

**Selling Candidates**  
**Campaign Advertising Unit for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Grades**

**Eve Pranis**  
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## **Selling Candidates (Campaign Advertising)**

**Grade Level:** 7/8

**Subject:** Social Studies

### **Rationale**

The question of how to engage students and teachers in exploring the role of media in a democracy intrigues me. I have a particular interest in political campaigns, but have found few good resources appropriate to middle grades. If a core purpose of schools is to teach students about the responsibilities of living in a democracy, educators need to help youngsters develop the tools and dispositions to make informed, responsible choices. By routinely asking questions about who is constructing media messages, what are their intents and points of view, what persuasive techniques they are using, what information is missing, and so on, students can begin to unravel this “mediated” information. Once students learn to apply this critical lens to the political arena, access a range of information sources, and identify those that provide more reliable, less biased information, they will have a foundation for constructing informed points of view on the political process, issues, and players.

With positioning for the 2000 presidential elections already in full swing, I was moved to focus on political campaigns. After all, there’s no reason to believe that the first campaigns of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be any less negative, shallow, or character-based (rather than issue-based) than those in recent years. Political ads, which seem to be the primary tool used by candidates to define themselves and their opponents, have an enormous influence on the campaign process. Televised campaign ads, which tend to be dramatic and emotionally-charged in their attempts to influence viewers, seem like an ideal “hook” for opening a critical dialog with middle school students. By learning to recognize persuasive techniques used in this familiar genre, students can begin to understand the construction and impact of political ads and to consider what kind of information, vital to the democratic process, is missing. This exercise can lay the groundwork for using a similar critical lens for identifying, comparing, and evaluating other sources of information about candidates.

### **Embedded Teaching Philosophy**

The activity sequence in this unit reflects several important aspects of my teaching philosophy. I believe, for instance, that students come to class not as blank slates but with

experiences and preconceptions about the world. They need opportunities to draw on their existing knowledge and engage in active inquiries that allow them to explore new ideas. In this unit, students begin by reflecting on what they already know about different political information sources and considering how these sources compare. They then explore their reactions to and perspectives on the construction and impact of campaign ads. It is only after they have plumbed their own responses and conjectured about production strategies and techniques that the teacher shares enough information about these areas to propel them to a deeper level of thinking and practice.

The unit also reflects my beliefs that students need opportunities to reflect individually on core concepts and questions *and* to discuss ideas and collaborate with different-sized groups. As students begin to develop, hone, and defend their own points of view and listen to other perspectives, significant learning takes place. These are the same kinds of experiences and dispositions necessary for active participation in a democracy. This approach also allows students who may be more comfortable with small rather than large groups (or vice versa) to have a forum to express ideas.

When students deconstruct political advertisements, they employ the kind of dispositions and critical questioning that I maintain should be at the core of all education. They are actively involved as inquirers rather than as passive recipients of information. I have long been intrigued by the five core questions posed by educator Deborah Meier as vital to all learning: *How do we know what we know? Who's speaking (viewpoint)? What causes what? How might things have been different? Who cares?* These mirror the types of questions promoted by media educators and the kinds of dispositions toward campaign ads that are embedded in the unit.

## **Vermont State Framework Goals**

### *Arts, Language, and Literature Standards*

5.14a – Students analyze and interpret features of a variety of types of media.

5.5 – Students develop a point of view that is their own.

### *History and Social Sciences Standards*

6.3 – Students analyze knowledge as a collection of selected facts and interpretations based on a particular historical or social setting.

6.11 – Students examine and debate the meaning of citizenship and act as citizens in a democratic society.

## **Student Gains (concepts, skills, dispositions)**

Participating students will...

- Gain a deeper understanding of the political campaign process and role the media play in that process.
- Understand that different media sources yield different types of qualities of information about candidates.
- Learn that creators of campaign ads target specific audiences and use a range of techniques to influence and persuade those audiences.
- Increase their abilities to identify bias and persuasive techniques used in campaign advertising.
- Develop a disposition toward healthy skepticism about the content and presentation of political material.
- Develop an inclination to seek information about political candidates from multiple sources.

