

Adjust Your Messaging on the Fly

By Eric Reyes

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The campaigns: Obama, McCain

The tactic: Co-opting and adjusting new slogans and themes at key moments in the campaign.

The business takeaway: A new message can sell the same product in a totally different way, *and* upend a competitor, at least on the first bounce. But re-messaging too often can backfire.

Election '08 has had some memorable message misses. Mike Huckabee's evangelical bent and crusade for a "Sanctity of Life Petition" didn't quite jibe with his "Chuck Norris Approved" tough-guy ads, for one. But the biggest shift in messaging, notes [a study released by the Project for Excellence in Journalism \(PEJ\)](#), was McCain's choice to use the "change" theme after Alaska Governor Sarah Palin joined the GOP ticket. The pair was cast as "mavericks" out to change Washington, and the new tagline set the stage for McCain to be the anti-Bush as the campaign wore on.

Change — most notably hyped with the slogan "Change You Can Believe In" — had been Obama's core theme all along. His campaign was caught by surprise by the McCain repackaging. As John Dickerson wrote on *Slate* in September: "Having McCain talk about change makes Barack Obama happy. Change is his turf. He's been talking about change for two years. This also makes Barack Obama incredulous. *Change is his turf. He's been talking about it for two years.*"

McCain's sudden switch triggered some further fine-tuning of Obama's "change" message. The PEJ noted that the word "change" quickly became less obvious on the Obama Web site, while on McCain's site, it is among the 20 most frequently used words. And "Change You Can Believe In" in the Obama camp morphed into "Change We Need."

That kind of subtle fine-tuning is something more marketers could exploit. "If your market conditions or what's happening with the buying power in your market change, you need to be able to adjust and fine-tune your message," says John Ellett, CEO and managing partner of the nFusion Group in Austin. "The quicker that can be done, the more you will be aligned with your market."

Ellett adds that adjusting messaging is great unless it leads to buyer — or voter, if you will — confusion. "McCain, over the past six weeks, has changed his message so many times that people don't know what it is anymore," says Ellett. "McCain understood, maybe too late, that change was the issue, and that he did have maverick capabilities that could be leveraged. Marketers of any product need to understand the ability to move quickly, but don't get schizophrenic with your brand in the process. There was a core brand consistency that Obama has stuck with, and that McCain has lost."

Additional reporting by John Maas.

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