

Q&A: DAVID MARK

'Viral Marketing' Key To Future Political Advertising

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“political ad makers are going to [try] to be as
outrageous as possible and then just get as much
free media as you possibly can.”

— David Mark

Lyndon Johnson's campaign released "[Daisy Girl](#)" on Sept. 7, 1964. The infamous ad, meant to imply that **Barry Goldwater** might lead the world to nuclear destruction, aired only once but had an indelible impact on political advertising.

David Mark, former editor in chief of *Campaigns & Elections* magazine examines the significance of this spot and others like it in his forthcoming book "[Going Dirty: The Art of Negative Campaigning](#)."

In a recent interview with NationalJournal.com's [Jennifer Koons](#), Mark discussed the book's findings and commented on the future of campaign advertising. Edited excerpts follow. For previous Insider Interviews, [click here](#).

Q: How has negative advertising changed since 1964? How has it stayed the same?

Mark: The [ads] back in 1964 were kind of clean and humorous. Now, they're really kind of sneering and mean and sharper-edged. A lot of times now they're not really designed to go after swing voters. They're designed to rally the bases of support and get people fired up to make sure they actually get out to the polls. And I think that's a big change over the last 40 years or so.

Q: In your chapter on negative advertising, you make a connection between the "Daisy Girl" ad in 1964 and the [Swift Boat ads](#) that ran in 2004. Will the Swifties' ads have as much impact on the future of negative ads as the "Daisy" spot? Are we going to see Swift Boat-type ads popping up in 2006 and 2008?

Mark: I would think so. The real notable thing about the Swift Boat ads, which I think is going to be copied, is how little money was spent on them initially. It started out as just an [ad buy](#) in three states for just a half-a-million dollars, which in presidential politics is not a lot of money.

It just got so much free media and got sent around on the Internet and got discussed on blogs endlessly. And that's what I think political ad makers are going to be shooting for -- trying to be as outrageous as possible and then just get as much free media as you possibly can.

I would imagine there would be some crazy ads like that in 2006, 2008. It's hard to predict now exactly what the subject will be. But for campaigns on a lean budget, that's the real lesson of the Swift Boat ads.

Q: Web-based ads started popping up during the last election. These Internet-only spots seemed to be especially hard-hitting. Will they become even more incendiary in upcoming elections?

Mark: Definitely. They're notable for a couple reasons. One is they can be any length. They don't have to fit inside a 30- or 60-second time frame like you need to get on television. Another is they're really cheap to produce, and they're also not subject to stand-by-your-ad provisions like television ads are, in which candidates have to verbally take responsibility for their own ads.

I think the intent of Web video commercials is very different. It's not really to persuade people in the middle; it's to fire up the base.

Q: Will there be a transition over to even more Internet-based advertising?

Mark: Those [Web] ads are fun and they do generate buzz, but I don't know if they're the most effective way to reach people. I still consider [direct mail] to be the most effective communication tool, because candidates do direct mail under the radar screen. It's hard to trace, it's hard for opponents to figure out how many pieces are getting sent out. You can get in a lot of messages that you would not want to be associated with even on a Web video commercial.

I do think the Web video stuff will grow and continue to be increasingly important. But not as much as... the old-fashioned mediums -- direct mail -- and TV is still very important.

Q: What ads stand out in your mind as being particularly potent in the past few cycles? What do you think it takes to create a memorable ad?

Mark: I think the humorous ads are the ones that play best.

The one that I like most is from the [2002 governor's race](#) by **Sonny Perdue**, the Republican who ended up beating **Roy Barnes**. His campaign was almost out of money and they spent almost everything they had on this [video](#) that they sent out to supporters and journalists and posted on the Internet, portraying the governor as a rat.

It was very effective. It tapped into a lot of concerns that voters in Georgia had about the governor. Perdue was outspent 6-to-1 and still managed to win that race. That to me is a good example. If you have a creative ad that taps into voters' pre-existing concerns about the opponent, you can still win even if you're outspent heavily.

Q: That reminds me of what you said earlier about the Swift Boat ads. So much of the success of these relatively inexpensive ads relies on buzz and generating interest among the press to do the publicity for you.

Mark: That's really the future. In the marketing business it's called "viral marketing," and politicians and political strategists are really picking up on it.

It becomes almost like a race to the bottom though. Everyone always tries to outdo each other and have the most outrageous ad up there on the Internet. Pretty soon, people might start tuning out the process entirely.

Q: Are there any races in particular this cycle that you're looking forward to following?

Mark: I'm looking forward to the [Florida U.S. Senate race](#) to see what the Democrats come up with against **Katherine Harris**.

I imagine they'll be some pretty tough independent ads against her to try and fire up the Democratic base in Miami-Dade and some of the other heavily Democratic areas. I'm sure those are being worked on as we speak.