

GROPING for POWER

The parties have become ad agency 'products'. But does election advertising actually work? Jane Inglis talked to Brian Slapp.

Q: How much have the major parties spent on this election campaign?

A: A lot.

Q: Did it pay off?

A: Probably not.

Q: Who's a pretty boy, then?

A: A hawk, or maybe a peacock - depends.

Ask a reasonable question and get a generic answer. It's all in the packaging and advertising - or perhaps it isn't, depends on how one looks at it, really.

Australian election campaigns may not be as long as US elections (about a year there) or as costly; but we do seem to have an awful lot of them and the notion of a slick, quick sell, particularly on TV, is becoming de rigeur. But does it really work, as politicians and their political machines would like to believe, and ad agencies would like them to believe?

The non-specific answer is - it depends. Like all advertising it is simply selling a product, though there are pitfalls in that exercise. Unlike other products, for example, this one (the politician and political party) is on public view, 'working' as it were, for anywhere between 18 months to three years between ad campaigns.

What does an advertising person

think of political ad campaigns? Now for some specific answers.

Brian Slapp (formerly a creative director with advertising multinational Ogilvy and Mather) highlights the last point as one of the pitfalls in ad campaigns - the difference between TV editorials and ads. In editorials the public sees the politician in a news clip or interviewed on a current affairs program being questioned on issues of concern to the public, providing (or attempting to provide) answers and information, with all their individual mannerism and quirks.

And this is the case during the period of government between election campaigns. In an election campaign ad, of one or two minutes, the public sees "this magically transformed person with much better grooming and make up in a totally different presentation". They look "false" because they are transformed "into totally artificial entities", Slapp says.

"I think it works against them because they are so glib, so slick. They're obviously contrived. These are people who are not being seen in their natural habitat or in their natural manner and mood. They're obviously scripted. Very few of them feel comfortable or believable when reading a script. And I think people have been exposed to

enough TV advertising to be very cynical about it."

Not to mention being groped by Andrew Peacock. He did it in the Liberals' ads, and liked it so much he kept on doing it on his walkabout campaign trail. What sort of message, indeed, would the electorate get about a Liberal government from that?

Apart from false and real images of politicians which vary in editorial appearances and ads, Slapp points to the different message the public receives - the difference in information, or lack thereof. "Invariably the TV editorial is far more probing and far more in depth than TV commercials can ever expect to be. That is where you're really going to get any information, and when you see a TV commercial juxtaposed with that, all it does is highlight the shallowness and glib nature of the TV commercials." Not to mention the disingenuity of the politicians and their campaign directors regarding the intelligence of the voting public.

It's what you say, how much you say about it and where you say it.

The major parties concentrated on the economy during the election. A sign, perhaps, of an increasingly economic literate public. But, as Slapp points out, "the electorate's main concern is how the economy affects them personally in their daily lives", yet the



Photo: John Fairfax & Sons

politicians addressed the issue "in generic, national and global terms". And where there was an appeal to the individual voter, we get an 'election promise', for example Hawke telling us we'll have an extra \$50 in our pockets under Labor. Slapp feels people don't really believe that, "there's no real honesty" in it.

Slapp thinks Hawke wins more points for honesty and seeming more human when he admits (in editorials, not ads) that, as Slapp puts it, 'OK, we screwed up, we misinterpreted what was going to happen to inflation, and everybody else did too', but then convinces the electorate that he really believes Labor's program is the best track to take and why. Such humility on Hawke's part is almost accidental and generally anathema to politicians, but admitting fallibility is something no politician would normally come at (except perhaps for Jannine Haines, though she's not running for government).

But it's not all honesty and altruism in selling the political product because, as Slapp points out, we're

"basically greedy - we all want to know what's in it for us as individuals". He quotes another seasoned advertising personality, David Ogilvy (founder of Ogilvy and Mather), in that "the more you tell, the more you sell". Common sense, really. "If you want to buy a motor car or a refrigerator, or a fairly significant purchase, you want to know as much about it as you can." So, if you want to go out and buy a politician....

Slapp is referring to the difference between TV ads and print media ads - and the Liberals' Q & A ads in particular. Slapp believes that one ought to provide the potential buyer/voter with information (albeit cleverly, interestingly and briefly presented) in order to make their decision. The Liberals placed full page, broadsheet sized ads in major dailies with "probably a hundred words on the page".

He thought the graphic was quite clever, but the message didn't deliver and it should have. "While ever it's factual and educational and informative, and really is relevant, I believe

people will read it. People who are really concerned. And I suggest that that's probably who the swinging voters are. They wouldn't be swinging voters if they didn't give a bugger who was in power."

