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Persuading Talk

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When presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama meet in the election debate, it will be style and smoothness that will catch the ear of persuasion expert Randy Sparks.

"People are very, very concerned about the style of the message. Style has a strong impact on whether you are persuaded," said Sparks, whose research on persuasion was published this year in the Journal of Applied Social Psychology. The New Scientist has also written about his work.

Sparks, associate professor of marketing at the University of Dayton, has 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.

Listeners attribute less social power to those who speak less smoothly and are less likely to be persuaded by them, he said. Frequent hesitations also are distracting and may permit listeners to begin "arguing with the speaker in their heads."

While Sparks said his research shows the less fluent speaker tends to be a less effective persuader, smooth delivery can sometimes work against a speaker.

"I think the mistake some people make is they think that if you have style, you don't have substance," he said. "But from a purely language standpoint, a better speaker tends to have a more confident, fluent tone" and that translates into more persuasion, he said.

Sparks said what voters expect from a president may also have an impact on the effectiveness of McCain's and Obama's messages.

"Obama tends to do better with a prepared speech, which is appropriate for the large venues and audiences he's been seeing. Those venues add to some of the grandeur, so if you are looking for that grandeur, you'll find that more effective," Sparks said.

"If you want something in a more folksy sort of way, the unscripted town hall setting that McCain prefers will be effective," he said.

From what Sparks has seen, Obama may have an advantage in speech-making skills, but "Oratorical skills don't win elections," he said. "It's ultimately about getting your message to the voters."

Sparks' most recent research on how a speaker's style affects the ability to persuade is titled "Style Versus Substance: Multiple Roles of Language Power in Persuasion."

He is available for analysis and comment about the candidates' styles following the debate. Contact: Randy.Sparks@notes.udayton.edu or 937-229-2027.

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