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As seen in **POLITICO**'s *Opinion Contributor*

The Strategy Behind Political Ads

By KEN GOLDSTEIN and ELIZABETH WILNER | 1/13/12 4:34 AM EST

Political advertising is our window into a campaign's war room — the strategizing and decision-making process. It's the "tell" of presidential politics.

A campaign's ads reveal the success of its fundraising, or lack thereof; float the messages it believes will win with voters; and shows who and where those voters are.

Super PAC activity is part of this tell. Technically, super PACs are independent operators. Functionally, however, they advance a candidate's interests.

Ads give political reporters and analysts crucial clues about a campaign's polling, fundraising and focus grouping. Yet this trove of information is often underappreciated and overlooked.

Instead, political analysts usually discuss advertising's impact on a presidential race in terms of states and dollars. Specifically, money committed — ad buys placed with TV stations which have yet to be spent — in key primary or swing states.

This is an incorrect framework. First, the battlefields are media markets — not states. Markets do not adhere to state lines. Florida voters, for example, live in 10 different markets. Pricing of commercial time differs from one to the next.

Second, in terms of committed dollars, known as "the competitive," it is important to know the media markets where a campaign or super PAC decides to spend. This strategic decision is part of the tell — but not the whole picture.

It's like counting bombs without knowing whether they have exploded on target. An ad buy that is placed may not be fully executed for any number of reasons — the advertiser could be bluffing, for example, or has decided to divert resources elsewhere.

In fact, the only certainty offered by competitive data is that the intention to bomb exists.

To assess presidential campaign advertising in terms of competitive and states is to miss or mischaracterize most of the story. The true significance of advertising lies in:

- Message and tone — which reflect a campaign's survey research
- Daypart — the time of day when ads air, which points to a campaign's targeted voters
- Spot count by market, which — rather than dollars — is the best unit of measurement in weighing advertising's effect and the relative attention being paid to different areas.



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TONE AND FOCUS

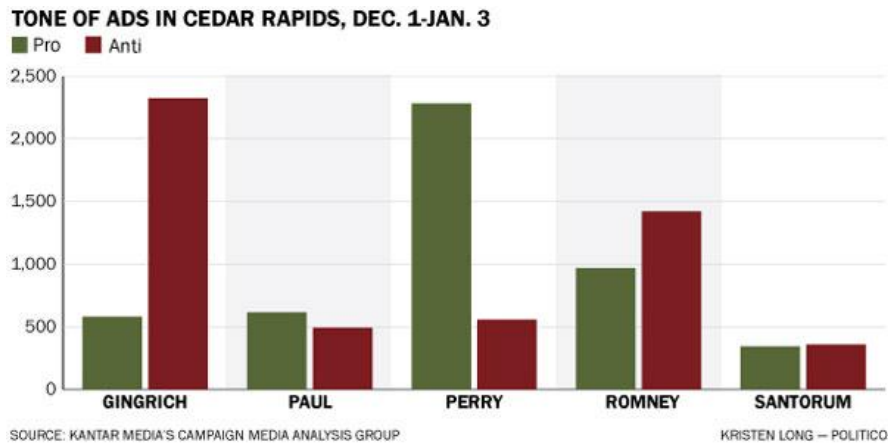
Knowing the identity of an ad's sponsor is valuable — particularly with the proliferation of super PACs. But in a race with multiple advertisers, it is more important to understand a sponsor's message and how it contributes to the climate of the race.

The Iowa caucus results, for example, closely track how the advertising unfolded. Former Speaker Newt Gingrich was the focus of about half of all ads aired before the caucuses, and the vast majority were negative.

By contrast, Romney was not the sole target of any negative ads by his rivals or their super PACs. The second- and third-place finishers in Iowa also were attacked relatively little.

Not until Jan. 7 did a GOP candidate — Gingrich, in the Columbia, S.C., market — launch an ad attacking Romney alone. His salvo was quickly overshadowed by talk of a pro-Gingrich super PAC spending millions of dollars.

This snapshot of ad tone and focus in one Iowa media market says it all:



Tone and focus are also key to assessing the effect of super PACs and other outside advertisers. The more these outside groups enter the fray, the more mixed the messages may become. They could undercut the impact of one side's advertising.

In 2004, for example, Sen. John Kerry's campaign and Democratic-leaning groups spent more on advertising than President George W. Bush's reelection campaign and like-minded GOP groups. Yet the pro-Bush forces had a bigger impact.

