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The Great American Sales Pitch: A Visual Selling Expert Gives His Critique of the CNN-YouTube Democratic Debate

Paul LeRoux, author of Visual Selling: Capture the Eye and the Customer Will Follow, critiques the delivery skill of Democratic presidential candidates at the CNN-YouTube Debates. Based on enthusiasm, gestures and eye contact, he says John Edwards won, hands, er . . . up.

Chicago, IL (July 2007)—If you watched Monday’s CNN-YouTube debate between Democratic presidential candidates, you probably noticed the format was not typical. Generally, debates consist of political questions and answers between a few talking heads. This one—with its video clips, audience participation, emotionally charged presenters and a moderator, who spoke without hiding behind a lectern—shattered the old rules. The results were dynamic and quite revealing. In fact, presentation consultant Paul LeRoux says the format forced candidates to truly “sell” their message to the audience and stand out from their competitors.

“As someone who taught the importance of visual selling for years, I loved the set up for this debate,” says LeRoux, coauthor (along with Peg Corwin) of *Visual Selling: Capture the Eye and the Customer Will Follow* (Wiley, April 2007, ISBN-10: 0-4717936-1-2, ISBN-13: 978-0-4717936-1-8, \$24.95). “All the visual elements—from the YouTube questions to the audience shots to the candidates themselves—kept TV viewers engaged. It was a visual selling feast—one that truly put the candidates’ presentation skills to the test.”

Visual selling is one of LeRoux's passions. Indeed, it is his livelihood. He teaches executives, salespeople and other presenters how to drop the PowerPoint crutch (with its barrage of put-em-to-sleep text and bullet points) and take back the attention of the audience.

When LeRoux coaches clients on effective visual selling techniques, he focuses on three important aspects: enthusiasm, pausing, and gestures. And because political candidates are basically salespeople, LeRoux believes these visual selling techniques should be a big part of their presenting arsenal. Here is his take on the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate:

Enthusiasm

In any kind of presentation, enthusiasm sells. It is the most important visual element of a speech. And in fact, "enthusiasm" is a Greek word that translates roughly to "the god, the spirit, and the energy within you." And Monday night's political candidates had to harness their energy within to make their arguments the most appealing for viewers. Presenters reveal their enthusiasm levels when their faces light up while making certain points and their bodies react to convey certain emotions. Intonation and voice volume also count.

"All the candidates were passionate about what they had to say during the debate," says LeRoux. "They were well-primed and, in general, delivered their sound bites with great enthusiasm. I felt that John Edwards registered high on the enthusiasm meter and seemed to generate more 'heat' than Hillary Clinton or Barak Obama. Perhaps because she is treading uncharted territory as a female presidential candidate, who doesn't want to appear too emotional, Clinton appeared more 'even keel' than her fellow male candidates.

"Enthusiasm is conveyed with varied vocal pitch and volume, with higher volume and intonation on key points. Mike Gravel's unvaried strong volume came across as shouting, not enthusiasm," adds LeRoux. "Christopher Dodd registered the lowest on the enthusiasm meter as his monotone way of speaking really hurt him. And although I wouldn't give him the top enthusiasm honors, Joseph Biden registered off the enthusiasm charts when he said several times, 'Let's be honest here.'"

Pausing

LeRoux teaches his clients that pausing is not an option; in visual selling, it is a necessity. A strong statement has double the impact when followed by a pause. However, pausing can be a difficult art for presenters to master because it forces them to manage the adrenaline increase and nervousness that come with speaking in front of an audience. The skill is even more difficult to display in a debate situation such as Monday's, in which responses were subject to a tight timeframe and candidates were trying to get in as many sound bites as possible.

“During the debate the candidates couldn’t take pauses as long as those that could be used in their speeches, but they could take short pauses that would have allowed them to emphasize certain points,” says LeRoux. “They struggled with implementing ‘the pause,’ and in most cases simply repeated what they had said.

“When Obama presented his belief that the U.S. should think carefully about how best to get out of Iraq, as the current administration used very little thought before going in, he could have made his point even stronger with a well-paced pause,” adds LeRoux. “The same is true for Clinton when she delivered what seemed to be scripted lines on being a woman president.”

Gestures

While it was somewhat difficult to judge specific gestures during the debate because the TV cameras predominantly used close-up shots, LeRoux felt that most candidates were weak in this particular visual selling category. Imagine a specific gesture for “stop,” “hold firm” or “get out” and you’ll understand why a widely understood gesture packs more punch than the generic and oft-used hand-wave. A strong speaker uses a *specific* gesture at least every fourth or fifth sentence. And although they often come the most naturally to speakers, arm flipping and finger pointing are ineffective in emphasizing certain points.

