

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 be 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.

Ads are powerful; differentiation is important

This morning's Washington Post is full of interesting media/marketing news. First is the announcement that the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) has enacted tough new rules on cigarette/tobacco advertising as part of the agency's new authority to regulate the industry.

According to the Post, tobacco companies will be banned from sponsoring sports and entertainment events and from offering free samples, among other restrictions. The FDA also tried to limit advertising to text only (banning color and graphics) but a judge has ruled in favor of the tobacco companies, which the FDA is appealing.

Tobacco advertising and the federal response to it has always been fascinating. Tobacco is a legal product, sold and taxed in stores like any other product, but when used as directed, causes wide-ranging health problems (cancer, heart disease) not only to smokers but those exposed to smoke. The Feds have tried to curb the appeal of smoking by restricting advertising and putting warnings on cigarette packs. This has always raised the question of first amendment rights—after all, the companies that manufacture cigarettes are trying to sell a legal product. But the government is concerned that increased sales of tobacco mean increased health risks.

The point here is that advertising and marketing efforts, when

done right, are powerful. They can steer consumer behavior. Personally, I abhor smoking and I applaud the FDA for stepping up regulation of tobacco marketing. To me, marketing tobacco is marketing death, yet the issue of free speech remains. The real issue may well be why we allow companies continue to produce and market a product that kills.

Another piece of news that is fascinating is that Christiane Amanpour, the famed CNN war reporter, will move over to ABC, to host This Week. If ever there was a least likely candidate for this position it was Amanpour, who is more comfortable confronting dictators and dodging bullets in war-torn areas. I think David Brinkley would turn over in his grave! Will the round table with George Will, Cokie Roberts and the rest continue? I doubt it. And I doubt that with Amanpour at the helm, This Week will be able to compete with Meet the Press on domestic political coverage. **But that seems to be the point—hiring Amanpour is meant to change This Week into a program with a more international focus. And differentiate it will, but will that also result in increased viewership? That is the question.**

