Memo: What Makes a Good Ad?
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For: Colleagues and peers of Louis Perron
            People interested in winning elections
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Perron Campaigns Election Update (Philippine edition): What Makes a Good Ad?

A year from now, the Philippines will have elected a new president, a vice president, 12 senators as well as numerous local officeholders. Several candidates have already been or are running political tv advertising. Among those who are or were "on the air" figure Alan Peter Cayetano, Bongbong Marcos, Jojo Binay, Sherwin Gatchalian, Rodrigo Duterte, Ping Lacson, Joel Villanueva and Isko Moreno. Others, I presume, are already preparing behind the scenes. So, the million dollar question is: what makes a good political television advertising?

A successful senate campaign: the four M's
In a one-on-one campaign, such as for president or vice president, machinery and the so-called ground game may be important factors. The same is true if one is eyeing for the top spot of the senatorial ranking. But for a candidate who is eyeing a safe seat in the senate – say somewhere between rank 4 and 10 – it's all about media. I like to say that anyone can make it to the senate as long as he or she has the four M's under control, which are **media, message, money and no mistakes**. When it comes to media, two things matter – and they matter in that order – ABS-CBN and GMA. The rest is just a bonus. As for the message, it should be based on real, quantitative public opinion research to make sure it is in synch with the political demand.

The basis for a good advertising and media campaign has to be a coherent message. When I say message, I mean more than a slogan, a jingle, a motherhood statement or an advocacy for that matter. A message is a coherent, credible and appealing narrative why someone should be elected. In that sense, an ad should express and communicate that message.

The good news is that as a senatorial or vice presidential candidate one does not have to solve all the problems of the country. As long as a senatorial candidate has one specific and concrete achievement or "claim to fame", it is already a plus for voters.

There is a myth in Philippine politics that a candidate should create awareness first, then worry about conversion later on. I strongly disagree. Awareness without conversion is an unguided missile. In fact, whether an ad is consciously trying to communicate a message or not, it does convey one anyway. In awareness campaigns without content, the message is simply "Hi, I want to run". That's not a very appealing message to voters. With the costs of airing ads skyrocketing, it is only practical to make sure that one's message resonates with voters via research before airing them.

I often observe that though some voters in developing countries are not as educated as they would want to be, they are nevertheless not stupid (sometimes I feel it's the other way around in developed countries, but that's another issue). Therefore, it is important for an ad not to talk down to voters. In that sense, I am skeptical about ads which are limited to dancing, jingles and celebrities. Also, interactions with voters should be genuine and believable. Again, detailed qualitative public opinion research plays a crucial role for this. What may be appealing for political insiders may not be what the electorate and in particular what the target audience finds appealing. Research helps bridge this gap.

It is also important to remember that a good campaign is never a re-run of another good campaign. This is especially a potential trap for politicians and campaigners who have been successful in the past. In 2010, Jojo Binay was the first nationwide candidate to run on his achievements at the local level, in that case his achievements as mayor of Makati. As I discussed in earlier updates, this ad campaign was crucial for his upset win. In 2013, plenty of candidates tried to copy this approach – with moderate success.

If a candidate does have a message that is based on research and then produced an ad that communicates that message in an appealing way, it is important to give the medicine some time to work. As a rule of thumb, an ad has to air at least three weeks on prime time before making an impact. Many politicians make the mistake of assuming or hoping for an impact too fast. As a result, their approach becomes an erratic shot-gun attack with ads and messages constantly changing.

Winning local campaigns: the three P's
During the 2013 elections, we witnessed ads being run on behalf of several local candidates. They came mostly from the vote-rich provinces such as Laguna and Cavite or the City of Manila. This trend might well continue during the next election cycle. However, the nationwide character of Philippine television networks and the important cost of television advertising is setting a natural limit to it.

What I have mentioned above is nevertheless also true for local campaigns: the electorate is evolving and becoming ever more cynical. Therefore, material for local politics should equally be content-driven. When I read some of the newsletters for example – even if I

don't understand the dialect – I can feel that someone is trying to sell me something. I can imagine voters, with their cynicism at an all-time high, will be even more turned off by materials like that.

In addition to appealing and content-driven campaign material, an effective local campaign needs the three P's: **performance, projects and presence**. Again, sound qualitative and quantitative research play a crucial role to assess the perceived performance as well as to maximize the impact of projects and presence.

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