Here’s what LeRoux had to say about each candidate’s “gesture proficiency”:

- **Edwards:** “Again he stood out compared to the other candidates,” says LeRoux. “He conveyed words/phrases like ‘powerful,’ ‘over and over and over,’ ‘everybody,’ ‘move,’ ‘high’ and ‘I’ with clear movements that reinforced and added visual support to his words. When he said ‘men and women’ he raised first one hand and then the other. ‘This past week’ was accompanied by a gesture behind him. And when referring to someone who was present, he made an open-handed and respectful movement of his arm towards the candidate he was referring to or the speaker on the video screen. His gestures helped take his performance at the debate to the next level.”
- **Clinton:** “Her most frequent gesture was one in which her hands were close to her body, her palms were open, and her fingers were spread,” says LeRoux. “To make her points, she often waved her hands in that position. She got in only a couple specific gestures, such as those that accompanied her words ‘bring people together.’ Overall, I thought her gestures were weak and unspecific.”
- **Obama:** “He regularly gestured using an arm movement with his index finger and thumb pressed together,” says LeRoux. “He also used repetitive pointing, a gesture that can make audiences feel vaguely uncomfortable. Traditionally, pointing is viewed as impolite at best and accusatory at worst. Obama was able to redeem himself with specific gestures accompanying, ‘I propose,’ ‘I think,’ and when he motioned towards other candidates as he referred to them.”
- **Biden:** “One thing that made Biden stand out is the firm grip he had on the lectern,” says LeRoux. “This tended to inhibit his gestures; however, he unleashed a couple good ones. Viewers could easily visualize ‘cross over.’ And when he said ‘one year or so to get out of Iraq,’ he raised one finger high in the air, and successfully emphasized his point.”

- **Gravel:** “Mike uses mostly repetitive large arm waving or finger pointing gestures,” says LeRoux. “While these draw the attention of the audience, they didn’t support his message at all. His pointing at the audience came across as accusatory and negative.”
- **Kucinich:** “While not high on use of specific gestures, Kucinich wins the award for the best gesture of the evening,” says LeRoux. “As he said, ‘connected to our defense policy,’ he gripped the fingers on one hand with the fingers of the other, giving those words a visceral reality. He made a couple other specific gestures when he used ‘welcome’ and ‘towards and away.’ Unfortunately, his most frequent movement was an ineffective, up and down chop of his right arm.”
- **Dodd:** “My advice for Dodd would be ‘don’t point and don’t grip,’ says LeRoux. “Gripping the lectern reduced his gestures and created a static image. His most frequent gesture was an ineffective shaking of both hands.”
- **Bill Richardson:** “Richardson’s movements were repetitive and vague,” says LeRoux. “He did use a successful gesture a couple of times when he made an open arm gesture toward the screen as he talked about Darfur or when he gestured towards the other candidates.

“As a group the candidates missed several great opportunities to emphasize their points with an accompanying gesture,” says LeRoux. “Phrases such as ‘raise the minimum wage,’ ‘lower taxes,’ ‘beat down’ and ‘stop spending money in Iraq’ cry out for related gestures, but the candidates didn’t take advantage of them.

“Because the candidates are using their visual selling techniques to sell their ideas to one of the most important audiences of all—American voters—they should constantly be aware of how they are stacking up in the three categories I’ve outlined here,” says LeRoux. “They’re all professionals with years of public speaking experience, but I’d give the same advice to help them improve as I would an amateur speaker.”

Which of the three speaking techniques is most important? Without a doubt, *enthusiasm* trumps everything else, says LeRoux. He adds that based on this criterion, coupled with his high “gesturing” score, Edwards was the visual selling winner.

“If you ever wonder how to convey enthusiasm during a presentation, here’s a simple trick: speak up,” he advises. “When you raise your voice volume, it is almost always read as enthusiasm, conviction, sincerity, and honesty. Secondly, know your key sound bites and pause to give them punch. And finally, use specific gestures to help listeners visualize as well as hear your content. Every sixth or seventh word we say is an active verb. They serve as opportunities to deliver meaningful gestures that emphasize and support your words.”

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About the Authors:

Paul LeRoux, the founder of Twain Associates, Inc., has been coaching salespeople on visual selling for more than twenty-five years. His specialty is rehearsing executives for high-stake competitive presentations, outside funding pitches, and large audience addresses.

Peg Corwin is the marketing director for Twain Associates, Inc. Peg has extensive professional experience in sales and has worked with real estate, financial services, and investment consulting firms. She has held licenses as an insurance agent, securities broker, investment advisor, and CPA.

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About the Book:

Visual Selling: Capture the Eye and the Customer Will Follow (Wiley, April 2007, ISBN-10: 0-4717936-1-2, ISBN-13: 978-0-4717936-1-8, \$24.95) is available at bookstores nationwide, from major online booksellers, and direct from the publisher by calling 800-225-5945. In Canada, call 800-567-4797.

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