Of course, as Slapp admits, there is the possibility that the lack of information is intentional, particularly if the politicians don't have much to say; or in the case of Peacock and sums of more than three figures, the party would prefer he didn't say much at all of substance.

Of course, a rather costly factor in all this is the endless opinion polls the parties and other institutions carry out. There must be a lot of very tired polled people in market research land. Perhaps they could apply for a special exemption for registering their opinion yet again on election day. But, better yet, perhaps one of the parties should invent its own Max Headroom to barrack for a political candidate tied to a TV network and win or lose according to the ratings. Wandin Valley would be simply overrun by tanned and blow-dried pollies.

The POST-MODERN Conditioner

From Vidal Sassoon to Redken, the post-modern invasion of private life has Michael Dwyer in a lather.

More than anything else, post-modernism has had an unsettling effect on my ablutions. Jean-Francois Lyotard certainly has a lot to answer for.

As an adolescent I revelled in the simple pleasures offered by the suburban family bathroom. A leisurely bath in a hot, brimming tub; a half hour of blissful solitude as I thumbed through tattered, dog-eared copies of *New Statesman* and other mildly radical foreign journals. I even enjoyed my newly acquired ritual of shaving.

Now, confront me with the eclecticism of an Alessandro Mendini designed bidet and I simply bind up - what Freud and his acolytes would have quaintly diagnosed as a case of infantile anal retention. Studio Alchimia design simply plays havoc with my bowels.

I find that I can no longer wash my hair with any sense of propriety. The bathroom cabinet in my house confronts me daily with a myriad of disconcerting labels (seemingly my flatmate's sole contribution, bills aside, to the collective expenditure of our household). I am beginning to confuse whether a label is a signifiant or a signifie, let alone understand the semiological relationship between the packaging and what is actually inside the bottle. It's back to Eco, I suppose.

The Vidal Sassoon conditioner invariably evokes an array of perturbing vignettes. It is difficult seriously to apply to your scalp something which sounds like a rather silly amalgam of the names of various post-war novelists and political commentators.

Lathering up, I am alternately reminded of Gore Vidal and the bite and flair of American literature over the last forty years, or of Donald Sassoon's eulogies to the pragmatism of the self-styled Peppones of the Italian Communist Party. The slightly off-pink colour of most of the bottles which clutter the bathroom shelves is therefore perhaps rather appropriate. The Redken container is quite naturally a more astringent hue, although I always thought Livingstone went into the House of Commons, not cosmetics.

The further recesses of the cabinet reveal more contemporary, and fashionably French, intellectual trends. After all, marxism or any philosophy with even the faintest hint of crimson is definitely no longer de rigueur in our ivory towers, let alone our marble effect bathrooms. Take down the Che poster from behind the toilet door. Socialism is passé even to the armchair revolutionaries who began to inhabit the university common rooms after the rebellious year of 1968.

Body Shop is obviously a transla-

tion from the French of Foucault's posthumously published treatise on aerobics and the culture of the modern gym. Decore. Hmm, perhaps the hair-care equivalent of Derrida's concept of *différance*.

It certainly makes me want to defer and differ to a cheaper brand. And the list goes on. Gone is the generic bathroom anthropology of yesteryear. In its place we have Henri Palmolive, famed at the *École Normale Supérieure* for his stunning work on the semiological implications of tribal deodorising rituals. What you thought you did in the privacy of your own bathroom becomes the template of all subsequent global human behaviour.

Of course, I realise the psychological implications of this sort of absurdist name-association. Or I hope I do. An analysis by Lacan would undoubtedly reveal it was some mix-up in my mirror stage formation, and all this nonsense therefore was a reflection on me (sorry Jacques, that should be a reflection on the function of "I").

Which probably means that Heidegger really had nothing to do with the manufacture of soap. Not directly at any rate.

I am not ashamed to admit that I felt comfortable and secure with modernism. Certainly, I had my doubts about structuralism but, well, didn't

everyone? In spite (or perhaps because) of his oh so clever critics, I always thought that E P Thompson was on the right track when it came to the pondering about of the French intelligentsia. Thompson is not what you would describe as a philosopher's philosopher. He calls a spade a spade, and accordingly Althusser a "freak of intellectual fashion". I suppose that the most practical approach to my predicament, if I ever want to regain some sense of normality in the bathroom, is to stop trying to take post-modernism seriously. Boyd Tonkin, in a book review last year in *New Statesman & Society* (May 26, 1989) adopts an appropriately condescending attitude to the whole scene. Tonkin suggests that post-modernism "thrives among loose definitions and messy data". He claims it is ultimately "just a weary late modernism that owes more to the moustache Marcel Duchamp scrawled on the Mona Lisa than to the grand designs of a Pound or a Picasso". The correct approach is, therefore, to treat post-modernism, along with other phenomena like David Frost or flared trousers, as just a temporary cultural aberration. After all, when you look with any depth at the subject, or at least its foremost philosophical exponents, it is at best slightly amusing, and at worst rather ridiculous.

