

CULTURE



ADVERTISING/USA

Polling power

With the 2020 US elections on the horizon, we find out how the creatives behind the country's most effective political adverts bring in the votes.

By Ed Stocker

During the campaign for the last presidential election in 2016, Democratic Senate nominee Jason Kander was speaking to adman Mark Putnam. The Missouri politician mentioned that one of the things he had learnt to do in army boot camp was to rapidly assemble and disassemble a rifle. Putnam mulled over the information for a second and then leaned in. "I said, 'I could make an ad about you assembling a rifle quickly but I don't know if that would be enough to be

interesting,'" Putnam says from his office in Washington, a few blocks from the White House. "'Can you do it blindfolded? Because that would make a great ad.'"

The subsequent Putnam Partners spot, which made Kander look tough with an AR-15 while defending background checks, has a rawness to it and the clicks of gun parts being slotted into place act as punctuation marks. And although Kander didn't win his race, the advert became one

Kamala Harris

Top: Stills from this year's "The Anti-Trump" (GMMB)

Pete Buttigieg

Above: "Sun Comes Up" by AKPD Message & Media

of the most talked about of the year, resonating beyond the Midwestern audience for which it was originally intended. It's just one example of the quick-witted and often frenetic creative work going on behind the scenes in the centres of US power. More often than not it's TV advertising that is charged with punching through the clutter of competing political noise to reach voters when it matters.

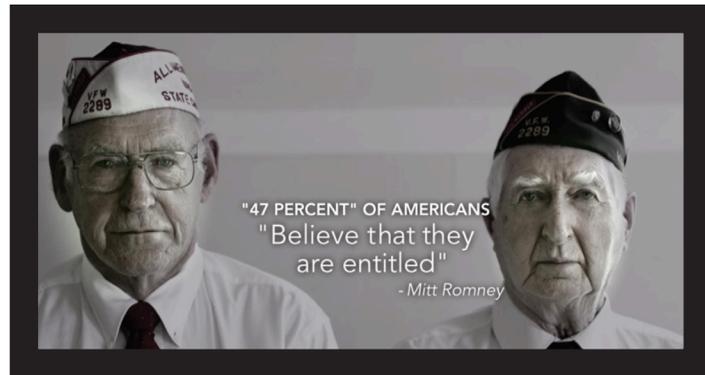
As 2020 election season ramps up – with Senate, House, gubernatorial and down-ballot races alongside the presidential contest – the nation's political consultancies are preparing to go into overdrive. In an already anomalous year, Michael Bloomberg's brief run for the presidency saw him spend more than \$500m (€469m) of his own money on TV, radio and online advertising, while total advertising expenditure for the cycle could top \$10bn (€9.4bn).

Unlike the commercial world, where brand loyalty from advert producers isn't always a given, political ad-makers all seem to have an unwavering commitment to the product they are selling. Every firm in this industry proudly displays its political colours; working for both sides of the divide is unheard of. Many in



"Save The Day Response"

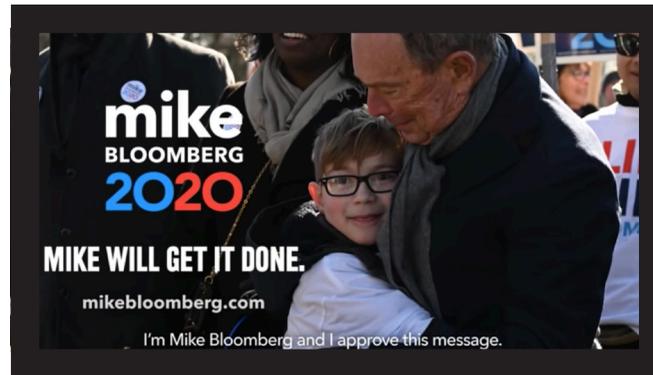
This BrabenderCox spot, not commissioned by any campaign, is a Republican retort to an advert featuring Hollywood actors announcing their support of Hillary Clinton in 2016



Barack Obama
Left: “My Job” by Putnam Partners for Obama’s 2012 re-election campaign

