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## When Images Speak Louder than Words

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George Clooney, an ardent supporter of Barack Obama, has reportedly said "I'll support [Obama] in any way I can, including staying at home and shutting my mouth."

Clooney was stinging from the experience of having his role in his father's unsuccessful 2004 Kentucky Congressional campaign depicted as "Hollywood versus the Heartland" carpetbagging. Is he right to steer clear of active endorsements and campaign appearances on behalf of Obama? Are there other ways that Clooney could play an active role in the Obama campaign without risking a backlash from voters?

Clues to solving this predicament may be found in research on the psychology of persuasion. This research finds that the human brain processes information through two distinct systems: the conscious system works through deliberate and logical steps and is most active in processing verbal messages, while the unconscious system works through association and pattern recognition and is most active in processing images, objects, and nonverbal behavior. It is through the unconscious system that images can speak louder than words. Recent studies suggest four important ways in which images can move voters:

### 1. Icons: magnets of meaning.

Central to the visual language of campaigns are icons of our national culture and history--the Constitution Hall, the Statue of Liberty, Lincoln, JFK. Icons, central to our identities and richly laden with associations, act as magnets of meaning in the unconscious mind. Just as inviting a popular friend to co-host a fundraising event draws a host of people from her social network, exposure to meaningful icons recruits a host of attitudes, feelings, and motivations that are linked in our mental networks. Even the briefest exposure to an iconic image sets off chain reactions in our unconscious minds.

Consider the American flag, an icon with renewed resonance post-9/11. Barack Obama was questioned for his decision early in the campaign not to wear an American flag pin on his lapel (incidentally, his reasoning was that he didn't want a symbol to act as a "substitute for true patriotism"). Research on the flag's unconscious ramifications suggests this may have been a wise choice. The flag factors into voters' judgments of Obama partly by influencing how voters think about... *themselves*. Melissa Ferguson of Cornell University found that fleeting exposure to the flag makes people more likely to subsequently endorse traditional American values, such as individualism, and nationalistic attitudes; follow-up studies in Israel and Italy found that subliminal presentation of national flags in a laboratory experiment later influenced votes in an actual election. In her most recent studies, Ferguson found that exposing Whites to images of Americana led them to express ethnic prejudice and negativity toward Obama.

So flags are not innocuous signals of a candidate's patriotism; they are icons that set off chain reactions of unconscious thoughts related to patriotism that can, at least temporarily draw out a more conservative identity amount progressives. Obama needs find icons that have the opposite effect, drawing out more progressive identities among moderates and

conservatives. In addition, because flag symbols are ubiquitous in election season, he needs to stress elements of his biography that more strongly associate him with "America" and patriotic values.

## 2. *Visual backgrounds.*

Icons are just one visual element of campaigns; backdrops are also used to influence voters' perception of political figures. President Bush carefully manages the settings for his appearances, from his now notorious "mission accomplished" landing to the backdrops of his town hall meetings. Can such staging really influence voters' choice of candidates?

Recent research suggests that backgrounds can have a subconscious impact on consumers. A study of online shopping by Eric Johnson of Columbia University found that the subtle background patterns of a web page can affect the tradeoffs that consumers make. When the background pattern featured images of pennies most participants chose a less expensive (and less comfortable) couch, but when the pattern featured clouds most participants chose a more comfortable (and more expensive) couch. Consumers were unaware of being influenced and did not even remember seeing the background patterns.

Even polling place location can have a surprising affect on voter behavior. A study led by University of Pennsylvania professor Jonah Berger found that voters in Arizona's 2000 general election were more likely to support raising the state sales tax to support education if they had voted in schools as opposed to other locations.

## 3) *Campaign signs.*

Obama's image can be seen on signs, shirts, and buttons, available to supporters who want to communicate their support. Campaign paraphernalia is nothing new--George Washington's supporters wore buttons on their coats during the first inauguration. Obama's campaign has been particularly energetic in distributing signs and buttons at political events, especially televised ones. Their hunch that seeing a crowd of peers displaying campaign materials may shift undecided voters is well supported by Robert Cialdini's findings that people rely on "social proof" when uncertain of what choice to make.

What many political operatives fail to appreciate, however, is the powerful influence of campaign paraphernalia on... *the people who display it*. Duke University Marketing Professor Tanya Chartrand asked students to wear a pin with the American Heart Association logo on their backpacks. Two days later, she asked the pin-wearers and a group of students who had not been approached about the pin whether they would distribute brochures on heart disease prevention. The pin-wearers were twice as likely to volunteer their time. The lock in of commitment that comes from voluntarily and publicly displaying support for a cause is the reason why not only campaigns but also companies are so eager to give away objects laden with their logos and slogans.

When people become walking campaign signs, messages are communicated at many levels. As Jeff Bleustein, CEO of Harley-Davidson, a company that relies little on traditional media advertising, put it "It's one thing to have people buy your products, it's another for them to tattoo your name on their bodies."

## 4) *Product placement.*

Because words are primarily processed through conscious, analytic pathways, they are easier to resist than images that are processed through less conscious, intuitive associations. This is why lectures by celebrities on politics tend to backfire (call it the "Dixie Chicks effect"), but a musician such as [will.i.am](http://www.will.i.am) can influence fans by setting Obama's words to his own music.

Anyone who watches TV knows that product placement is rampant, especially in the age of digital video recorders, when advertisers are desperate for ways to reach audiences. In fact, marketing research shows that it has a significant impact on consumer product choices, especially if it is done in a subtle manner. A recent study out of Toronto and Harvard found that consumers were 30% more likely to select a wide range of products and brands--from Mott's apple juice to Tide laundry detergent--if the products were embedded in an episode of Seinfeld. Here's the kicker: although consumers remembered the

product better if it had been seen and talked about in the episode, they were more likely to actually select the product had it been visually displayed...but not mentioned.

All of this brings us back to George Clooney's dilemma. Although Mr. Clooney may be an attractive draw at fundraising events, research suggests that he is right to steer clear of an overt endorsement or speeches in support of Obama. Voters will at best resist and at worst react against such transparent attempts at persuasion. Even appearances in the background at an Obama rally may be unwise as they could reinforce McCain's current portrayal of Obama as the "biggest celebrity in the world." Instead, a more effective way for Clooney to advocate would be through example: by appearing wearing an Obama T-shirt or pin, or being photographed driving a car (or motorcycle, as the case may be) with an Obama bumper sticker. Better still if these include wordless images (e.g., those produced by [008themovement.com](http://008themovement.com)). In so doing, Mr. Clooney can leverage the unconscious visual route to persuasion by exposing people to the increasingly iconic Obama image and turning Obama gear into a fashion statement so that others wear it and become committed themselves.

In other words, George Clooney may be most valuable to Obama as a means of product placement. The ultimate product placement.

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