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Dialog

Voters have power to demand healthy debate

BY TOM SHEPARD

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Voters are sick and tired of the increasingly negative tone of political campaigns. They long for a return to the more civilized and issue-oriented campaigns of the past – like the 1828 presidential campaign, when Andrew Jackson’s opponents distributed fliers claiming his wife was a prostitute.

OK, so negative campaigning has been part of the electoral process since the founding of the republic. But that doesn’t mean we have to like it.

The public is weary of slash-and-burn negative advertising that distorts and misleads. Such advertising insults our intelligence and demeans the electoral process. But raising the tenor of debate requires us to be discriminating in how we evaluate and respond to political advertising.

Campaign communications have two objectives – to make voters aware of the candidate or ballot measure, and to draw distinctions between one side and the other. The healthy debate that leads up to electoral decisions depends on voters having the opportunity to compare and contrast one side’s arguments against the other.

Depending on how it’s done, this process of comparing and contrasting can be informative and constructive or it can be deceptive and destructive. The challenge for voters is to distinguish between campaign advertising that contributes to a healthy debate and advertising that undermines it.

Political consultants frequently cite poll results showing negative advertising is more effective in influencing voter attitudes than positive advertising. But advertising that describes differences between opposing candidates or viewpoints can be positive if it is both factual and fair, and it can be negative if it is not.

I’ve found the following criteria helpful in separating the “positive” from the “negative.”

- Are the messages factual? Are sources for information cited and accessible so you can check its accuracy for yourself?
- Are the messages relevant to the decision you’re being asked to make? While a candidate’s conduct 30 years ago may be titillating, it may not be relevant to his or her qualifications today.

- Is the message fair? Is information taken out of context, or does it fairly represent the views expressed by the candidates?

Applying these criteria may seem like more work than it is worth, since we retain the option to simply deposit political mailers directly in our circular file and fast-forward past offending television spots on our DVRs, but the truth is most of us already apply these criteria subconsciously to the political advertising we consume.

The next time you see a particularly offensive mailer or television ad, ask yourself what it is about the advertising that puts you off. Likely it will relate to one or more of the criteria listed above.

And when you see that offensive mailer or television spot, ask yourself why a campaign is resorting to questionable claims, irrelevant attacks or out-of-context quotes. The likely answer is that the campaign has been unable – or too lazy – to come up with a more factual, relevant or fair message to distinguish their candidate from their opponent.

Voters can help make such campaigns accountable and promote the public's interest in a vigorous and informative debate by demanding that advertising measure up to these criteria. You can send a message to campaigns that don't by simply voting "no."

Shepard is president of Tom Shepard & Associates, a political consulting firm based in San Diego.