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Those useless political attack ads

By Marc Zwelling

The recent provincial election featured the usual tsunami of party advertising. But did those TV and radio commercials work?

Everyone thinks advertising sways behaviour – someone else’s behaviour, not our own.

It’s also conventional wisdom that political attack ads work. Didn’t the Conservatives’ TV spots decapitate two federal Liberal leaders, Stéphane Dion and Michael Ignatieff?

There’s no proof, however, that attack ads work. It would be possible – but expensive – to find out whether attacks ad win elections. Conduct surveys with voters before and after they view negative ads and see if they feel the attacks changed their vote. Of course other factors could have switched their election day decision.

A quote attributed to the Philadelphia retailer John Wanamaker more than a century ago says: “Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted — the trouble is I don’t know which half.” Today Wanamaker would know; it’s something like 90 per cent.

Can people in the advertising industry sell candidates the way advertisers sell toothpaste? The truth is ads don’t sell much toothpaste.

A University of Southern California professor, Gerard J. Tellis, analyzed 750 studies on advertising effectiveness published between 1960 and 2008. His research found that a 1-per-cent increase in advertising expenditures leads to a 0.1 per cent increase in sales or market share.

In politics ads do even worse.

The *New York Times* columnist David Brooks cites data showing that “in state and national elections that are well-financed, television ad buys barely matter.”

In recent elections political scientists found that if one candidate ran 1,000 more commercials than an opponent the lead in ad spending translated into “a paltry 0.19 per cent” advantage in the vote.” Brooks observed there is “barely any relationship between more spending and a bigger victory.”

Another reason advertising can't sell candidates is that people really dislike advertising, especially political ads. All ads interrupt you when you're doing something important. You may wait for a commercial break to go to the bathroom, but no one waits patiently for the commercial.

Though a 57-per cent majority of us say most advertising is truthful and inoffensive, only 30 per cent believe political advertising is truthful, according to a poll in 2011 for the Advertising Standards Council of Canada.

If ads don't work, why are the parties buying so many? Like other advertisers, political strategists see their opponents advertising and feel they need to compete or risk having their message drowned.

The most effective advertising, however, is free – it's word-of-mouth advertising. Word-of-mouth is more credible than paid advertising. If you send the link for this article to a friend, you're advertising it.

In a 58-nation poll last year, the global research company Nielsen found 84 per cent of consumers trusted “recommendations from people I know,” 62 per cent trust “ads on TV,” 61 per cent trust newspaper ads, and 57 trust per cent ads on radio.

There is no paid advertising to support plenty of profitable products and companies, just word-of-mouth. The host of the CBC Radio advertising show, Terry O’Reilly, notes that Costco, lululemon, Ferrari, and Body Shop are among the global brands that don’t advertise. Zara, the world’s largest group of fashion stores, is another non-advertiser.

You can’t advertise marijuana, but anyone who wants it knows where to buy it.

*Marc Zwelling is the founder of the Vector Poll™ (www.vectorresearch.com) and author of *Public Opinion and Polling For Dummies*, published by Wiley (2012).*