Controlling the Corporation
Mobilizing for Action
Tom O'Brien

"Marvelous marketing combined with the most skillful selling CANNOT overcome a bad product." That sounds about right, doesn't it?

Roger Ailes and Karl Rove respectfully disagree.

When it comes to politics and policy, a large portion of voters are uncommitted and poorly informed. They don't know the candidates, they don't understand the issues, and the right-wing sound and light machine is primed to win their support and their votes.

While our base is important, to win elections and legislative battles, we have to win over independent low-information voters. <u>Since we can't mobilize people we can't persuade, persuasion is the first step</u>.

In a recent Pew Research poll, many of these low-information ***voters*** could NOT identify Mitt Romney as the former governor of Massachusetts. Apparently, many U.S. voters cannot or will not keep up with the most elementary facts -- even in national elections.

Unfortunately, this means that independent low-information voters, who by definition make decisions based on little information, are more vulnerable than better informed voters to being manipulated by a few well-chosen images and catchy phrases.

The work of neuroscientists George Lakoff and Drew Westen show that emotions are fully engaged in political decision-making, even for self-declared independents.

This has implications for how we approach the vast middle to mobilize these voters to join us in protecting the rights of workers, protecting our environment, and in electing progressive candidates.

In The *Political Brain*, experimental psychologist and neuroscientist Drew Westen provides insights into how to approach independent voters. His research makes clear:

- They *do not pay attention* to arguments unless they engender their interest, enthusiasm, fear, anger, or contempt.
- They *are not moved by leaders* with whom they do not feel emotional resonance.
- They *do not find policies worth debating* if they do not touch on the emotional implications for themselves, their families, or the things they hold dear…

So, it's essential that we target our messaging to the persuadable portion of the electorate, and that we understand that persuasion begins with an emotional hook to grab their attention, followed by an emotionally intelligent contrast between candidates or policies.

Campaigns have stages, but how you begin – how you set up the central question or proposition – is the most crucial stage. Let me give you an example in three quick parts.

While the images I am about to show are print ads, they could just as well be web-based banner ads, landing images for web-sites, posters, fliers, or concept pieces for TV ads or YouTube – or all of the above. The point is that the three pieces embody an effective approach to the beginning of the conversation with a targeted swing constituency of the politician with the power to grant the demands of union members. In addition, each ad is a vehicle for the campaign's demand and it's positioning for each stage of that conversation.

I will tell you more at the back end of the conversation. For now, I want you to be low-information swing voters who are seeing these without fore-knowledge of the conflict. I will also ask you to reverse engineer the ads – but more about that later.

First, when you begin, resist temptation! Do not jump head long into your issue. Instead, introduce yourself. Tell your target who you are _and what you do for them_ in a way that resonates for them emotionally. [Prompt Slide 1.
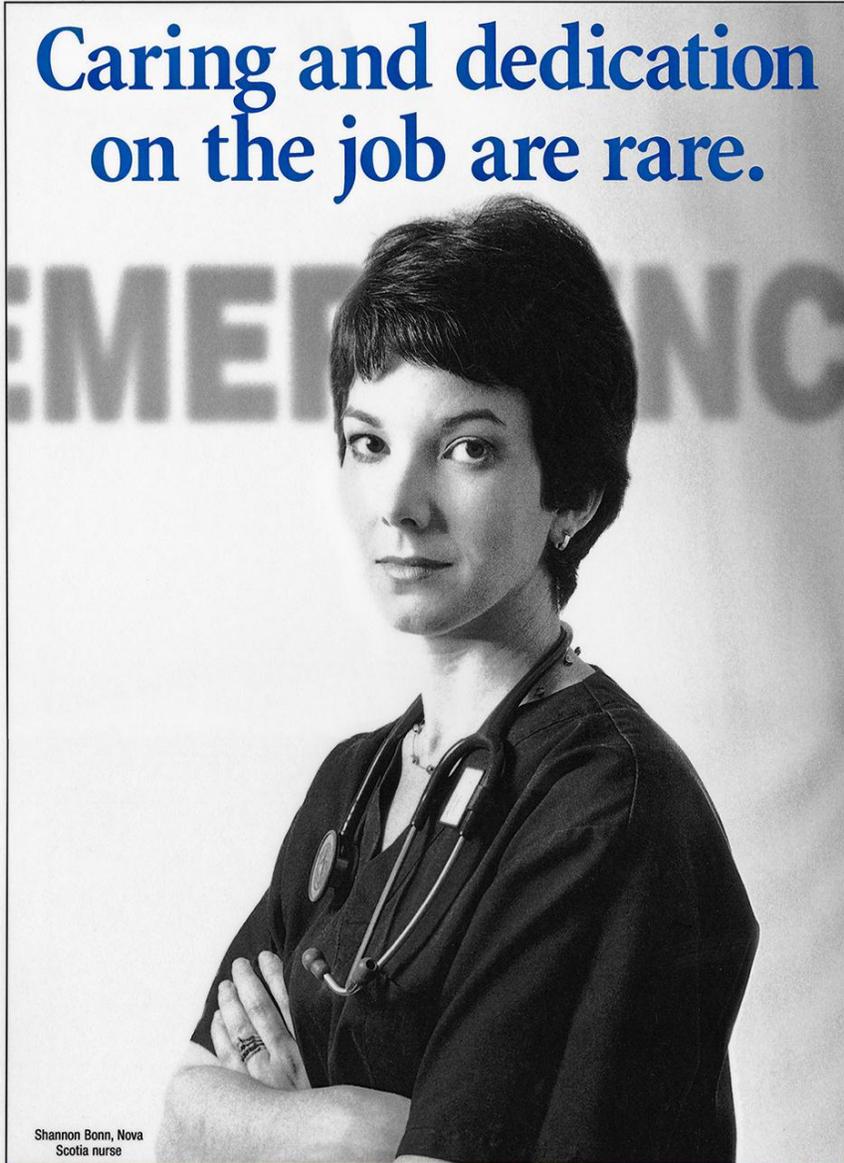
Caring and dedication on the job are rare.