## **Activity: Considering Candidates: How Do We Decide?**

Time: 40-minute session

Materials: campaign buttons, bumper stickers, or similar material; chart paper; markers; handout: *Considering Candidates: How Do We Decide?*

Objectives: Participating students will:

- Reflect on where citizens get information on political candidates.
- Compare and think critically about the quality of information from different sources.
- Spark interest by coming to class wearing campaign buttons or displaying bumper stickers or posters supporting different candidates. Ask, *What's going on here? What can you learn from these? After seeing these, what questions might you still have?* Discuss the inevitability of seeing more and more information about candidates as the election nears. Ask, *What are some of the other ways we get information about candidates?*
- As a class, brainstorm a list of how people get information about candidates (TV news, newspapers, friends, family, TV ads, billboards, yard signs, debates, and so on).
- Break the class into groups of four and assign each group to discuss two of the information sources. Pass out the handout, which includes the following questions, and talk through a sample response to each question. Give groups 15 minutes to discuss the questions and jot down their responses on the handout. *What are the similarities and differences between these two information sources? What types and amount of information does each provide? Which source do you think is more likely to be biased? More likely to provide "balanced" information? Why?* Before beginning, have students check several sources for a definition of the word *bias*, then discuss these definitions as a class.

- Have a reporter from each group share a response to each question with the class. Discuss students' thoughts and observations. One observation is likely to be that televised campaign ads are often negative and tend to be unreliable sources of information. Reveal that students will have the opportunity to delve deeper and become ad savvy sleuths during the week.

### **Activity: Ad Explorers**

Time: 40-minute session

Materials/Preparation: tape a televised campaign ad; handout: *Ad Explorers*

Objectives: Participating students will:

- Consider the purposes, target audience, and content of television campaign ads.
  - Reflect on and express their own reactions and points of view about political ads.
  - Recognize that political ads are constructed to impact the thoughts and feelings of specific audiences.
- Show the class the televised campaign ad you taped, then break them into small groups. Give each group one section cut from the *Ad Explorers* handout with one of the following sets of questions. Once students have reviewed their questions, play the ad again. Give groups five to ten minutes to discuss their questions and jot down highlights of the discussion to bring back to the larger group.
    - *What type of audience do you think the ad is aimed at? Why?*
    - *What do you think the producers want the audience to feel or think about the candidate?*
    - *What issue(s) does the ad address? What questions do you still have about the issue(s)? the candidate?*
    - *How does the ad make you feel? What about it made you feel that way?*
    - *Do you think the ad would influence you to vote for the candidate? Why or why not?*
  - Ask each group to share its questions and three highlights from its discussion with the class. Discuss observations, “aha’s,” and questions sparked by the activity.
  - Share the following “Did you know...?” information with students and invite their opinions and responses.
    - Research studies conducted over the past 15 years indicate that political commercials have *major* effects on people’s attitudes toward candidates (although most people would say that they’re not influenced by these ads).
    - Government closely controls “truth” in product advertising but, because of our principle of free speech guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, there is *no control* on the content/truth of political ads.

- Those who create political ads (like those who produce other ads) use lots of subtle and not-so-subtle techniques to influence viewers.
- Have the class discuss what features made the ad memorable and jot their ideas on the board.

### **Activity: Digging Deeper: Savvy Ad Sleuths**

Time: 40-minute session

Materials/Preparation: tape of ad used in previous lesson; tape of two additional political ads that have different emphases (for instance, try to find one that casts a negative light on an opponent and one that focuses on evoking “warm fuzzy” feelings about a candidate); handout: *Ad Savvy Sleuths: Tips and Tricks*

Objectives: Participating students will:

- Identify strategies and symbols used by political ad creators to set a tone, paint an image, and persuade viewers.
- Demonstrate their abilities to interpret and use persuasive techniques and symbols.
- Refer to the previous day’s class discussion and ask, *What techniques do you think were used in the ad to try to convince viewers to have positive feelings about the candidate or negative ones about the opponent? As students brainstorm responses, add to their previous day’s list of ad features.*
- Show the previous day’s ad again, this time without sound. Give students a few minutes to add to the list they’d generated. Discuss whether they noticed any new techniques when they focused on just the visual aspects of the ad. Play the ad again, but cover the screen with chart paper, so students focus only on the audio elements. Again ask what new features they noticed.
- While discussing students’ responses, note that although some are techniques may be quite obvious (e.g., saying negative things about the opponent), other ad elements may be more subtle and harder to identify. Highlight relevant examples from their list. Hand out two copies each of the student version of the handout, *Ad Savvy Sleuths Tips and Tricks*, and invite students to dig deeper.
- Talk through the handout with students, discussing each technique and generating an example or two. (You may want to share information and examples from the teacher’s copy, as appropriate.)
- Have students watch the second tape, then give them five minutes to individually jot ideas on handouts. (You’ll need to show the ad more than once to allow students to consider all of the elements in the chart.) Remind them that they will not likely find all of the elements in one ad.
- Have students pair up and share their ideas before discussing thoughts and findings as a class.

