots—“Broken Record,” “No One,” “Years,” “Exaggeration,” “Mistakes,” “Eagle,” “Stare,” and “Not Funny.” Overall, the DNC produced good and consistently creative negative ads. The creator of the Bush ads paid them the supreme compliment: “I thought the DNC did the best spots” (McKinnon, 2004).

The Media Fund

The Media Fund spent \$50 million on television advertising, making it the biggest raiser and spender of money after the DNC. It aired 34 television ads and even produced unique ads for palm pilot canvassers in Ohio. Its goal was to advance the candidacy of John Kerry.

We always knew that the Republicans—Bush and the RNC—would have up to \$300 million. We realized Kerry would be in a jam. Their strategy was to kill him after Super Tuesday. We saw our mission to help and protect him from that onslaught. That was our primary mission. (Walsh, 2004)

There were several phases to the Media Fund ad campaign, Redmond Walsh disclosed.

In Phase 1, in the 17 battleground states, we would go up and match as much as we could afford to match them. So we went up on the air March 10th. We stayed up with heavy buys through mid-May. Basically \$2 million a week advancing the Democratic agenda. (Walsh, 2004)

“Phase 2, in early May, was when we started working with Move-On. They were only up in five states” (Walsh, 2004). Media Fund had many creative contributors to its early advertising—Knapp, Mosely, Robinson, and Axelrod. “We did traditional ads about middle-class tax cuts and prescription drugs” (Walsh, 2004). From May on, “We shared some of the creative with Move-On. We were sharing the same pollster, Stan Greenberg, so it made sense to coordinate” (Walsh, 2004). It made more sense because the Media Fund had money, whereas Move-On had an abundance of innovative and creative ads but less money. So the Media Fund aired Move-On-created ads such as “Gas Pump,” “Platter,” and “Burger.” “Burger” was the most innovative because it had a surprise ending for an outsourced worker driving to a new job—only the new job was flipping burgers.

In Phase 3, “between the conventions, we did \$5 million in about five states heavy” (Walsh, 2004). Then in Phase 4, in September and October,

We did a national cable buy which we had never done before with some Saudi ads. . . . Squire and McMahon did the Saudi stuff. The Saudis was our big ad. . . . One of the dirty little secrets was that one of the most effective ads this campaign season wasn’t produced by the Democrats or the Republicans, it was the Saudi ad. (Walsh, 2004)

There were two Saudi ads, with the first one played more, proclaiming a costly and sinister link between Bush and the Saudi royal family.

The Saudi ads exemplified the best and the worst aspects of 527 ads. A total of \$7.75 million was spent airing the ad, so it had points and reach. It was a good ad because it was innovative, brought a new issue to the campaign agenda, and was memorable—scoring higher than any other Democratic ad on a recall test in the 60% range (Hart, 2004). However, the weakness of the ad was that it was not linked to anything that Kerry was emphasizing in his campaign. An isolated ad could be memorable, but it brought memorability to the ad and not the Kerry candidacy or issues. “The Saudi ads needed to be tied into Kerry’s issue of energy independence. That would have made it a more effective ad for us,” Kerry’s chief consultant judged (Shrum, 2004). The lack of coordination and control was a problem for Shrum. Yet the main goal of the Democratic 527s was to hurt Bush. “We couldn’t do much to help Kerry if he couldn’t get his own message out,” Walsh admitted.

The Media Fund spent money early in the campaign and when Kerry was dark. But it also concentrated its money later on. “Florida, Pennsylvania, and especially Ohio . . . we were good sticking to the economy and concentrated on jobs and health care—the bread and butter issues of the party. . . . We were aiming at the union households” (Carey, 2004).

The Media Fund spent most in Ohio—\$9,623,697. “We did a lot in Ohio. The Ohio project was done by McMahon—four ads, to talk specifically, just to Ohio people—education, jobs” (Walsh, 2004). In conjunction with American Coming Together, which handled voter turnout, they developed ads to be shown by canvassers on palm pilots to voters who told canvassers their main concern. “We couldn’t show the same ads on the palm pilots because ACT and Media Fund were separate with no co-mingling” (Walsh, 2004). This technique of advertising linked to interpersonal contact was called “convergence.” “We used convergence to go to a neighborhood with three ads. If the person were interested in education, then we would show them the education spot. . . . We took the personalized message to converge our messages with the voters’ interest” (Carey, 2004).

But as innovative and newsworthy as the canvass/palm pilot technique was, the big story in Ohio was that “we were outspent by the Republicans in Ohio. The Republicans bought heavy in the last 6 weeks” (Walsh, 2004). In my interviews, Democratic consultants bemoaned the fact that Democratic 527s spent predominantly early whereas Republican 527s spent late—especially on “Ashley” in Ohio.