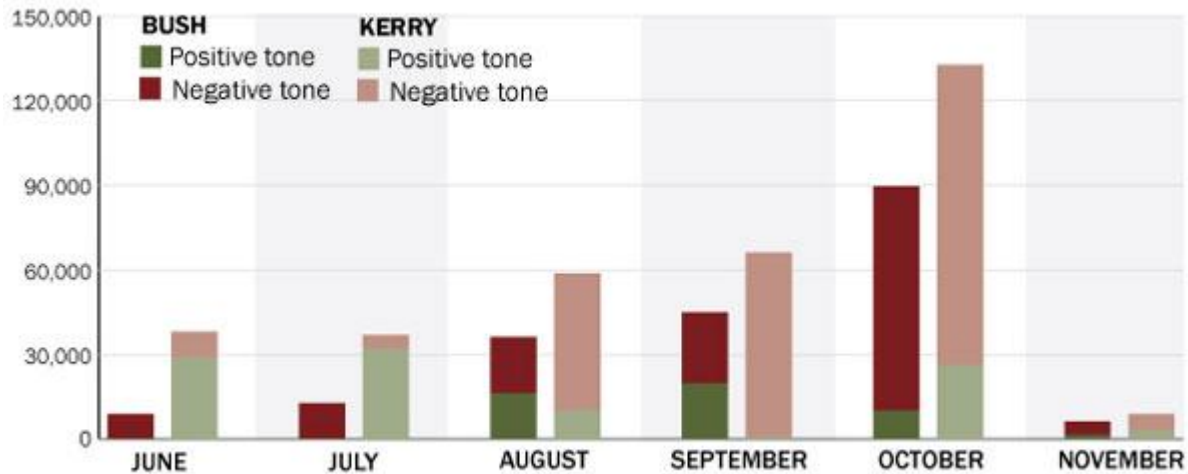


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Since they assumed most voters already had formed opinions about Bush, they dedicated their ads to discrediting Kerry. The Kerry campaign assumed the same about Bush and focused most of their ads on their own candidate. Some of the pro-Kerry advertisers, on the other hand, may have wasted their money trying to downgrade views of Bush.

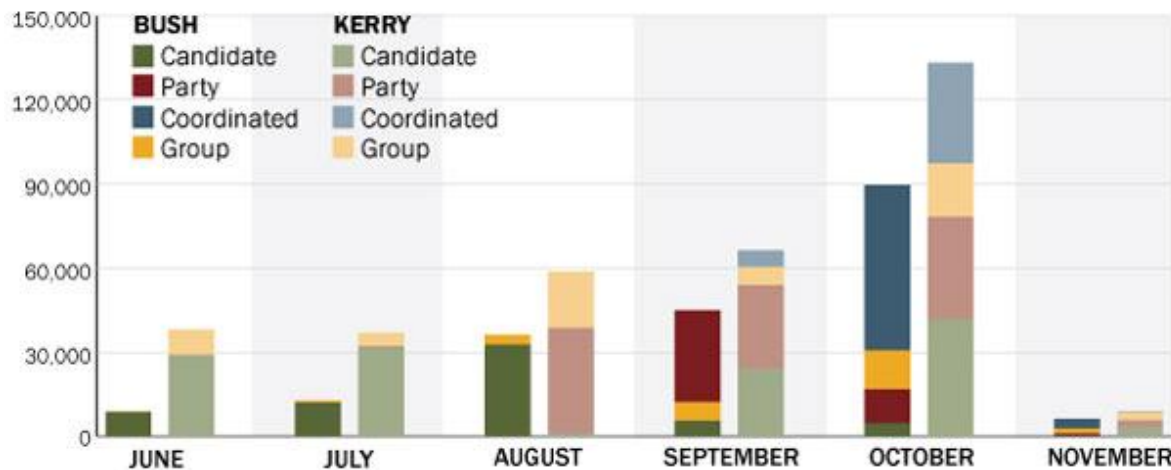
CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING BY TONE: KERRY AND BUSH



SOURCE: WISCONSIN ADVERTISING PROJECT, U. OF WISCONSIN

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CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING BY SPONSOR: KERRY AND BUSH