- **Individual Assignment:** Show the final tape at least twice and ask students individually to respond using the *Ad Savvy Sleuths Tips and Tricks* chart. The completed charts will become part of students' media literacy portfolios.
- Discuss both ads and students' responses as a class. *Which techniques were used most frequently? Which do you feel were most effective? Least effective? How did the verbal parts of the ad relate to the visual aspects? Did the ads tend to provide more facts/substance or emotional appeal? What are the limitations of a 30-second commercial? How might techniques used in a television ad compare with those in a print ad?*

### **Unit Group Assignment: Campaign Spin Doctors (Assessment)**

**Time:** two 40-minute sessions (one for planning and one for presentations)

**Materials/Preparation:** handouts: *Campaign Spin Doctors*, *Advertising Assessment* forms; markers and chart paper for backgrounds and props

**Objectives:** Participating students will:

- Work in groups to create and present a political campaign advertisement.
  - Demonstrate their understanding of how political ad creators target an audience and use persuasive techniques.
  - Assess their own and peers' presentations.
- **Overview/Challenge:** Small student groups will develop a concept and perform a three-minute presentation of a campaign advertisement appropriate to the scenario below. Break students into groups of four to five, then assign half the groups to candidate A and half to candidate B. Distribute appropriate handouts to each group.
  - **Scenario:** Two candidates are running for the local school board. Parents will be voting for one or the other. Candidate A promotes school uniforms as an answer to the pressure some parents feel to spend money on all of the latest teen fashions. Candidate B supports students' and parents' rights to choose their own clothing rather than be forced to wear uniforms.
  - **Guidelines**
    - Describe assignment to students and discuss the handout questions that they'll be asked to consider as they conceive their ad: *What might be your target audience's concerns? Fears? Thoughts? What do you want them to think or feel about the candidate and the opponent? What images, words, and musical techniques will you use to persuade them to vote for your candidate?*
    - Share the following challenge with students: Fill out the *Campaign Spin Doctors* handout as you discuss the creation of a three-minute live ad presentation. Include in your presentation at least six of the features we explored from the "tips and tricks" chart. You may use available classroom props and create your own using paper and markers.

- Evaluation Criteria: 1. Group participation; 2. Final presentation that: is appropriate to the audience, is persuasive, and applies at least six components featured on the “tips and
- After projects are presented, have both viewers and participants fill out *Advertising Evaluation* forms. Use these to spark further discussion and to inform your own assessment process.

### **Wrap Up: If Not Ads, What?**

- As a segue to more in-depth look at media sources and the political process, revisit and discuss some of the concepts explored during this unit. *What kinds of information were most often missing from the taped or student ads we viewed? What types of information do you think are most important to learn about a candidate? Where do you think you might find that information? Which sources may be more effective for candidates, but less useful for voters. Why?*
- Revisit the lists of information sources students created at the beginning of the unit. For each one, discuss students’ thoughts on the reliability of the source and the quality of information it provides about important issues.
- Assign students to be political media savvy sleuths for the next week and to bring in samples or descriptions of information on candidates provided by different media sources (Web sites, newspapers, brochures, radio spots, magazines, and so on.) Alert students that in coming weeks they will be asking some of the same critical questions about these different sources as they have about campaign ads, so they should keep their savvy sleuth antennae in gear!

**Note:** Following are some good Web sites with substantive information about candidates and the political process. Consider reviewing some and/or suggesting that students do so.

PBS’ The Democracy Project (<http://www.pbs.org/democracy>)

Publius (<http://www.publius.com>)

Project Vote Smart (<http://www.vote-smart.org>)

The Center for Responsive Politics (<http://www.crp.org>)

Democracy Place USA (<http://democracyplace.org/>).

### **Notes on Assessment**

The individual Ad Savvy Sleuth assignment and group Campaign Spin Doctor assignment are the primary summative means in this week-long unit for assessing students’ emerging abilities to analyze,

interpret, and construct media messages. Formative assessment, which provides information on students' emerging abilities, dispositions, and understanding *while* they are actively engaged in the unit, will occur informally through the week. Students' participation during group work and full-class discussions, along with responses to handouts, can help the teacher gauge students' progress, adjust pacing, and determine next steps.