

Politics On Madison Avenue



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I write about leadership, marketing, women and the workplace.

f **DO YOU GET A THRILL OUT OF** down-and-dirty political advertising? Tune in to Hillary Clinton's New York Senate campaign. If her ad agency is any clue, **tw** we're in for a humdinger.

in Clinton has hired DeVito/Verdi for TV, radio and print ads. That's the scrappy Manhattan shop behind the pro-abortion ads that are rolling out across much of the country for the Pro-Choice Public Education Project. One shows the top of a wire coat hanger and reads: "When your right to a safe and legal abortion is finally taken away, what are you going to do?"

More often, the agency's ads are witty, with a dark twist. A commercial for the men's apparel retailer Britches shows a coffin being loaded into a hearse. The voiceover: "You're going to be wearing a suit for a long time. Dress comfortably while you can."

DeVito/Verdi's clients are often underdogs with little to lose. Even so, the brassy agency has never worked on a political campaign. Ellis Verdi, agency president, admits he was surprised his shop was among those invited to the White House to pitch Clinton's account. But he thinks the First Lady was attracted by the agency's street-fighter reputation. "I was honest about the work we do--that it's strong stuff," says Verdi, 44.

Maybe Clinton liked the agency's record of needling New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the probable Republican challenger. In 1997 the mayor--who's known for patting himself on the back for civic improvements--was irked by a DeVito/Verdi ad for *New York* magazine that ran on city buses, which called the magazine "possibly the only good thing in New York that Rudy hasn't taken credit for."

The agency won't discuss plans for packaging Hillary. But it's a safe bet they'll try to turn her into a tough New York pol. "If you look at our ads you can almost put a comma at the end and say 'or else you're a fool if you don't choose this,' " Verdi says. Creative chief Salvatore (Sal) DeVito, 52, suggests he'd like to make Clinton seem more approachable. "I want her to smile more," he says.

These two are already grinning--hoping Hillary's campaign will vault their eight-year-old privately held shop onto the national scene. After all, Clinton is expected to spend \$20 million or so on ads before November. Vows Verdi: "This will be a brawl like you've never seen."

Knowing Giuliani's thirst for the sport, these guys better start training now.