SOURCE: WISCONSIN ADVERTISING PROJECT, U. OF WISCONSIN

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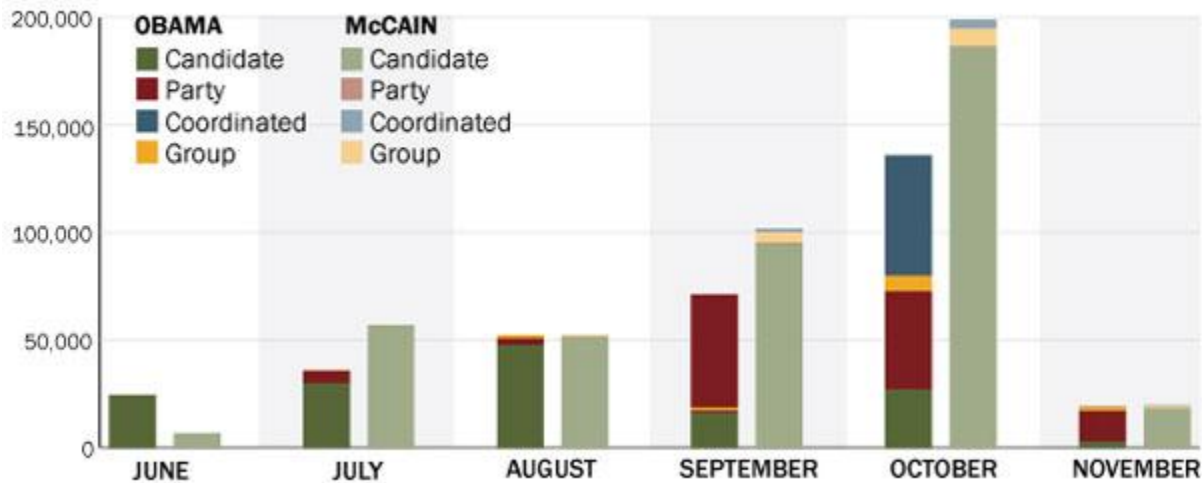


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In 2008, then-Sen. Barack Obama’s campaign set the tone for the vast majority of all advertising on

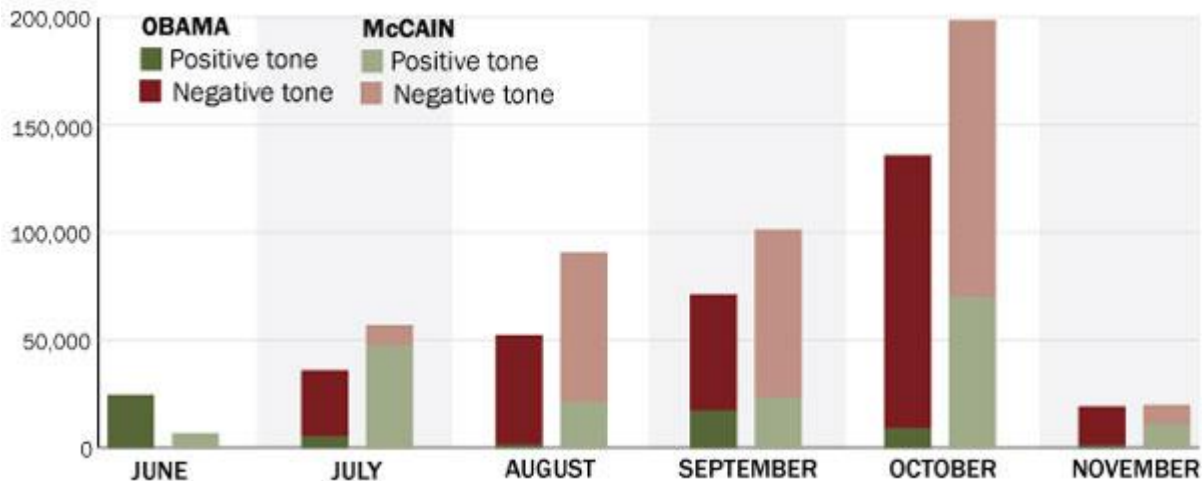
CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING BY SPONSOR: OBAMA AND McCAIN



SOURCE: WISCONSIN ADVERTISING PROJECT, U. OF WISCONSIN

KRISTEN LONG — POLITICO

CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING BY TONE: OBAMA AND McCAIN



SOURCE: WISCONSIN ADVERTISING PROJECT, U. OF WISCONSIN

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Obama’s behalf by controlling almost all the ad activity.

