

CAMPAIGNING FOR ELECTION

Politicians. These days you have to give them credit for even trying. Their most precious commodity, their reputations, have always been subject to attack. Sociologist Max Weber went so far as to call politics an inherently corrupt profession. And today the situation is worse than ever. Do they deserve such disdain? I hope not, but I suspect that a root cause of this problem is the nature of the campaign.

Too often politicians make promises they will inevitably break. Why do they invite future scorn by making false pledges? Two reasons are fear and tradition--fear of unattainable voter expectations, combined with a tradition of rhetorical exaggeration. The American public is accustomed to hearing outlandish political promises and often penalizes those who don't play the dishonest game of one-upsmanship. Wouldn't it be easier if those running for office acknowledged the realistic limits of what they can do? Of course it would, but the challenge is to be more effective and honest without losing your competitive edge—to be both authentic and upbeat.

Ironically, the opposite impulse to such exaggeration – modest self-effacement – can be equally destructive. Campaigners need to find the middle ground between hubris and humility. These suggestions may help you locate that elusive middle ground:

- *Tell your audience how much their trust means to you, and pledge to continue to earn it*
- *If you make a promise that is a stretch, acknowledge the difficulty in seeing it through, but explain why it's worth the effort*
- *If you would be embarrassed to make a claim in front of your own family, **don't** try it with the public*
- *When your position is strong, you can defend it with honesty and integrity. If your position changes with every new opinion poll, people will be hard pressed to know exactly where you stand*
- *Show respect for your opponent, but don't be afraid to highlight your strengths and their weaknesses*
- *If your opponent makes unrealistic promises, call him on it!*
- *Explain clearly why you want the job and why you're the best candidate*
- *Identify yourself with people you know your audience trusts*
- *Hold "town halls" where you can create a safe environment for audience give and take*