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Art & Commerce: Politically Indirect

—BY DAVID BERNSTEIN

NEW YORK These days, you can't watch the news without hearing a bland sound bite from one presidential candidate or another. And that got me thinking.

Every four years, we hear the same refrain: "Where have all the great orators gone? Where are the Lincolns and Roosevelts who used words to win not just our votes, but our hearts?"

The truth is, the same could be said of advertising. Where are all the Tom McElligotts, Hal Rineys and Tom Thomases? Are we less talented? Or are our clients more timid?

Personally, I'd like to think it's the latter. And their timidity usually starts with the quoting of a sacred cow: Advertising should be direct. Their argument goes something like this: Why do ads always have to be clever? Why don't they just tell me what they want me to know? Why in God's name can't they just be direct?

Unfortunately, folding your arms, rolling your eyes and saying with your best David Ogilvy accent, "Because you can't bore someone into buying your product" doesn't work.

What does work is far less flip, and doesn't require a British accent.

So, why shouldn't ads be direct? Because it assumes your audience cares about your message, which is a dangerous assumption. After all, how many of the 5,000 ads you're exposed to every day do you care about? Only two or three, I bet. The fact is you need to make them care. You need to say something memorable enough to get them to care. And that goes for marketing a product as well as marketing an idea.

About 40 years ago, a certain president could have heeded that generally accepted

advice during his inauguration. He could have said to the assembled masses exactly what he wanted to say, in the most direct language possible. He could have said, "By and large, Americans are selfish, and I think they should volunteer more often."

But John F. Kennedy didn't. He said, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

The line not only got applause, it is remembered today. The line gave birth to the Peace Corps.

Twenty years before that, the prime minister of a small European country wanted to thank the troops who fought on his behalf during World War II.

Some people would have suggested he simply say, "I'd like to thank the men and women who won the war. They did a bang-up job." Winston Churchill didn't. He said, "Never in the face of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few."

A grateful nation finally had the words to show its gratitude.

Many years before that, a man was trying to protect a woman from an angry mob, not with the brute strength of his fists, but the force of his words. Conventional wisdom would have suggested he say, "Please don't hit my friend. She's really a nice gal once you get to know her."

Jesus didn't. He said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone." His language raised the ante. He harnessed a set of words like a battalion of troops and launched them into battle. At least that's what my Christian friends tell me.

I could go on and on. There are enough examples to fill a book-like Bartlett's Familiar

Quotations, for instance.

I could argue that being indirect is the most direct route to the heart. But then, the real issue isn't about being direct or indirect. It's about being memorable. What these men said was not, in substance, all that memorable. How they said it was. And that's why we still remember their words today.

Next time you hear a sentence you find memorable, write it down. Chances are, it won't be direct. Chances are, it will use negative words (which I'm told turn people off). It will use extraneous words (which I'm told make people lose interest). And it just might use loaded words—words that invoke the holy trinity of untouchable topics: sex, religion and death.

Your memorable sentence will do all the things both ad folks and presidential candidates are told NOT to do. And that is a shame, because those are the very things that make your sentence worth pinning on your corkboard. Or your client's forehead.

Whichever seems more direct.

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