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The Bible of Talk Radio and the New Talk Media

Issue 152

PROGRAMMING • MANAGEMENT • MARKETING • TECHNICAL • LEGAL

October 2004

Top 10 reasons:

Why John Kerry is blowing the election

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WASHINGTON — Four years ago I wrote an article for *TALKERS* magazine titled “Why Al Gore didn’t win the election by 10 points; a talk radio perspective.” (See *TALKERS* Archives at www.talkers.com.) Well, this time there is no point in waiting for November 1. I have a reputation as a Democrat-leaning commentator and talk radio personality and it pains me to write this, but I hope by my going public with this now, the Kerry campaign can turn on a dime and pay some much needed attention to the talk media. As I write this, I am astounded by how many points made in the 2000 article are exactly the same and despite the lone voice of Kandy Stroud, the director of radio for the DNC, the Democrats still have a long way to go when it comes to talk media. So, four years later, here goes:

10. The Kerry Campaign didn’t accept help when it was offered. Last winter the Kerry campaign was offered help by Democrat-leaning members of the talk media. Michael Meehan, a campaign spokesperson and Kerry senior adviser said he didn’t need help.

Stephanie Cutter, the campaign’s communications director, has made no outreach to the liberal segment of talk media programmers/talent and was described by one host as ‘unfriendly.’ Better than focus groups, the talk media could have saved the campaign hours of message crafting and many blunders. I wish I could say this thick-headed behavior was limited to talk media; unfortunately, I have heard this from many successful elected officials and party stalwarts.

“They have treated old talk radio friends miserably — they don’t support their own.”

9. They have treated old talk radio friends miserably. Continuing with the theme of the Kerry camp’s miserable relationship with talk media — they don’t support their own. Howard Monroe of WVLY is a well-known Democratic talk show host who has broadcast for 30 years in the battleground territory of Wheeling, West Virginia and neighboring Ohio. Unfortunately he could not get the time of day from the local Kerry campaign reps. Ironically, Howard was invited by the Bush-Cheney people to ride on the Vice President’s bus and sit on the podium (he chose not to sit on the podium) when Cheney was in town. The Bush-Cheney people have also bought a ton of ads on Howard’s station since May. The

Kerry folks? Only after they heard Howard on the air talking about what the Bush-Cheney people had done for him did they bother to give him two general admission tickets to a Kerry event. No Kerry interview, no photo op, nothing. To add insult to injury, a new talk station was started less than six weeks ago in Wheeling by a wealthy Democrat. What did Senator Kerry do? He cut a promo saying he always listens to the new station. This complete misunderstanding of talk media protocol would have never happened if the Kerry campaign had anyone who knew something about talk radio. Comparatively, the RNC had Sean Hannity cut a video promo to welcome delegates to Madison Square Garden. This was good for the RNC and great for Sean’s visibility. Other than Al Franken, does the Kerry campaign even know who their talk show hosts friends are? Are syndicated hosts Alan Colmes, Ed Schultz, Arnie Arnesen, Bev Smith, Tony Trupiano and a score of local hosts chopped liver? Or how about independent but friendly hosts like Thom Hartmann and Doug Stephan? Although talk radio has had a friend in DNC chair Terry McAuliffe, why did Terry take Neal Boortz for a drink in his convention sky box but not one Democratic host get a glimpse? And why wasn’t Alan Colmes’ book on the Democratic National Committee website? Al Franken’s book was there but not Alan’s.

8. Some surrogates are poorly trained; others are just bad choices. Some of the surrogates have been great, talk friendly and well-informed. But others would be better off if they were *not* on radio or television. One physician referred to his talking points during a face-to-face interview and did not use even one personal example. Another surrogate who serves as a domestic policy advisor was on a syndicated show and just read from the talking points. Both surrogates were drier than the Sahara. They have too many wonks who can’t relate to the talk audience and can’t roll with the punches. Another retired general they have used is universally hated by many active and retired military people. Another Democratic strategist on radio row during the

Republican convention kept talking about Kerry's record in Vietnam. The host interviewing him just kept wondering what planet he was on given the fact that the Swift Boaters had just sunk Kerry on this issue.

7. They don't understand how Republicans use talk media and were unprepared for their Willy Horton issue. The Republicans have made Vietnam Kerry's Willy Horton issue. Who would base an entire campaign on one of our country's most divisive issues; an issue that is 35 years old? How could they not have anticipated the Swift Boater's actions when some of the same issues were used in other campaigns against Senator Kerry? As soon as I saw the ad I knew what the talk media would do with it. How could Kerry's people have been so blindsided? The answer is simple. They have no one in the campaign who has even a remote understanding of talk media. A first year talk show host would have known that the swift boat ad was going to create a tidal wave and would have developed a rapid response to the ads even if they hadn't anticipated it beforehand.

