

"Candidates' style versus substance: a media trainers' scorecard"

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People vote for presidential candidates not only on the substance of message, but on style.

"Style" includes the "likeability factor," and at its heart is the voter's perception about whether the candidate has connected and reached him or her in a way that fosters a sense of comfort. Another factor is "confidence," conveyed by the projection of presence along with the voter's discernment that the candidate's experience and values translate outwardly from an inner core of self-assuredness. Both of these factors - and others - carry weight in the voter's mind. An absence of any one of them can present a problem for the candidate.

In Vice President Al Gore's performance in the 2000 presidential debates with then Texas Governor George Bush, Gore came into the campaign as the likely favorite. He ruptured support among independent and undecided voters not based on his message or his lack of conversancy with the issues, but on his style and how he projected his personality.

To many people's surprise, he was perceived as arrogant and snooty, compared to Bush's earthiness and plain-spokenness. Gore created apprehension and distance with certain voters; Bush was viewed as centered, human, and likeable, drawing voters in.

In the recent early presidential debates, three Democrats and two Republicans received higher overall, across-the-board marks than their same-party opponents in terms of performance based on style and "connectability."

There are ten determinants of style from this media trainer's vantage point. (Reference to "he" also implies a "she" (Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY))).

First, does he project confidence? Does his experience and values translate into believability and strong convictions? Does he project "presence?" Presence often emanates from an inner core of self-assuredness based in part on belief in the lessons gained from experience and a cohesive value system. Highest marks on Dem side to Sen. Joe Biden (D-DE), Clinton, Sen. Chris Dodd (**D-CT**), and Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL). Highest marks on Republican side to Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), Mike Huckabee, and Mitt Romney. Biden's performance stems from sense that his deep experience translates into strong convictions. Dodd comes close in this category for same reason. Obama's presentation of strongly-held values translates into perception of solid convictions. Clinton's high marks here seem to stem from both experience and values. McCain leads his Republican colleagues in this area, especially in first debate, projecting strongly held convictions about need to stay the course on the Iraq War. Huckabee reflects strong convictions upheld by "reasonableness." Romney's self-assurance translates into perception of strongly held beliefs.

Second, does he exhibit heart and evidence humanity? On the Dem side, Obama takes lead here. Perception that he cares about the downtrodden comes through. Perception that he rises above dualism, sees the nation's destiny as standing for greater inclusion and fair treatment for all, communicates. Clinton is a close second here, with concern about universal health care rights for everyone cutting through. Gov. Bill Richardson (D-NM) and John Edwards follow. Richardson with his plain-spokenness, earthiness, and candor is compelling in this category. Edwards, when he communicates a humane populism, is effective here. On the Republican side, Rudy Giuliani conveys certain humanness in his

willingness to depart from expectations of more conservative elements of his party. McCain's strong convictions about defense translate as a concern for the welfare of the American people. He shows heart, but perhaps "passion" is a more suitable descriptive.

Third, does he have a sense of humor? Biden is best here. In first debate, in response to question about whether he could tame his often overly verbose style, he responded with a laconic "Yes." None of the other leading candidates have thus far evidenced strong sense of humor.

Fourth, does he connect? Does he reach the average voter? Clinton gives strong performance here, with self-confidence and a centeredness that reaches. Biden gets high marks as well, with the perception that his strength of convictions emanating from long experience is sincere and compelling. Richardson connects with his plainspokenness and earthiness. Both Obama and Edwards were weak as connectors in the first debate, though both improved substantially in the second. On the Republican side, Romney connects well due to his ability to communicate clearly. Huckabee follows, with McCain and Giuliani serving as runners-up.

Fifth, is he likeable? "Likeability" includes such previously stated factors as heart, humor, and "connectability." Beyond those, however, it deserves its own category. Does this candidate engender a feeling of comfort? Does he project an agreeable nature that narrows the distance between himself and voters, or widens the distance? Is he someone a voter would feel comfortable with at the dinner table, among family and friends? Among the current crop of candidates, Obama, Richardson, and Edwards get highest marks among the Dems; and among Republicans, Huckabee and Romney score highest.

Sixth, is he articulate? On the Dem side, Obama, Clinton, Biden, and Dodd are the strongest here. On Republican side, Romney outdistances his opponents in this category, with Huckabee a decent second.

Seventh, does he seem centered and balanced? On Dem side, Clinton, Obama, Biden, and Edwards come through with strong marks; and Senator Clinton outdistances her rivals here, in part due to the projection of strength and self-confidence. On the Republican side, Governor Romney outperforms his colleagues in this area.

Eighth, is he intelligent? Interestingly, all of the candidates evidenced a decent amount of "gray matter" in both debates - though Clinton and Biden stand out among Dems, and Romney, Giuliani, and Huckabee stand out among Republicans.

Ninth, is he wise? "Wisdom" connotes a quality of heart combined with intelligence - someone who discounts the trivia of small-mindedness in favor of taking the higher road. A person who knows the difference between "right" and "expedient" is wise. Obama is the standout here, with Clinton, Richardson, Biden, Dodd, and Edwards as runners-up on the Dem side; and Giuliani, Romney, and Huckabee the standouts on the Republican side.

Tenth, is he strong? Will he protect me? Clinton and Biden are the leaders here on the Dem side. Giuliani and McCain lead the pack on the Republican side.

Given the scores ascribed to the current crop of candidates with respect to the aforementioned determinants of style, and from this media trainer's eye, Clinton so far earns the highest cumulative mark on the Democratic side, with Biden and Obama close runners-up; and Romney earns the highest cumulative mark on the Republican side, with Huckabee a close runner-up. It's early in the game, however, and the situation is fluid. Candidates can improve their scorecard in the style arena. Just as important, the elements of style must also be weighed with the voters' perception of strength of message. "Money" is obviously another powerful determinant. And, of course, there are dark horses in the wings with strong gifts of style who can shake up the game: former Senator Fred Thompson, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and a "redeemed" former Vice President, Al Gore.

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