The Media Fund also concentrated on Hispanic and African American ads. They were unique to other Democratic 527s in their concentration on minority voters. “We gave away \$1.5 million to NDN [New Democratic Network]. They did the Hispanic ads. . . . Then we spent nearly \$5 million on Afro-American media . . . from Labor Day to election day; mostly cable—BET” (Walsh, 2004). In all, 15 of the Media Fund ads were done for African Americans. Most were 15-second ads focusing on jobs and economic concerns. But 2 focused on Kerry, who “fought with brothers,” and another focused on a single Black walker who slowly gathers a long line of Blacks to vote.

Big money and small money helped the Media Fund. “We had large donors on our side” (Walsh, 2004). Several individual donors helped fund individual projects. “One guy with a bunch of money asked us to do one ad on homeland security” (Walsh, 2004). But it was the smaller donations that were the surprise for the Media Fund. “One thing is for sure. Conventional wisdom was turned on its head. Big and small donations—we got them” (Carey, 2004).

Move-On

In many ways, Move-On was the most innovative of the 527 groups. It created and aired ads that it aired or shared with the Media Fund. It was most innovative in ad creation, fund-raising, and ad testing. During the primary campaign, it held an ad creation contest. A total of “1,500 ads were submitted, which is staggering. Only a handful were terrific and very creative,” disclosed Bill Zimmerman, who was the creative director of the Move-On campaign (Zimmerman, 2004). The best ad was called “Child’s Pay” and depicted children in factories and other locales working in adult jobs to pay off the Bush-created deficit. Move-On sought to play this ad on the Super Bowl but was denied access to that huge market of viewers. So it played the ad on its Web site and raised additional money to air it and other ads.

Move-On was unique in raising money on its Web site.

The ability to put a spot on a Web site and raise all the money to air it, not just a portion of it. We did that dozens of times. This is something that is entirely new and different. It is new and different not only in the amounts of money raised, but the speed of the Internet allowing us to make it happen. (Zimmerman, 2004)

Zimmerman went on, “We made ‘Quagmire’ and we raised a million dollars in 24 hours. There were several other instances where we raised a million in 24 hours” (Zimmerman, 2004). “Quagmire” was a visually innovative ad that depicted a lone soldier walking and eventually sinking into a quicksand quagmire of an Iraq battlefield.

For Zimmerman, “This was a crusade. This was a fight for our generation that would define our nation for our children and our grandchildren. We wanted to put together the best possible campaign” (Zimmerman, 2004). Few other ad creators I interviewed were as ideologically committed as Zimmerman. “We went into this very selflessly . . . without regard to who was going to benefit from it financially” (Zimmerman, 2004).

Zimmerman also had a creative point of view that differed from many other political advertisers.

People hate political ads and with good reason. First, people don’t watch TV to get informed about politics. They watch to be entertained. Political commercials are intrusions into their entertainment. . . . You have to make spots interesting. They have to be based more on emotion than information. Emotional reactions can be funny or tragic—something ironic or angry to touch people in their hearts, not in their heads. (Zimmerman, 2004)

Zimmerman went on, “The second problem with political ads is that political advertisers think the more they put in the spot, the more effective the spot, when in fact, just the opposite is true. The more you put in, the less effective it is” (Zimmerman, 2004).

Zimmerman bemoaned the fact that more and more political ads have become graphic driven. “Most political advertisers are asking viewers to read something on the screen and hear something being said and people can’t do that. We see commercials with scenes taking place behind graphic writing. It doesn’t make for good television. We try to make spots that stand out” (Zimmerman, 2004).

Finally, Zimmerman bemoaned political advertisers’ quest for gross rating points. “Most political advertisers make the mistake of buying gross rating points and repetitions of a spot. The effectiveness of an advertising campaign is determined by two variables—repetitions and the impact of the spot. Political advertisers only focus on repetitions” (Zimmerman, 2004).

Zimmerman certainly helped create some of the most emotional, impactful spots of the 2004 campaign. In “Mother,” a mother cries after losing her son in Iraq and says,

I imagined it would hurt if one of my kids were killed, but I never thought it would hurt this bad. . . . When you haven't been honest with us, Mr. Bush. . . . How do you think we felt when we heard the Senate report that said there was no link between Iraq and 9/11?

In another ad, "He Doesn't Get It," a sister condemns the president for the charade of looking for weapons of mass destruction. "My brother died in Baghdad on April 29th. I watched President Bush make a joke, looking around for weapons of mass destruction. My brother died looking for weapons of mass destruction," she says in the ad.

