

Why Campaigns Have To Be Negative

Columbia.

YOU'RE A CANDIDATE — of the highest integrity. You're considering proposals to "attack," yes, that's the right word, to attack your opponent. Let's not mince words here. You are considering saying *negative* things about the person you are running against, loud and clear, to make sure the voters hear you.

No one is suggesting that your campaign

By Les Cohen

He about anything. No one is asking you to attack your opponent's personal life. No one even wants you to exaggerate or color the truth. Your only, simple objective is to make certain that the public clearly understands precisely who your opponent is politically and what his or her priorities are likely to be if elected.

Negative campaigning, you say to yourself, is not your style. You would prefer to focus the public's attention on the positive aspects of your own candidacy, leaving it for the people to discern for themselves the differences between the candidates.

Besides, you rationalize, the public doesn't like negative campaigning. Don't the people admire and respect your high ethics and positive-thinking personality? Of course they do. Attacking your opponent could backfire, severely undermining your personal appeal among the electorate.

On the other hand, these losses might be more than offset by defections in your favor from the undecided ranks and from your opponent's constituency. The net gain may be just what you need. In a close race, even the shift of a few hundred votes could make the difference.

Negative campaigning. You're damned if you do, and damned if you don't.

Let's think about it for a moment. First of all, if you don't point out your opponent's shortcomings, who will? Certainly not your opponent. The press might, but you can't count on it. They need to remain neutral. They have a lot to cover and certainly your race isn't as important to them as it is to you.

If your campaign doesn't bring your opponent's deficiencies to the public's attention, chances are excellent these problems will not be a factor in the election. That's all there is to it. Voter education will be lacking

and the voters may not make an intelligent choice. More to the point, they may not support your candidacy to the extent they would if they knew the entire story.

Then there is the pace of modern times and the onslaught of media and other information which have become part of our daily routine. Over-stressed and over-exposed, the voters' senses have become dulled. "Maxed out" by the regular business of life, voters have become intellectually insensitive to any but the most blatant statements. They have neither the inclination nor the time to discover differences between the candidates on their own. That's the campaign's job, and the responsibility of the press, but to a lesser extent. For all intents and purposes, the voters only know what you tell them.

To be more precise, voters only know what they hear and see, in the papers and on radio and television. To attract their attention, you're going to have to do considerably more than make polite and eloquent statements, alluding "with all due respect" to significant differences between you and your opponent.

No. Advertising is advertising, and campaigning is no exception. You need to be clever without being cute. You need to be direct and to the point. You're going to have to be loud and clear. The price of media being what it is, you're going to have only a few seconds to make your point. Nothing subtle works. If you're not careful, even the simplest, most straightforward observation about your opponent's experience or proposals can come off sounding like the prelude to a Saturday WWF wrestling free-for-all.

Believing what they will, the voters make up their minds on the real issues, maybe, but more than likely based on the superficial images and impressions the candidates have fed them. However intelligent and well-meaning, it's the best even the most responsible voter can be expected to do. Like cooking for someone who needs to put more and more seasoning on his food just to achieve the same level of taste, a 1990s campaign finds itself almost having to slap the voters in the face to get their attention.

Busy and under enough stress as it is, the last thing the voter needs is the additional task of figuring out whom to vote for. The voters are the candidates' customers. If you want their business, so to speak, it's up to you to make it as easy as possible for them to support your point of view.

Compounding it all, there is no stopping your opponent from taking the initiative. Is your opponent telling the public the truth, exaggerating, taking what you said out of context or even lying? Campaign insiders may know the real truth, but their votes aren't going to get you elected. You need to tell the public what really happened in no uncertain terms. Without taking your case to the public to counter these charges, and without then taking the initiative against your opponent, you risk appearing weak and affirming by your silence the credibility of your opponent's remarks. Should you have attacked back? I know "He started it!" sounds immature, but as a practical matter, what alternative do you have?

So what's an honest, positive-thinking candidate to do? Voters need to realize that they can't have it both ways. If they expect to be well enough informed to make an intelligent decision on Election Day, they need to appreciate the absolute necessity for negative campaigning and not hold it against the candidate — matters of poor taste, exaggeration and outright lies notwithstanding.

As a voter do you want a "clean" campaign, or do you want to be well informed and leave it to the candidates to demonstrate their character by virtue of the substance and style of their debate? Make up your mind.

Skillfully and tastefully executed, negative campaigning can and should be informative, without being slanderous or sleazy. It can be effective, without being harsh. It's education, not "opponent bashing," that the electorate needs. When it comes right down to it, it's not the attack itself which bothers the public, is it? It's the campaign's style and finesse that draw the fine line between educating and offending the electorate. What we need here is a change in terminology to something, let's say "critical campaigning," with a more positive connotation.

What choice does a candidate have if winning is really the objective? The fact is, I think a good portion, perhaps even the vast majority of the electorate expects negative campaigning for the reasons I have outlined and doesn't have complete confidence in any candidate who isn't aggressive enough to use every legitimate tool at his or her disposal to get elected.

Mr. Cohen was one of the campaign coordinators for Ted Sophocleus, who ran for Anne Arundel County executive.