Mike Bloomberg
Right: Ad-maker Jimmy Siegel had Mike Bloomberg play a tough guy in “George”

Jason Kander
Far right: The 2016 Senate candidate assembles a rifle in Putnam Partners ad “Background Checks”



COMMENT
Why Bloomberg’s advertising was a (very) expensive folly
By Sasha Issenberg

Mike Bloomberg spent \$6m (€5.6m) for every day of his candidacy for president. That outlay briefly turned his Times Square campaign headquarters into one of the most prolific creative studios in the US. His dozens of different campaigns demonstrated the breadth of the political ad-maker’s craft. There were prosaic recaps of the former mayor’s biography from the journeyman political consultant Bill Knapp alongside moving anti-gun testimonials made by Madison Avenue auteur Jimmy Siegel. But in electoral terms this body of work amounted to little more than a dismal punchline at Bloomberg’s expense: the media mogul who spent far more money far quicker than any other candidate in history did not carry a single state before ending his candidacy.

That seeming paradox was no surprise to political scientists. Reams of academic research point to a common conclusion: adverts can have a real (even if small) impact on voter opinion but the effect decays quickly. In other words, you can boost your support levels or position in the horse race by a few percentage points, but a week after the ads stop playing the poll numbers are likely to slide back to where they were previously. In the hands of political ad-makers, that has been distilled into a tidy (if self-serving) maxim: go up and stay up. Bloomberg did just that. He bought space both on national broadcasts, including a single \$10m (€9.4m) spot during the Super Bowl, and saturated many local markets at levels never seen during a primary campaign. Bloomberg adjusted his message to reflect regional concerns and political targets, including 31 distinct spots attacking Donald Trump. Some aimed for poignancy, others for dark humour.

Slate published an article ranking 185 different Bloomberg adverts on their creative merits. Although Joe Biden’s campaign ads never received that level of scrutiny, it would be easy to conclude that Bloomberg – who for a time was spending about 100 times more per delegate than Biden was – conclusively demonstrated that advertising doesn’t matter. Yet his barrage can still be credited with launching a plutocratic former Republican (with a personal history of antagonising some of his new party’s most important constituencies) above two dozen other candidates into the top tier of the Democratic primary contest. Ultimately, Bloomberg’s failure to gain ground can probably be attributed more to his foundational weakness as a politician. On the debate stage, next to his rivals, Bloomberg wasn’t as effective at delivering his message as his adverts were.

Sasha Issenberg is Monocle’s Washington correspondent and author of ‘The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns’

political-advert firms have moved into the field after working on campaign communications.

Time pressure and an emphasis on quick results are a hallmark of political advertising. “We have an election day and it’s not about increasing market share by half a point compared to our [nearest] competing brand of soap,” says Putnam. John Del Cecato, a New York-based adman for AKPD Message & Media (which made Pete Buttigieg’s 2020 spots), puts it another way. “This is a discipline in which you have to convince people to take a certain action on a certain day and it’s very often a binary choice,” he says. “When you go to the grocery store you can buy a six-pack of Coke and a two-litre bottle of Pepsi – you don’t get that choice in politics.”

Concepts also have to be developed with limited resources, a small crew and a short shoot time. “Typically, you don’t have a billion-dollar company funding the ads,” says Anson Kaye, a partner at GMMB, the biggest Democratic consultancy in the US; it recently worked with Kamala Harris. He is sitting in his Washington office behind a desk monitoring a Twitter dashboard and CNN on separate screens. “One production for a GM ad might be more than you

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would spend on all the ads combined in a political campaign.”

This means that ad-makers, who have a budget of thousands rather than millions to spend per spot, have to wear multiple hats, even if they might be a partner in the business or a lead producer. Their role spans location scouting, advising on an edit or weighing in on the music; it’s an ad-hoc model that Lindsey Seltzer, a vice-president producer at GMMB, calls “run and gun”.