Shannon Bonn, Nova Scotia nurse

BUT NOT AMONG NURSES.

Nurses care. It's just the way they are.

Ending forced overtime and gaining fair compensation for their care and dedication on the job are what nurses want.

They give us their best. Nova Scotia can do better for our nurses.

The members of the Nova Scotia Nurses' Union.

Designed by: **RYAN BURKITT DESIGN LIMITED** 465-8199

Second, present your issue *in an emotional frame that matters to them*. Present the central proposition in a way that resonates for them emotionally. [Prompt Slide 2.
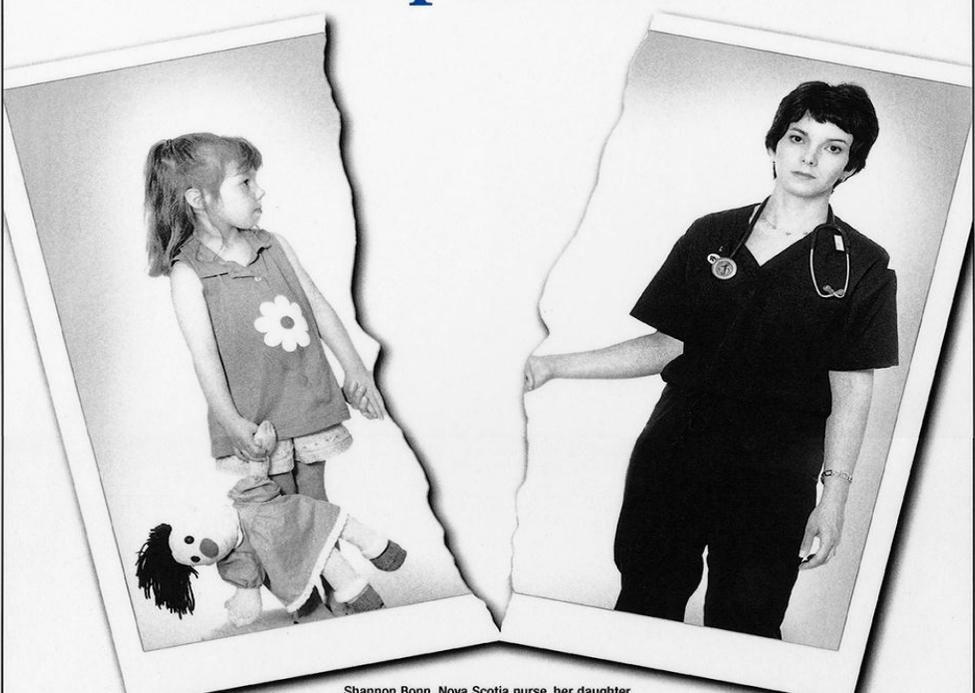
Shannon Bonn, Nova Scotia nurse, her daughter Mackenzie, and her friend Molly.

In this case, the frame is family values. Please notice our victim: a four year-old holding the kind of doll that many in our target audience owned when they were small. I wagered in this ad that the doll (a child's "love object") would help our target audience more closely identify with our little victim – and feel outrage on her behalf.

We invite our audience to join us in making a moral judgment on behalf of our little victim. Why stand with us? Because "it hurts and it's wrong." Simple and direct.

The _proposition_ we made and restate in every campaign medium is to end forced overtime and gain fair compensation for nurses, _in exchange_ for nurses' caring for and dedication to the target, if they should ever need it. This engages the social-psychological principle of reciprocation – for a service which every adult knows, he, she or their family may need one fateful day.