The whole French intellectual tradition from the structuralists onwards is rich with the bile of scientificity, anti-humanism and anti-historicism. Far be it for me to suggest that this can lead to life-style problems, but just look at the facts. Louis Althusser may well have been la plus grande intelligence metaphysique that Jean Lacroix ever taught, but that didn't really help his wife. Helene Althusser was found dead in the couple's flat in the rue d'Ulm in November 1980. In a state of complete delirium, Althusser confessed to strangling her. A magistrate subsequently found him to be, in legal parlance, "unfit to plead".

Other heroes of the post-war French intelligentsia fare little better. Any self-respecting Australian academic with a normally developed and heal-

thy cultural cringe would know the details. Roland Barthes, a leading structuralist theoretician and another progenitor to the post-modern condition, died after being run over by the French equivalent of a Mr Whippy ice-cream van.

The untimely, and some would not hesitate to say unfortunate, demise of Michel Foucault, was also shrouded in peculiar and still generally unrevealed circumstances. By 1970 Foucault had earned sufficient reputation to be awarded a personal chair at the College de France. Yet, he failed to produce the imposing corpus of work hinted at in the first volume of *Histoire de la sexualité*. In hindsight, his proposed *Les Perves* would have probably made an interesting (and illuminating?) read.

**"The
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The deconstructionists seem to have similar problems with life in the academic fast lane. Jacques Derrida's critique of the persistence of a metaphysics of presence in Western thought did little to help with the more physical charge of possession of drugs in the Eastern bloc (Czechoslovakia).

It would also appear that it is not only the French who develop these sorts of life-style problems, but anyone even slightly tainted with a Gallic brush. The Greek philosopher Nicol Poulantzas obviously suffered as a result of reading a little too much of this French structuralist and post-structuralist theory in its original. Faced with the prospect of a lifetime

studying this sort of circumlocutional drivel, he took the easy way out and hung himself.

While, in the 1960s and 1970s, a sort of chic gauchisme was the intellectual vogue, our post-modern age has thrown up more unlikely, and more worrying, cultural heroes. Any sort of progressive or marxist thought has been summarily dismissed, and replaced with the proto-fascist dogma of philosophers like Nietzsche. The 'crisis of representation' in Western thought of which post-modernism is the most succinct and sustained example, has led to an apoplexy of our philosophical traditions. The intellectually conceited among us may find this smart or trendy but, personally, I think it warrants a little more concern.

I am not openly hostile to all that post-modernism has to offer. Clio is more enjoyable, albeit expensive, to read than Cleo. Some of its other manifestations would also appear to be inescapable. It seems not unlikely that we will all be living both with it, and within it, for a considerable period of time. It is interesting to note that Craig McGregor, one of four judges for the annual awards of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, estimated that three-quarters of this year's entries were essentially post-modern or influenced by post-modern ideas.

Rather, it is the underlying and spurious premises of this type of designer philosophy which allay my sensibilities. Post-modernism ultimately leaves us with nothing to believe in - no prospect of human progress. It is a system of thought which flourishes in negation. More or less cutting off your philosophical nose to spite your face.

The pervasive intrusion of post-modern ideas into all aspects of thought is not something which we can hope will inevitably subside, but only makes more pressing the need for stout defence. I can't speak for anyone else, but I know that I will certainly continue to read *Das Kapital* in the bath.

MICHAEL DWYER is not a contemporary French philosopher.

GREEN Hills

TV's first environment issues-based program finishes on the ABC this month, after a ten-week series. Jess Walker talked to presenter Nick Stuart.

Obviously the environment's been flavour of the month recently. What were you trying to do in *A Question of Survival* which might distinguish it from the rash of media environment coverage?

Although the environment has been covered by many programs before, what hasn't been done is getting beyond the chasing of chainsaws and the sludge file coverage, to looking at the entire problem. Current affairs has been very good at focussing on the end result: the toxic waste that comes out of factories and where it's being dumped, the cutting down of trees. But it hasn't put it into perspective. What we've been trying to do is say that mainstream thought has got to adapt to environmental logic. We can no longer just base our decisions on economic logic. It's got to be a logic that includes some of the environmental factors and imperatives which are imposing themselves on us.

