

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2007

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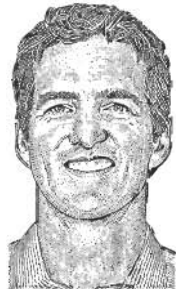
The Spirit Behind Huckabee's Advertising Approach

Media Consultant Helps Tap Conservative Vein; A Tighter Inner Circle

By LAURA MECKLER

CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa—Ad man Bob Wickers's face lit up as he saw the spark he was searching for. It was the last stop in a long day of campaigning across eastern Iowa, and his client, Mike Huckabee, was on fire, preaching the politics of godliness and the importance of standing up for core beliefs.

Mr. Wickers's film crew caught it all, down to the crowd's last "amen!" One day soon, a clip from this speech may be pumped into the homes of voters contemplating the Republican nomination for president, the next installment in one of the least conventional presidential ad campaigns in years.



Bob Wickers

Until now, the spots have combined humor and a heavy dose of religion, with subtle digs at rival Mitt Romney that manage to knock the former Massachusetts governor without ever uttering his name or delivering an outright attack—a strategy that is about to change.

"They're just being extremely clever. When those ads go up on the screen against any one else's ad, it makes the argument implicitly that he is different," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, an expert on political communication at the University of Pennsylvania. "Right now the smartest advertising on the air is Huckabee," she said.

Mr. Romney has been running a more conventional ad campaign, with a series of attack ads critical of Mr. Huckabee's record as governor of Arkansas. Mr. Huckabee first addressed these attacks on the stump and put out a general defense on television.

With the Iowa caucuses coming on

Thursday and polls showing his lead is gone, his campaign plans its first attack ad, aimed at Mr. Romney, to begin airing today.

A variety of factors explain the former Arkansas governor's rise from bottom to top of the pack in Iowa, including his appeal to evangelicals, an aura of genuineness, and flaws of other, better-funded competitors.

Another reason for Mr. Huckabee's success: a set of unusual ads crafted by Mr. Wickers, a media consultant working on his first presidential campaign.

Every presidential election makes stars out of a few political consultants. In 2004, Joe Trippi won a reputation for harnessing the Internet to help his candidate, Democrat Howard Dean. In 2000, Karl Rove's reputation as a political master was sealed with the election of George W. Bush. Should Mr. Huckabee continue his climb, Mr. Wickers and his team would earn similar reviews.

For now, the Huckabee campaign hasn't had much money to spend on commercials—and hasn't spent much on consultants. Through Sept. 30, the campaign spent \$85,000 on a category they labelled "media consultants," well below spending by every other major candidate, according to an analysis of spending reports by the Center for Responsive Politics. Mr. Wickers's share of that was \$30,000, according to the Center.

Aides say they haven't been able to afford any polling or focus groups to test messages before they go on the air. Despite this—or perhaps because of it—their ad campaign has an edginess unusual at the presidential level.

It began with a tongue-in-cheek spot featuring action star Chuck Norris, which quickly became an Internet hit. The next ad, the first to air widely on Iowa TV, showcased Mr. Huckabee as a "Christian leader" and reminded evangelical voters what they don't like about Mr. Romney without mentioning or referring to him. "I don't have to wake up every day, wondering what do I need to believe," Mr. Huckabee says.

Then a Christmas ad may—or may not—have included a subliminal cross in



The appearance of a cross earned extra mileage for this Huckabee ad.

◆ **The Situation:** Mike Huckabee's presidential campaign has been helped by a series of innovative TV ads.

◆ **The Players:** Leading the effort has been Bob Wickers, who is working on his first presidential campaign.

◆ **What's Next:** After a string of positive spots, the Huckabee campaign begins running its first attack ad today, against rival Mitt Romney.

the background, a mystery that generated the sort of buzz a campaign can only hope Santa will bring on his sleigh.

With the exception of the ad featuring Mr. Norris, the spots all have one thing in common: the only voice you hear is that of Mr. Huckabee. "You don't hide a candidate like Mike Huckabee," said Mr. Wickers. "He knows how to connect."

Mr. Wickers, 44 years old, is a veteran of California Republican politics. He got to know Mr. Huckabee through his business partner, Dick Dresner, who has worked for Mr. Huckabee since his 1994 run for lieutenant governor. Mr. Wickers joined the team for Mr. Huckabee's first gubernatorial campaign in 1998.

Mr. Wickers, a Presbyterian and long-time resident of San Francisco, doesn't appear to have much in common with a Southern Baptist running a campaign crafted to appeal to evangelical Iowans and Southerners.

Mr. Wickers says he and his candidate have bonded by a shared sense of both

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faith and struggle. He relates to Mr. Huckabee's hard-scrabble life story, recounted at each campaign stop. The son of a Los Angeles police officer, Mr. Wickers and his sister were the first generation in their family to attend college. Like his client, he had to work his way through school. An internship with then-Sen. Pete Wilson turned into a job dealing with constituent problems in the senator's San Francisco office, which Mr. Wickers did while finishing his last two years of school. After graduation in 1985, he was hired to do political work for California Senate Republicans. Eventually he opened his own shop.

Until now, Mr. Wickers's highest profile clients have been candidates for governor and U.S. Senate. He made ads for Norm Coleman's 2002 Senate win in Minnesota and is working on his re-election campaign next year. He also worked for Sen. Jim Jeffords of Vermont in 1994 and 2000, before he left the Republican Party. (Mr. Wickers says he's closer to Mr. Huckabee politically than he was to Mr. Jeffords, who was on the liberal end of the party.)

One of the keys to the Huckabee campaign, he says, is the small inner circle. Decisions about TV ads are made by a

tiny group: Mr. Wickers, Mr. Huckabee and Chip Saltsman, the campaign manager who had planned to sit this race out after his longtime boss, former Sen. Bill Frist, decided against a presidential run. (He changed his mind after Mr. Huckabee persuaded him to come to Arkansas for a day of duck hunting. By day's end, he says, he was sold.) Mr. Dresner, Mr. Wickers's partner, and Ed Rollins, the newly installed national campaign chairman, also have input.

"When things are done by committee, you tend to compromise," said Mr. Wickers. He suggested that a big committee would never have agreed to put "Christian leader" across the screen.

"Most candidates are risk-averse and are comforted by more formulaic advertising," Mr. Wickers said. "Mike lets you go to the edge and pull back if need be. Others don't allow you to get anywhere near it."

Mr. Huckabee's first ad was a parody spot featuring the candidate and action star Chuck Norris. It got scarce TV air time, but has been viewed more than 1.1 million times on YouTube.

His Christmas ad generated even more attention. In it, Mr. Huckabee declared that the Christmas season should be

about celebrating the "birth of Christ." Then, intentionally or not, the camera pans to a bookcase, whose shelves appear in the shape of a cross. Mr. Wickers denies that was intentional. Either way, the cross controversy was debated and digested on TV news shows repeatedly, assuring that the Huckabee ad was seen many more times than the campaign could ever have afforded if it were paying for the exposure.

Mr. Wickers traveled with Mr. Huckabee through eastern Iowa this month collecting footage for future spots, quietly jotting down moments that might make for good ad material. He settled on a speech delivered early one morning in Manchester.

"Our founding fathers believed that your worth was something that was unique because it was given to you by God, and they knew that these inalienable rights that we have come from that creator," Mr. Huckabee says in the spot, released at the end of last week.

It was exactly the sort of passionate moment Mr. Wickers was looking for. Mr. Huckabee was in the zone. "Thematically, it taps into exactly what I'm looking for."