The *Citizens United* decision, as well as the 2002 campaign finance reform act, has led to an explosion in ads by outside groups. It spiked from about 10 percent before the campaign reform act to 25 percent in 2006, after it was enacted. After *Citizens United*, it doubled to 50 percent in 2010. Understanding this activity and how these groups’ messages are — or are not — in sync with those of the candidates is likely to be a major storyline in 2012.



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DAYPART

Gone are the days when campaigns advertised during many of the same programs and at the same times of day. Even news programming is gradually losing its dominance as the biggest platform for reaching swing voters. In 2008, presidential candidates aired slightly more than half their ads during news programs, down from 56 percent in 2004, and 64 percent in 2000.

The explosion of niche cable channels in particular has blown open the programming options for targeting specific voting blocs. Knowing what daypart, and which shows, advertisers are choosing provides an even bigger window onto who these voters are.

TARGETING BY GENRE

The table below shows the ratio of Democratic to Republican TV ad spending by genre.

2000		2004		2008	
Court shows	0.49	Sports	0.37	Daytime soap operas	0.58
Mystery/suspense/crime	0.53	Kids shows	0.49	Game shows	0.86
Documentaries	0.54	Mystery/suspense/crime	0.72	Daytime talk shows	0.86
Science fiction	0.72	Daytime soap operas	0.80	Documentaries	0.88
Sports	0.79	National/network news	0.83	Local news	0.91
Local news	0.85	Documentaries	0.90	Mystery/suspense/crime	0.92
National/network news	0.95	Local news	0.94	Late night talk	1.01
Novelas	0.97	Game shows	0.96	Sports	1.08
Reality - adventure	0.98	Dramas	1.02	Reality - adventure	1.09
Dramas	1.02	Religious	1.05	Religious	1.10
Game shows	1.15	Daytime talk shows	1.13	National/network news	1.15
Daytime soap operas	1.22	Reality - talent	1.15	Dramas	1.22
Movies	1.31	Reality - adventure	1.20	Reality - talent	1.26
Comedies	1.61	Novelas	1.33	Kids shows	1.52
Daytime talk shows	1.73	Late night talk	1.55	Comedies	1.58
Religious	2.05	Movies	1.84	Court shows	1.63
Late night talk	4.67	Comedies	1.89	Movies	1.70
		Science fiction	2.00	Novelas	2.33
		Reality - dating	2.79	Reality - dating	2.60
		Court shows	2.82	Science fiction	2.76

Note: Entries are ratio of Democratic ads aired during each program genre as a proportion of total Democratic ads to Republican ads aired during each program genre as a proportion of total Republican ads. Genres were eliminated that did not have at least 50 ad airings in a particular year.

SOURCE: WISCONSIN ADVERTISING PROJECT, U. OF WISCONSIN

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COUNT SPOTS, NOT DOLLARS

Spot count, rather than dollars, is the best measurement to apply in assessing the effect of advertising. A dollar spent in one market can mean something far different from a dollar spent in another.

For example, if an advertiser buys \$100,000 in advertising in the Columbia, S.C., market, voters in that area will see it. If the money is targeted in the more expensive Charlotte, N.C., market, South Carolina voters living within that market can factor those ads into their decision making. But the potential effect of that \$100,000 differs greatly in terms of the number of spots it buys, and how many voters would see them.



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Political analysts take care to distinguish among various polls because of differing methodologies, weighting and sample sizes. They should grasp why it is important to do the same for advertising. Equating dollars across two media markets is akin to equating a poll of 400 likely voters in one state to a poll of 800 registered voters in another.

So the way presidential campaign advertising is often discussed today is pretty much the least accurate way to represent it.

The next time you are tempted to say, "Advertiser X is spending YYY dollars in Z state," consider saying instead: "Advertiser X has the resources to afford airtime in the expensive Y market." Or, "Advertiser X is on the air during Y show/time of day in an effort to reach Z voters."

We expect about \$3 billion to be spent on political TV advertising in 2012, possibly more. That's a lot of story to overlook, a lot of strategy to decipher — and a lot of reasons to get it right.

Ken Goldstein is president and Elizabeth Wilner is vice president of Kantar Media's CMAG, a nonpartisan firm that analyzes the content and spending of campaign advertising.

View the Politico opinion piece online: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0112/71390.html>