

Politicians, pandering and the shifting message

Although pander has some decidedly unsavory definitions (to act as a go-between in sexual intrigues, for example) I am using this definition: to cater or to indulge.

Politicians seem to be always pandering, saying things they think cater to the audience they are speaking to or trying to appeal to. We saw this a week ago, when President Obama gave his State of the Union speech and he most decidedly pandered to the people who think they are on the short end of the wealth stick in this country. Here's an excerpt:

We can either settle for a country where a shrinking number of people do really well, while a growing number of Americans barely get by, or we can restore an economy where everyone gets a fair shot, and everyone does their fair share, and everyone plays by the same set of rules.

And then this:

So let me put colleges and universities on notice: If you can't stop tuition from going up, the funding you get from taxpayers will go down. Higher education can't be a luxury. It is an economic imperative that every family in America should be able to afford.

To me it's clear Obama thinks he needs these people to vote for him in November.

Then there is Newt Gingrich pandering to the Jewish vote in Florida by saying that Romney voted to eliminate serving kosher food to elderly people under Medicaid.

Rick Santorum (and when they were still in the race, Rick

Perry and Michelle Bachmann) panders to the homophobic vote (although he probably calls it the family values vote) by opposing same-sex marriage.

We have seen all GOP candidates this year pander to the racist vote by emphasizing that Obama is an “other” (Gingrich called him a “food stamp president” and the other candidates have called him everything from a socialist to other negative descriptors).

In short, politicians will say anything to get a vote. The problem with pandering is that it assumes the audience can’t see it is being pandered to. And then there is the fact that different audiences might have conflicting needs from one another and the candidate that panders to one might necessarily offend another or end up contradicting him/herself.

In marketing, we believe in tailoring a message to the target audience. However, we also believe that messages should be clear and CONSISTENT. If a business employed a shifting message strategy, it would quickly lose customers. Why do we tolerate this shift from politicians?

ADDENDUM: Just came across this piece on CNN.com: Latinos won’t forget Romney’s anti-immigrant talk. Author Ruben Navarrette says this:

the dishonest and cynical way in which the former governor of Massachusetts has dealt with the immigration issue on the campaign trail shows that he has a problem being consistent.

Navarrette goes on to discuss how Romney held a strong line against amnesty, but now has softened his approach to PANDER to the Latino vote.

Now as he competes this week for Hispanic votes in Florida – and, on Feb 4, in Nevada, where Latinos account for 26.5

percent of the population – Romney must be hoping that Latinos have bad memories.

We don't. We never forget a slight. And, in that respect, Romney has given us plenty to remember.