Rival ad makers judged that these and other emotional ads hurt Kerry because they were too extreme. "The 527 ads on Kerry's behalf did a disservice to Senator Kerry because of the harshness of the attacks on the president—the harshness turned off a lot of people" (Dyck, 2004). "The Move-On ads were way over the top" (Reed, 2004). "Their 527s were overfunded, over the line, off message, and off strategy" (McKinnon, 2004).

Zimmerman defended the appropriateness and effectiveness of the Move-On ads. "Our consistent strategy was to limit Bush's popularity in battleground states so that the Democrat would have a better chance of carrying one or more of these states" (Zimmerman, 2004).

He was prideful that the ads hurt Bush because they were tested and the non-effective spots were not aired extensively.

We created lots of TV spots and we tested those spots. The testing that we did was unique. It involved not focus groups or dial groups but actual market tests. We went into small markets. We advertised for 2 weeks. We did polling before and after. We discovered that some of our spots worked well and some didn't work at all. (Zimmerman, 2004)

Zimmerman emphasized that his ads were tested and his tested ads worked.

Our advertising campaign was empirically driven. While criticisms of our ads were logically made, that said they were too strong, they're not because we tested them. We didn't put those spots on the air because of a hunch. We tested them and they worked. We had two angry sister spots. One had anger that didn't sell at all. In "He Doesn't Get It," her anger was felt by people we polled. That spot had a powerful impact on undecided voters. We would never put a spot like that on the air without testing it. Her sorrow brought in viewers. Her sorrow drew them to pay more attention. (Zimmerman, 2004)

Zimmerman had a series of 10 ads, all done by volunteers and prominent directors. "We told everybody the same thing. Your spots are going to be tested the way our spots are tested and whichever spots test the best, those are the spots we will use regardless of who made them" (Zimmerman, 2004). One of the ads that tested well was an ad by Rob Reiner, titled "Mistakes." The ad ridiculed Bush for not admitting any mistakes. When I played this ad and a good DNC ad also titled "Mistakes," the Move-On ad always came out better evaluated by my students, who acted as a focus group comparing the two ads.

Move-On also extensively used cable, both local and national cable. Zimmerman explained his use of cable.

We used cable in two ways. First we used it to drive news coverage in localized markets, in D.C. and New York City. For roughly \$12,000 to \$15,000, you can buy 10 spots a day for a week on each of five news networks in D.C. This is a miniscule amount of money, but it allows you to hammer a message to the reporters and editors who determine what is newsworthy and what isn't. (Zimmerman, 2004)

“The other use of national cable was so our membership could see our advertising because a significant number didn't live in battleground states. Friends . . . never saw ads and were saying, ‘What campaign, what spots?’ So we put them on cable so everyone at Move-On could see” (Zimmerman, 2004). Finally, Zimmerman explained, “In Ohio you could hardly buy a 60-second spot except on cable” (Zimmerman, 2004). So Zimmerman used cable to reach the media and his members and get spots on the air in crucial but crowded states. Zimmerman concluded that the Move-On campaign should be remembered for three things.

First, for the first time in history, a major advertising campaign was funded by small contributions from members. Second, the nature and quality of our advertising stood out and it wasn't regular political advertising. Third was our ability to run an empirically driven campaign. We didn't proceed on subjective judgments, but we took time to thoroughly test them. (Zimmerman, 2004)

If 2004 was primarily a base-driven campaign, the appeal of the Move-On ads reinforced Kerry's base by feeding Bush bashers with innovative ads. “We were able to create spots that don't look like political ads. They focus on the emotional and get one clear message through without covering it up with a lot of prints or facts on the screen” (Zimmerman, 2004).

One test of the Move-On advertising campaign was its effect in the states that it chose to emphasize—Ohio, West Virginia, Missouri, Nevada, and Florida. Kerry eventually lost all those states. Move-On was a success at Internet fund-raising and creating ads that would make it to a show reel of memorable 2004 ads, but the bottom line of ad effectiveness is helping to win elections, and Move-On and Kerry came up short.

Summary

In a year of huge spending, that Kerry could outraise and outspend Bush was a surprise. Party money and especially 527 money was crucial to both candidates. But it was timing and placement, not simply money spent, that were important. The pro-Bush 527s affected the campaign early (Swiftvets) and late (Progress for America). The pro-Kerry 527s kept a level playing field during Kerry's dark periods. However,

Kerry did not need to have dark periods because he need not have taken federal matching funds. Bush had more creative, better produced, and more consistent ads. Kerry was right to have state-specific ads; however, he needed to have a more coherent national message. Simplicity (terrorism and jobs) not complexity (education, health care, Iraq, stem cell research, deficits, and Middle East oil) would have made Kerry—the issue candidate—better able to address issues that mattered in 2004. Bush was the values, not issues, candidate, and values and character topped issues in 2004.

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