Selling “no”

If you doubt the power of advertising, then do yourself a favor and watch No, the movie by Pablo Larrain, featuring Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal. The movie (now available in DVD), in Spanish, is set in 1988 Chile, where the government of Augusto Pinochet has been forced by international pressure to call a referendum to see whether the public will support eight more years. Voters who support Pinochet will vote yes, and those who oppose him will vote no.

The No campaign hires Rene Saavedra (played by Garcia Bernal) to come up with a concept. Saavedra, who works for the ad agency hired by the government’s Si campaign, has a track record of edgy, successful campaigns. Saavedra thinks the No campaign needs to feature happiness, thus equating a negative concept (no) with being happy. He commissions a song about happiness and develops a “happy” logo.

As a marketing communications writer and consultant, I was very interested in seeing how Saavedra’s concepts were received by the No campaign. Since they were fighting an ideological campaign, they believed you had to make a case to the people (Pinochet has killed, tortured and disappeared thousands of people). Saavedra’s reaction is that that would not be a pleasant, nice message. The campaign recoils, saying that of course it isn’t a nice message. But Saavedra prevails, getting them to see that people don’t want to scared and oppressed by negativity.

You will need to watch the movie to see how the opposing sides deal with each other, but suffice it to say that Saavedra was right. People respond better to a positive message, or at least pay more attention. He succeeded in putting the Si campaign on the defensive.