

THE LIVING ROOM CANDIDATE

PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COMMERCIALS 1952–2008

Lesson Six

BEHIND THE AD: THE PROCESS OF PRODUCING A POLITICAL COMMERCIAL

Objective

Students will learn about and try out the behind-the-scenes processes and techniques of advertising used in producing campaign commercials. They will create their own 30- or 60-second spots.

Overview

The first presidential campaign commercials, which featured Dwight D. Eisenhower, were created by Rosser Reeves, one of the best-known advertising consultants of the day. The process that he developed for these campaign ads remains much the same today: bringing in specialists as consultants; conducting research on what issues are important to the public; developing a script that incorporates these issues into themes for the campaign; paying for studio time and a film crew; shooting the commercial, while taking care of all the attendant pre- and post-production matters; and finally, purchasing time on television in which to air the commercial.

Campaign commercials and the images of the candidates that they present are the product of careful planning and execution by this large staff of collaborators. Commercials are shaped by the results of opinion polls and market research, and are designed to fit into an overall campaign strategy. The candidate and the production team face the same questions facing any filmmaker or advertising executive. What is the subject? What should be said? In the case of narration, should the candidate read the script or should a spokesperson be used? Should the candidate appear in the ad at all? If so, what should he wear? And where should he be photographed? Should he be shown in shirtsleeves meeting with workers, a man of the people? Or should he be shown in a formal office environment, in suit and tie? Should the ad stress the candidate's record or attack the opponent's?

This lesson will require students to adopt the roles of the people responsible for producing a commercial. It can serve as a culminating group activity in their study of the exhibition and may be extended over several class periods.

Preliminary Discussion

Is everything that you see in a television advertisement always true? How can you tell?

Procedures

Direct students to the "Type of Commercial" link on the website. Ask students—either individuals or groups—to examine at least two commercials from each category. Because there is such a variety

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of material, you may choose to have students focus on a particular year or candidate as well. Have them take notes about how the commercial was filmed. Discuss their observations, and discuss what may have influenced the choices of setting, appearance, and presentation in each.

Then write the following on the board:

CONSULTANT RESEARCHER CANDIDATE WRITER FILMMAKER

Divide students into groups of at least five and ask them to decide which of the people above are responsible for:

- Paying for the commercial
- Buying television slots
- Developing a campaign strategy
- Conducting polling and interviewing focus groups
- Providing advice on presentation
- Developing slogans
- Writing the script
- Developing a theme for the commercial
- Choosing settings, actors, and costumes
- Selecting the style of filming
- Editing the commercial

In the discussion of these responses, emphasize the prominent role of the consultant in all aspects of the commercial. Assign (or ask students to decide upon) the roles that they would like to play in their groups. Each group will then create its own political commercial, including a finished script and at least a description of the setting, costume, and props. This needn't be a U.S. presidential ad; students can make an ad for senator, governor, or even class president. The production forces behind the commercial are the same.

Assessment

Through their work, students should begin to understand the immense amount of behind-the-scenes planning and preparation that results in the carefully crafted television image of the presidential candidate. They should also be aware that television does, in fact, tend to favor image over substance, and should consider the impact that this may have on the political process.

Extension Activities/Homework

1. Write a daily summary of the progress that your group has made. What, if any, problems did you encounter? How were they solved? What did you agree upon or do successfully?

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2. Students should be given a chance to present their final commercials. If your school has video equipment, film each commercial and show them to the class. If you do not have video equipment, you can simply have each group present their spots live. The commercials can then be analyzed using the principles described in Lesson Two.

Curriculum Standards Addressed

New York City English Language Arts: E1c, E3b, E3d, E5a

New York State Social Studies: 5

To View

“Real People: Rhonda Nix” (2004, MoveOn Pac)

“John Kerry, International Man of Mystery” (2004, Republican Web ad)