

9-29-2008

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Recommended Citation

"Analyzing Debate Styles" (2008). *News Releases*. 1717.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/1717

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Analyzing Debate Styles

09.29.2008 | Faculty, Culture and Society

A simple, often-used method of persuasion, frequently used in establishing brand identity in the marketplace, helped Sen. John McCain gain an edge over Sen. Barack Obama in the first debate between the two presidential candidates, according to a persuasion expert.

"A very common persuasive tactic is that if you repeat something often enough, people start to believe it. If it's credible, it tends to stick," said Randy Sparks, associate professor of marketing at the University of Dayton.

"I thought that Sen. McCain's use of the phrase 'Sen. Obama just doesn't understand' in the debate was consistent with the practice of good branding," Sparks said. "He said it at the beginning of each of his segments, speaking slowly and clearly."

Repeating that phrase not only helped McCain cast doubt on what Obama said but branded his opponent as less experienced and even naive, Sparks said. "Using the phrase once wouldn't have had much impact, but the cumulative effect was like hitting him (Obama) with lots of light jabs."

Sparks gave his analysis of the two candidates' speaking styles after Obama and McCain met Friday, Sept. 27, in the first debate of the presidential election.

"Linguistically speaking it was a win for McCain, not a knockout, not a TKO, but in my view, McCain was up by a round. He was better able to capitalize on his point of view," Sparks said.

The cadence and pace of Obama's speaking style also did not emphasize his points well, he said. Sparks noticed that Obama often started a statement with a lengthy, drawn-out word, followed by a rapid-fire response.

"His main point would be lost," he said. "He's clearly trying to choose his words carefully, as you must do in this situation, but it tends to make a listener wonder if he had a quick and immediate grasp of the situation."

Sparks said that Obama could be more effective by finding a strong, brief but clear statement of one of his strengths and repeating that statement at the beginning of each of his segments in the next debate.

Sparks has researched how a speaker's style affects his or her ability to persuade a listener. His research titled "Style Versus Substance: Multiple Roles of Language Power in Persuasion" was published this year in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. The *New Scientist* has also written about his work.

"People are very, very concerned about the style of the message. Style has a strong impact on whether you are persuaded," said Sparks.

His research found that speakers who use many "ers" and "ums" or speak with considerable hesitation are less effective persuaders.

"The degree to which a speaker is fluent has an effect on his or her credibility. Even though what someone says may make sense, you are more likely to think they don't know what they're talking about," he said.

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