



The Great Debate

BY JOHN CONNOLLY

Political spending in 2004 will set records with total expenditures approaching two billion dollars. Although we frequently hear about the 170-to-200 million dollars that President Bush expects to raise, this same phenomenon is taking place across the country from statewide gubernatorial and senatorial races down to local campaigns for Congress, mayor and city council.

In this age of the 30-second attack ad, is there a way for newspapers to significantly increase their paid political advertising? And could this extra business contribute positively to the overall quality of our political campaigns?

The Print Debate Project believes the answer to both those questions is an emphatic yes! To that end, we have developed a new form of political dialogue called the Print Debate that will establish a level playing field between competing candidates and ideas.

A major component of our business model calls for us to propose the Print Debate to political candidates in many markets across the country. Another element of this plan is to provide the entire template for all the rules, terms and parameters for the Print Debate to newspapers for no up-front costs.

This debate could take place in either the main body of the paper or as a series of four-to-eight page freestanding inserts. Simultaneous publication of this Print Debate would take place on both the paper's Web site and on a general Print Debate site. As you will see shortly, unlike a TV debate that requires two opponents to agree to participate, this process can proceed with or without an agreement between candidates.

One section of a Print Debate would prioritize and summarize issues. Another would allow for an opponent's ideas to be

answered and/or attacked in a prescribed format. Still another section could allow a pool of reporters to ask questions of each candidate.

What may become a very compelling section within the Print Debate is the 'Citizens' Questions.' As the Print Debate facilitator, our Web site will solicit questions from the public. Then, just before the questions are due, a second phase of this interactive process will allow citizens to vote for their favorite question. This voting will require 'enabled cookies,' thereby preventing a given computer from voting twice.

The visual terms for the Print Debate call for one quarter of each inside page of these freestanding inserts (or the equivalent space in ROP) to be discretionary. In this area, each candidate could use a photograph, news article, government report, graph or any other nontext item, with relevant caption. This will allow an argument to be made or reinforced while simultaneously encouraging a distinctive and visually pleasing format.

Consider a Print Debate when two candidates agree: In this case, say, two congressional candidates would publish a total of three documents each. Both candidates could publish their initial Print Debate documents simultaneously just after Labor Day. Then, week-by-week for four weeks, one challenge document would follow another, allowing candidates to expand upon their previous statements and to respond to each other. A third-party candidate could be included in this level communications playing field very easily by starting the process a little earlier.

Consider a Print Debate when two candidates do not agree; in this instance, the motive for a candidate to initiate this challenge would be to influence the undecided middle of the body politic. To this challenger, the Print Debate becomes a partisan weapon that can be wielded effectively against the campaign favorite, often the incumbent, whose natural inclination will be to reject or ignore any forum that features a level playing field. As those

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Print Debate Documents are distributed, the challenger would stress the superficial approach of an opponent who refuses that substantive debate. Thus, the opponent's motive to respond in kind to this Print Debate challenge would be to head off a shift of momentum in the polls.

This debate would formally create a central and historical record of a campaign that would, in turn, be reported upon extensively by the TV networks, cable, newspapers, radio and other media.

Once it is put in use, a Print Debate could cause increasing numbers of citizens to tune out and otherwise ignore the shrillness of conventional ads and campaign messages. This phenomenon could tend to diminish the power of money in a given campaign.

While televised debates encourage brief exchanges and catchy 'sound bites,' debate in print is better suited to exploring complex issues and presenting comprehensive arguments. This debate might also elevate the quality of future TV debates because citizens would already have a common foundation of information in their hands.

This Print Debate would increase the accountability of leaders because citizens would receive a short series of documents that many will keep permanently. (This permanence is an argument for the freestanding inserts versus the ROP format.) Yet if a candidate prefers to avoid commit-

continued on the following page

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ting to an issue, he or she could spell out the reasons within one of the challenge documents. This orderly and easily referred-to framework would contrast sharply with today's intense and turbulent campaign media environment.

Consider this historic precedent: In 1787 and 1788, the authors of the 'Federalist Papers' and the 'Anti-Federalist Papers' engaged in a 10-month print debate that ultimately led to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. The views of James Madison, John Jay and Alexander Hamilton triumphed over the Anti-Federalists in this deliberative and public dialogue that went back and forth more than 80 times in newspapers of the day.

The average Print Debate in one of the top 50 U.S. cities would cost two candidates some \$300,000 to \$500,000. At first glance, this may seem expensive, but far more meaningful discussion will be generated from this exercise than the same amount of money poured into three or four weeks of TV spots. And citizens will understand that distinction.

In summary, the Print Debate is:

1. Good public policy by providing a substantive debate process that will encourage candidates to compete on a level playing field.
2. A new advertising vehicle that will allow newspapers to substantially increase their share of the political campaign market.
3. Offered to newspapers for no up-front costs whatsoever. (NOTE: Total costs are a 1 percent licensing fee and an optional 1-to-2 percent facilitator fee; details of both are on our Web site, www.printdebate.com.)

If many newspapers adopt this Print Debate operating system, thereby largely standardizing this entire process, how long will it take for these newspapers to capture at least 10 percent of that two billion dollars spent during these election cycles? ■

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