

...and I approved this message

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One night last week I DVR'd the 6:00 news. Not because of my interest in any particular story, but because I wanted to perform an experiment. For the most part I skipped past the news, weather and sports stories and spent more time looking at the commercials. In particular the political campaign ads. Like most of you I am REALLY tired of all the political ads on TV. In the times we are watching TV together, my daughter Jenni gets very angry at the campaign ads and will often leave the room.

Like any good experiment I had a hypothesis; that there were many more negative political ads than positive. My criterion for determining whether an ad was positive or negative was actually pretty simple. If it portrayed a candidate from either party in a negative light, then it was negative. If it showed a candidate's position on an issue or how virtuous they were, the ad was considered positive. In total I saw 21 ads, of which 18 were political and 3 were something else. Of those 18 political ads, 13 were negative and five were positive. My hypothesis was right!

When I took a little more time and examined the negative ads, most took one fact about their opponent and exploited it. Then they would take a semi-similar fact and show the difference between the sides. Of course the ad was designed so that the undecided voter watching the ad would be able to easily decide who to vote for. That would be until you saw an ad for the other side doing the same thing.

I don't think that either side was outright lying, but I am convinced that the facts that were presented did not represent the entirety of the situation.

Sometimes throughout my career I wanted to advertise the bank in the same manner as the political ads that I just talked about. I was going to strike a strategic advantage for my employer and send the competition a little closer toward bankruptcy, or so I tried to convince myself. Fortunately, smarter heads prevailed and my unique, fantastic marketing ideas were put aside.

As small business owners and managers, sometimes we do not have professional help with our advertising and are forced to make these decisions on our own. My advice is simple, don't. Ask somebody who you can trust to give you an honest opinion. And when in doubt, go positive and leave your competition out of your ads.

By the time you read this the election will either be almost over or completely over. The political ads will be a thing of the past and we can get back to seed and fertilizer commercials. I will not be doing any more experiments involving commercials, and Jenni will not have to leave the room during the commercial breaks.

*Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.*