6. Their message is scattered. As Michael Harrison says, "Talk radio is the nation's most accurate bellwether of public opinion." Kerry's message mavens need to listen to a little talk radio. No one knows how to hammer a message home better than a talk show host. Hour after hour, day after day, one issue can be pounded home and stretched across the landscape. For example: Give a bunch of pro-Kerry talk show hosts his record on the environment, put it together with the childhood asthma stats and voila, you would have heard an issue crafted better than any speechwriter. No one knows how to make sure a message hits the front porch, back fence and pocket-book better than talk hosts. Why hasn't the Kerry campaign hit hard on those basic talk issues? These are the issues that matter to the voter.

5. They let the Republicans paint Kerry and haven't fought back. Flip-flopper, indecisive, confused. These are the words that define Senator Kerry, thanks to the successful efforts of the Bush-Cheney campaign. The problem is Kerry never responded in kind. Fight fire with fire. When the College Republicans went through the Midwest parading giant flip-flop sandals, the Kerry campaign should have crafted thousands of fliers and handouts in the shape of a flip-flop sandal that listed Bush's flip-flops for distribution at every Bush-Cheney campaign stop. But more than even fighting back with gimmicks like flip-flop sandals, why haven't they gone after Bush's

record? For starters, Bush's "I'm a Uniter not a Divider," or simply tell the American people why Kerry could do a better job on a host of issues. An incumbent President always runs against their own record, so the challenger has to make the case using the incumbent's own record. So far, Kerry's campaign has been lost in Vietnam while "reporting for duty."

4. They treat talk hosts like regular press. Hello? Who carries the water for the Democrats? It isn't the newspapers; it's the Democratic talk media. From having press credentials as mandatory to enter the convention press party (most small town hosts don't have them), to refusing to give tickets to Democratic talk show hosts for a campaign briefing at the convention (because they aren't "press"), the Kerry people haven't figured out who their friends are. They should take the precious little time they have left and invite (without cost) every syndicated and swing state Democratic and independent talk show host on the Kerry campaign plane and bus. They should do this with Senator Edwards (remember him?) as well. They should grant each host a private 15-20 minute interview with Kerry as well as other campaign staff. We are not talking about hundreds of invites here as the overall number is less than 40 hosts. This is a very doable and smart strategy.

3. They haven't used the Internet to get them earned media from the talk media. JibJab.com made a great cartoon based on the song "This land is your land." It has been everywhere. Tons of free 'earned' media on television, radio and linked Internet sites. The Dems developed some great cartoon figures including "Hal E. Burton" and "Miss Leader and Enron Ed." They had them show up at events but not on the Internet and because they didn't get them to the talk media in a form they could use, their efforts have gone to waste. Every talk show host has a website with links, but material that should have been designed so that the talk media could use it has not been developed.

2. They haven't used talk media to help them get out the vote. The 527 group ACT (America Coming Together) has not made use of local talk media. Local hosts have received their press releases but there has been no attempt to woo local hosts by the hordes of Get Out the Vote volunteers. Many of these volunteers have visited the same homes of each potential voter several times but no one has thought to coordinate with local talk show hosts. A basic understanding of the mind of a talk show host would have made note of how most hosts push voting with some hosts not

taking non-registered voters' calls before elections. The Democratic National Committee has an entire talk show host outreach run by savvy Kandy Stroud, but the Get Out the Vote people might as well be on a different continent.

1. They have let their emotions and notions about the "conservative" talk media interfere with reality. This is perhaps their greatest media crime. They have iced out Alan Colmes from getting the big Kerry interviews. Why? Because they perceive that Fox News is conservative. Not only is the Fox News Channel the most viewed of all the cable news channels, but the Pew Center poll found that 32% of Fox viewers identify themselves as moderates and 18% as liberals. Why would you cut out 50% of the potential voters of the largest cable viewing audience? And why if they are so concerned about Sean Hannity getting time for his viewpoints would they not give Alan Colmes the interviews which he could do without Sean Hannity? (Hannity has done a ton of interviews this way including the President, the Vice President and other principals on the Bush team.) It makes no sense. It can take a while to convince Democrats to get on the air with conservative talk media, but during the New Hampshire primary Howard Dean went on Sean Hannity's radio show and he is still talking about what a positive experience it was. He also was heard by many Howard Dean fans who wrote about it on the Dean Blog site. Reality has not hit the Democratic strategists. What can they do now? They can do what the Republicans do: Conference in on telephone the Democratic and independent hosts and ask them for their campaign suggestions. Then they should act on them. Talk media is not only America's bellwether; it is the keeper of the "water cooler" and other communal gathering spots where swing voters come to hear the conversation that persuades them to pull the lever one way or the other on election day. Wake up Camp Kerry! There is still time... but not much.

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