Notice that the headline communicates a complaint that many in our target audience have experienced – our conflict gives them a chance to weigh in on the issue. Also notice the nurses' demand. It begins with a powerful, emotionally-charged word for our target or any woman: "forced." If you are male, like the province's Premier, and you force a woman to do anything (by definition: against her will), you are a bully.

This is the first peek at what will be our ultimate positioning: the victim and the heroic mom versus "the province's number one politician" who happens to be "a bully" in this instance. Also note that according to various polls, Canadians regularly say that nurses are the most trustworthy professionals while "politicians" rank with used car dealers, telemarketers, and – danger! – union leaders. The latter term we consciously avoided.

The Premier of Nova Scotia was a (retired) medical doctor which rates high on the trustworthy scale, but we had a rule never to call John Hamm, "Doctor." Instead we attempted to associate him with his profession, "politician."

Third, frame the fight – make them fight _our_ frame. Define the combatants/message-carriers. Make ours as positive as credibly possible and your opponent as unattractive as credibly possible – from the point of view of your target audience. [Prompt Slide 3.

We can be flexible, Mr. Premier.

Can you?

Nova Scotia nurse, Shannon Bonn, her daughter Mackenzie, and her friend Molly.

LET'S NEGOTIATE.

Ending forced overtime and gaining fair compensation for their caring and dedication on the job are what nurses want.

They give their best.
Nova Scotia can do better for our nurses.

The members of the Nova Scotia Nurses' Union.

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This positions Nova Scotia's top "politician" versus WHO? Please take a look at the figures in the picture. Does this pose remind you of a picture well known in western culture?   Folks, say "hello" to *Mary & the Baby Jesus*.

I wanted our target audience to "feel" this conflict. THIS IS OUR SET-UP. THIS IS THE FIGHT I WANTED TO HAVE.

<div align="center">Voice of Boxing Announcer:</div>

"Attention Conservative Mothers & Grandmothers: In the far corner, wearing the red trunks, the province's #1 politician in a ten-rounder with, in this corner, wearing the purple robes and white swaddling cloth, Mary & the Baby Jesus."

How does communicating vulnerability help the nurses? How does featuring flexibility – and not militancy – help them?

When Bill Clinton's campaign manager James Carville shouts in his southern drawl, "It's hawd for yaw opponent to hit ya when yaw fist is in his face," this is what he means. Carville is not calling for tactical militancy. He's calling for you to hit your opponent in such a devastating, one-sided way that resonates so strongly with his or her swing constituents that they take back their support in horror.

Please listen to Lakoff. Engage story telling in words and images that may in fact touch your target audience much more deeply than we – or they — can know consciously. Avoid your opponents' language and their own stories. Position them to use yours.

Make sure your campaign's overarching narrative has a hero, a villain and a victim that affects your target deeply. The most powerful stories are archetypal – Mother, Father, Madonna & Child, Robin Hood, Joan of Arc, Odysseus, Trojan Horse, cruel Pharaoh, Scrooge, Bob Crachit, Tiny Tim, Frankenstein's monster, Simon Legree, Luke Skywalker,

Gandalf, Lord Voldemort, etc. All of these characters from literature, from fables, and from the movies embody archetypes. Use them – subtley.

Finally, please understand that this speech is *not* about advertising – it is about campaign strategy. Your campaign must have an achievable goal and a strategy, including positioning, messaging (emotional & rational, direct & implied), timing, a timeline, a budget, and planned actions. Our campaign did, so must yours. My challenge to you is to learn from this slice of our campaign and from those to whom I referred above.

By the way, the nurses' campaign – of which we've only presented a small part – resulted in the roll-back of the Premier's legislation that would have taken away nurses' rights and imposed a poor contract. In addition, it won the nurses their first double-digit pay raise *ever* – a whopping 17.3 percent over three years.

In separate conversations with the nurses' union president and with me, the former chair of the Nova Scotia Tory party complained that during the campaign, his phone "rang off the hook" with calls from Conservative women objecting to the Premier's treatment of the "nice nurse and her daughter."

Conclusion

If Roger Ailes, Lee Atwater, Karl Rove and Frank Luntz can get white males making 12 bucks an hour to focus on welfare queens, Willie Horton, and gay marriage *instead* of their jobs, their kids' educations, and their families' health, then certainly *we* can figure out how to get these voters to re-focus on their economic, social, and environmental self-interest.

Certainly we can.   And with certainty, we <u>must</u>.

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[i] For more images and the fuller story, see *Campaigns & Elections* magazine, Tom O'Brien, "Case Study: Issue Advocacy Reaching Outside the Base," April 2002, pp. 46-53