Clearly, not every political advert has the highest artistic merit. There are still plenty of spots that feature clichéd orchestral music, the sombre inflections of a voice-over and B-roll imagery of a candidate hugging children or wearing a hard hat at a construction site. Often the bulk of

these ersatz offerings get made at a local level, according to Isabella Cunningham, a professor at Austin’s Stan Richards School of Advertising and Public Relations. But higher up the ballot, she says, that won’t wash. “Advertisers, in particular, know that the public is sophisticated and that they have to go one step further to have people pay attention to what they say,” she says. In other words, viewers can sniff out a predictable political advert from a mile away.

“You can’t just have [candidates] hugging babies,” says Fred Davis, founder of Hollywood-based Strategic Perception, which has worked with many Republican candidates, in his sing-song Oklahoman twang. “You’re wasting your money.” For an advert to alter a campaign or go viral, it needs to have a differentiator.

Ad-makers will spend hours with a candidate going through their life story, sifting for gold in the hope of discovering a valuable nugget that makes them more personable. Mark Putnam calls it that “little off-hand remark” that might seed an idea and both he and GMMB’s Kaye believe that, in a world where distrust in politicians is high and the pared-down world of digital advertising is starting to drive the tone of television

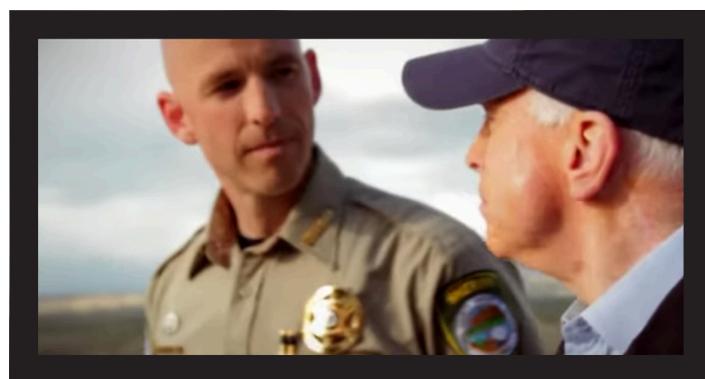
advertising, authenticity is key. That can mean shooting a spot in the style of a documentary with footage gathered from a town hall; if your talent is composed and telegenic (as the firms who worked with Obama will attest), a direct-to-camera address can work too. Quirky or dramatic footage that drives home a metaphor is invaluable, from illustrating a candidate’s journey by showing them swimming across the Hudson to asking a city councillor who is also a yo-yo champion to perform some tricks – even portraying your opponent as a giant rat (yes, these were all real adverts).

Having material that is “a little bit irreverent” can help too, says John Brabender, a founder at Republican-focused BrabenderCox, which has offices in a number of eastern US cities. His 2016 video retort to a Joss Whedon-directed spot of Hollywood actors supporting Hillary Clinton, featuring a cast sarcastically thanking the A-listers for their insights, 275,000 times on YouTube and nearly 15 million times across the web, according to the firm. That example, simple in its concept, gets to the crux of political advertising. Whether fear, anger or laughter, if it’s provoking a gut reaction then it’s doing its job. With ad-makers agreeing that they would take

a viewer’s emotional response over a policy head nod, the music – often the last piece of the puzzle for creatives – has an outsized role.

Sometimes the backing tune is purchased from a library but often it’s specially composed for the spot. That task will frequently go to Todd Hahn, who has been coming up with jingles for political adverts from his home studio for more than 30 years. From conjuring a southern guitar twang for a spot that might air in Tennessee to creating an ethereal soundscape, he says that during peak season, which will start in September, he might score as many as 15 adverts a day – for both Republicans and Democrats. “It’s ironic because I’m really not a political person,” he says. “I have no feel for it.” — (M)

“We have an election day and it’s not about increasing market share by half a point compared to our [nearest] competing brand of soap”



John McCain
Left: A much talked-about Strategic Partner spot from 2010 called “Build the Danged Fence”

Amy McGrath
Right and far right: “The Letter” by Putnam Partners tells the story of the Senate hopeful’s childhood note to opponent Mitch McConnell, which he didn’t respond to.

