Comedienne Joan Rivers is famous for her patented one liner: "Can we talk?" And indeed, as we hear now almost daily, talking is good for us. In fact, communication has become the chief antidote prescribed for our age. It is the miracle social therapy that solves problems, alleviates conflict, and promotes happy harmonious living.

The applications seem unlimited. Have a problem in your personal relationship? You probably need to work on your communications. Are you responsible for a business that is experiencing unhappy employees? Communication issues probably underlie that situation. And what about the manifold cultural, social and political conflicts that seem to engulf our world? Yep, communication is likely to be the answer there too.

The modern American political campaign exemplifies the manifestation of talk therapy. Today, campaigns are conceived of as "communications systems." Campaigners style themselves as "great communicators." Campaign tactics have become "communications strategies." And candidates are evaluated with respect to how well they "stay on message."

In theory much of campaign communication is supposed to be two-way communication--with voters and candidates taking turns listening and talking. Sometimes this does happen, especially in old style "retail politics" in which candidates meet voters individually or in small groups. Presidential primaries in New Hampshire and caucuses in Iowa are examples of retail politics writ large. Most state legislative races still follow this model, as do most local campaigns.

But in practice today, politicians, especially those seeking statewide offices, do most of the talking and voters do most of the listening. In the trade, this approach is known as "wholesale politics." Its chief tool is television and the political commercials that air on that medium. We are about to witness a record number of them in Pennsylvania as the gubernatorial primary election approaches.

To the cynical, political commercials are mainly object lessons in distorting reality and winning elections. The cynics could have a point here--especially with regard to winning elections. But we are getting ahead of our selves. Let's start at the beginning.

Political campaigns themselves are a series of integrated communication strategies, designed to persuade. The persuasive tool of the day is television. Long ago it supplanted every other way to influence voters. Simple arithmetic makes clear why.

Perhaps a campaign can reach 25 percent of its potential target audience directly with "retail" methods like face-to-face campaigning. But by using TV, a campaign can reach 90 percent of its targeted audience. An added incentive: voters trust television more than any other medium; it's no wonder that selling candidates on TV has become like selling soap, using the tried and tested techniques of Madison Avenue and Hollywood.
Political commercials have become specialty advertising. They are very effective. Careful studies have shown that people actually recall more information from political commercials than they do from the hard news they watch. And it's no wonder. Commercials get tested in focus groups for their ability to persuade, and then get aired over and over again to drive a message home. They get news coverage themselves, even more so when they are dramatic or controversial.

Spots, as they are often called, come in a variety of styles. "Bio" spots, introducing the candidate, are de rigueur in most campaigns. Later come issue spots and the inevitable " comparative spots." Ads can be slick and sophisticated, humorous or serious, and they come in the 60- or 30-second time slots.

They also can be positive or negative--especially negative. In the upcoming gubernatorial election, you may wager that before it's over, the infamous negative commercials will make an appearance. The closer the race, the more you will see. And they will make a difference.

Nor is this entirely inappropriate. The governor's office is a position of trust and leadership. By the nature of the office, character and personality will be emphasized in commercials, as will the policy dimensions of the governorship. Voters will learn new and important information that will affect their judgment, but they will also be deceived. Unfortunately, negative ads make voters dislike politicians and reinforce public cynicism. But they also work, and new research has shown they may actually keep voters going to the polls.

The impact of political ads can be enormous. They can change the course of campaigns, catapulting candidates from obscurity to prominence in a short time span. The now legendary Milt Shapp commercial in 1966, called Man Against the Machine, demonstrates the raw power of political commercials.

Shapp's supporters in the 1966 Democratic gubernatorial primary could have fit comfortably in a telephone booth, when the campaign unleashed a 30-minute commercial (actually a documentary) that toppled the then-powerful Democratic political organization in the state and won him his party's gubernatorial primary. Not just Shapp, but Pennsylvania politicians now had discovered TV. Pennsylvania politics has never been the same.

Since the Shapp era, money for TV has trumped virtually every other campaign need. Money and the TV it buys have become the sine qua non for election to statewide office. With sufficient TV money, some amazing come-from-behind victories have been achieved. The past three governors--Thornburgh, Casey, and Ridge--all started out behind, but were elected by an effective media campaign and TV commercials that delivered the messages that gave them the ultimate victory.

No one learned that lesson more than former Gov. Bob Casey, whose 1986 victory over Bill Scranton is perhaps the state's greatest object lesson in the effective use of TV to influence the course of a campaign. In three previous gubernatorial tries, Casey had relied on local Democratic Party support and had campaigned vigorously everywhere in the state, but could not win his own primary.

The new Bob Casey, managed by James Carville and Paul Begala, dialed endlessly for dollars and limited his personal appearances. He raised the money to match his well-financed opponent and a brilliant media campaign earned him not only a primary victory over Ed Rendell, but also a narrow victory over the popular Bill Scranton.
More recently, no candidate emerged from obscurity more quickly than Erie-based congressman Tom Ridge, once referred to by one capitol reporter as the candidate no one knew, from the city no one had ever seen when he sought the governorship in 1994. Ridge, who was introduced to voters in a popular commercial wearing a brown leather bomber jacket while engaging in almost comical repartee with his mother, quickly became a popular statewide figure.

The 2002 governor's race is well under way. Bob Casey Jr. and Ed Rendell will likely set spending records for a Democratic primary, and when the dust settles in the fall election; Republican Mike Fisher will join the commercial contest. Before it's over, one Republican and two Democratic candidates could well spend S40 million for one of them to become the next Pennsylvania governor. A huge chunk of the money raised (likely 60 percent or more) will be used to produce and air TV commercials.

We could remonstrate against the baneful effects of modern campaigning--the huge amount of money that will be spent, the ubiquitous media presence of the candidates, and the iniquities to truth that will undoubtedly accompany it all. But we all might as well sit back and enjoy it. If you watch TV in Pennsylvania between now and November, you will learn a lot more about Ed Rendell, Bob Casey Jr. and Mike Fisher than you think you ever wanted to know.

But you probably will learn something about them that will be predictive of what kind of governor the voters will elect. You could even remind yourself that when it's over, you are helping our politicians communicate better. Even Joan Rivers might approve.

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