



The Psychology of Persuasive Messaging By: Jim Kitchens

There are some political messages that resonate with voters, while others fall on deaf ears. To understand why certain messages appeal to voters – and to develop effective political communication – one must first understand the “Four Pillars of the American Psyche.” These pillars, or attitudinal anchors, consist of four psychological states: fear, narcissism, consumerism and religiosity.

An effective message should engage voters in several attitudinal anchors simultaneously. Whether you’re running a national or local campaign, whether you’re developing direct mail pieces or television commercials, incorporating the “four pillars into the messaging plan will result in persuasive, effective communication.

Fear

The first, and perhaps most dominant, pillar is fear. While President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously stated, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” the fact is Americans do possess a variety of fears.

Polls clearly indicate that Americans believe there will be another act of extreme terrorism within the next year.

Hurricane Katrina still haunts the national conscience as well, even in areas not typically affected by devastating hurricanes. In a recent survey of New England coastal residents conducted by my company, nearly 60 percent of respondents fear their region – the upper Northeast – will be desolated by a Katrina-like hurricane within the next 5 to 10 years.

In addition, economic fears consume Americans. We’re terrified of losing our jobs, we’re scared that Social Security is going to fail retirees, we fear the results of a stock market crash.

Be it weather, terrorism or the economy, fear drives American attitudes and actions. It has dominated the rhetoric surrounding the Patriot Act – fear of the government knowing too much versus fear of the government not knowing enough. Supporters and opponents have incorporated this pillar into their key messages, resulting in passionate, persuasive arguments from both sides. Likewise, since 2001, Republicans have effectively integrated fear into their communication, effecting outcomes at the polls. The Bush campaign was victorious in 2004 partially because it portrayed John Kerry as soft on

terrorism, implying he was the candidate most favored by terrorists.

Fear is one of the dominant components of the American psyche. Campaign messages playing on this attitudinal anchor (for example, threat of destructive hurricanes, threat of illegal immigrants taking “our” jobs, or threat of preventing future terrorist attacks) will resonate with the American public.

Narcissism

How does the electorate decide who to vote for? Do people consider the impact of politicians’ economic and social beliefs on a macro level (the country or state) or a micro level (each individual situation)? Politics have transformed into an exercise in self-expression.

To understand this evolution, just compare John F. Kennedy’s verbiage to that of Ronald Reagan 20 years later. In Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural address, he said, “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” Two decades later, Reagan illustrated the narcissism of politics when he asked, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” He didn’t ask voters about their towns, states or country; instead, he asked about their individual situations.

Narcissism encompasses extreme patriotism, self-involvement and self-importance. Campaign messages should come from this mindset, relating on a micro level to the voters. National campaigns should incorporate messaging at a community level, while messages for grass-roots campaigns should speak to voters on a personal level.

In 2005, Senator Barack Obama spoke at the AFL-CIO national convention. His opening statement demonstrated a perfect understanding of the current narcissistic mindset: “We meet here at a challenging time for the labor movement. And I can imagine that many of you are anxious not only about labor’s future, but yours. You’re wondering ‘Will I be able to leave my children a better world than I was given? Will I be able to save enough to send them to college or plan for a secure retirement? Will my job even be there tomorrow?’”

With just these few sentences, Obama conveyed his understanding of the union members’ personal challenges, their desire to provide for their children and concerns about personal job security.

Consumerism

Many Americans are consumers; we want big houses, luxury cars, trendy clothes and exotic vacations. From an economic standpoint, consumer spending strengthens the economy. Republicans have controlled this conversation for the better part of the last decade providing tax cuts and other incentives to encourage spending.

Because we want more of, well, everything, voters elect leaders who keep money in the pockets of the people, not the government’s coffers. For Republicans, this equates to tax cuts. For Democrats, this means a sticky situation. Pegged as the party that wants to raise taxes, Democrats are forced to explain how, in the long run, their plan is better for the country. (This goes against the narcissism pillar, making the situation incredibly difficult.) As campaign managers and message developers, we need to remember that

people want material possessions; they want wealth. Frame your message from that perspective. Will your plan increase property values? Diminish government spending? Increase personal income? These messages persuade voters.

Just weeks after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, in a speech at O'Hare International Airport, Bush asked the American public to "get on board. Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed." His goal: to instill confidence by triggering one of the dominant components of the American psyche. Bush's implied message was that returning to a high level of consumerism would provide a sense of normalcy to the general public, still reeling from the terrorist attacks.

Religiosity

There isn't a standard for involving religion in politics. But know that when incorporated correctly, it can be very effective. Hinting at religion or openly discussing religious topics can convey moral standards or draw sharp attention to a specific issue, as illustrated by Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., in March. Knowing that a recently introduced immigration bill was very complicated, and that Americans were divided about the issue, Clinton used a religious metaphor to rally support for amending the bill, specifically the criminal penalties for providing assistance to illegal immigrants. She said, "This bill would literally criminalize the good Samaritan and probably even Jesus himself." That simple statement garnered nationwide media coverage and helped communicate what Clinton and others believe to be cause for concern in the legislation. She knew that this would be an effective way to simplify a complicated piece of legislation. Americans, who overwhelmingly profess a strong belief in God, would not support legislation that would theoretically punish his son.

Religious beliefs shape the debate about a number of hot-button issues in today's political landscape, including abortion, gay rights and medical research. When developing campaign messages, remember that religion, especially as it pertains to morality, is a significant influencing factor. More than 90 percent of respondents to a 2004 Fox News poll said they believe in God. As the fourth pillar of the country's collective psyche, religiosity consequently impacts how we perceive and choose our leaders.

Best Message Wins

Political campaigns are won or lost on effective messaging. You can have the most qualified candidate, but if the campaign has a weak message, odds are it will fail. Conversely, if you take that same candidate (or even a lesser one) and communicate a strong message, the campaign will likely be victorious.

Create that persuasive message by incorporating the four pillars of the American psyche." Fear, narcissism, consumerism and religiosity shape our perception and understanding of public communication.