How easy is it to be dispassionate in looking at the issue given that the environment is such an emotive topic?

A Question of Survival sprang out of the TV science unit - the unit which normally produces *Quantum* and similar programs. This helped us to

take some of the emotionalism out of the debate and look things from a scientific perspective. I was an ordinary current affairs journalist when I began working for the ABC. When I came to *A Question of Survival*, I didn't come with any preconceived notions in mind or any real desire to preach. But when you step back and look at the scientific point of view, when you allow these facts to mount up, when you see exactly what's being said by everybody and start looking into the basis on which they're saying things, it becomes very clear that it is important, that it is something that needs to be said. And it's a story that's, by and large, not being tackled by a lot of the mainstream media who often reduce environmental stories back to stories about conflict between interest groups or about who's going to win the next election.

Do you find that the eight minute quota for each story is enough?

The difficulty with all the stories that we've covered so far is that there hasn't been enough time to go into all the complexities. I went to the Solomon Islands to do one of our first stories on the logging of rainforests there. The person who owns the company carrying out the logging is a Queenslander. Two of his former employees are involved either in the provincial or national government. I

put it to one of them that he had a conflict of interest between the people he was representing in government and accepting money on a consultancy basis from the timber company. He answered that yes, he was wearing two hats, but he didn't see that as a conflict of interest. That was an angle that we would have liked to explore in much more detail but, because of time, we had to let it go.

Also in that particular story, there was the issue of Third World development and the conflicts that the villagers face which would have been useful to bring out...

The individual people there are faced with so many dilemmas. And we could only begin to explore some of these problems. For example, they hold land in common in the Solomon Islands - a joint land ownership system. When you start introducing money into the economy it breaks down the land ownership system, and it also breaks down customs. And when you destroy the customs you're changing the way in which people live, not only because they can no longer live off the land but also because their society begins to break down. We just couldn't possibly cover that in the format available.

Issues like the greenhouse effect, for example, create an enormous amount of controversy. Most



Nick Stuart and his co-presenter Catherine McGrath.

people agree that it exists, but the extent of it is hotly disputed. How do you, coming from the ABC science unit, decide who to believe?

Most of the time we've tried to follow the mainstream of scientific thought. We haven't done that exclusively: for example we ran a story on solar power, and the scientific community is far from united about the effectiveness of solar power. So we spoke to a professor who has been working on solar power for the last 20 years and tried to put his work in context. We simply indicated where there are scientific doubts, and let individuals make up their own minds. If there is a wild claim that can't be substantiated, we don't use it. If it's a contentious claim but a significant body of scientific opinion believes in it then we'll put it forward, but we'll also balance it with other people who don't think the same way.

How did you decide on the balance of local and international issues?

Obviously, we tried to give the program an Australian flavour. That's why, for example, there isn't a story about acid rain. There is scientific argument about whether or not acid rain is seriously affecting Australia. So we

decided to leave that issue, whereas anyone who is doing it from the point of view an American or European program would have had to cover that issue because it's vital there. In the case of the Solomons Islands logging story, we could have gone to Sarawak or Borneo or the Amazon - the story's the same in each case. But because this was at Australia's back door, because it's been done by Australians, because the logs are coming back to Australia, hopefully people will notice that and will see the relevance and importance for an Australian audience.

Do you think there is a future for a series of this kind as a permanent fixture - one which perhaps also has more of a current affairs component?

Yes. *Quantum* is doing a certain amount from a different direction. *Countrywide* looks at issues like soil degradation - possibly the worst problem that we face at the moment in Australia - as well as urban and transport issues. And the *7:30 Report* looks at the Green parties and the rise of the green movement. Where there's a gap is that no-one's bringing these separate strands together. Environmental issues are still perceived as being, if you like, one government minister's portfolio. Really, they're

part of everybody's portfolio. There is definitely a gap in the market there and I wouldn't be surprised if we see some of the commercials trying to pick up the idea.

You come from a current affairs background. Would you say you've been converted through working on this program?

I'm always wary of any journalist who says they are converted, because we are trying to retain an objective approach. But it's certainly fair to say that all of us have now seen the importance of it, and that we are doing something that we believe is a contribution to that. We have differences among ourselves about the best way to approach the issues, but we are agreed about the importance of at least addressing them.

Is there likely to be a second series?

The second series all depends on reaction from the audience and how well we've done our job. We see no reason why there shouldn't be, because the issues are there and the interest is there. I suppose the question is whether or not we've done our job in interpreting them.

JESS WALKER is a Sydney freelance journalist writing about environmental issues.