

Dose of Venom for Candidates Turns Ads Viral

By Jennifer Steinhauer

March 20, 2010

LOS ANGELES — The virtual image is as mesmerizing as it is creepy. Meg Whitman, the leading Republican candidate for governor of California and the former chief executive of eBay, stands in front of a private jet, her lips peeled back from thick gums, and virtually snorts into the camera, “California, let me take you for a ride.”

Anyone who knows Ms. Whitman’s face — or the tangy lilt in her voice — would easily recognize her in this political attack advertisement. But the ad does not actually feature Ms. Whitman at all, but rather a technically impressive avatar of the candidate, talking trash about herself.

A new chapter of campaign attacks is unfolding in California this election season, in which highly sophisticated, fairly low-cost technology is being used to create nasty — and just plain weird — ads and videos that are intended to shock and draw large audiences on Internet sites like YouTube and Facebook.

It began last month, when Carly Fiorina, a Republican running for the Senate, released a Web video portraying her main opponent in the June primary, Tom Campbell, as a demon sheep. It was an instant Web hit. The Fiorina campaign followed up with another video, more than seven minutes long, depicting Senator Barbara Boxer, the Democratic incumbent, as a crazed blimp, floating across the country.

“If you can make something go viral,” said Evan Tracey, president of the Campaign Media Analysis Group and an expert on political advertising, “and make these ads unique, then they get this whole second life.”

The segment on Ms. Whitman, titled “Meg-a-Tar,” has been created as a conventional television spot scheduled to be shown this week on cable stations in Los Angeles and Sacramento, as well as on the Web. The effort is being unleashed not by Ms. Whitman’s primary opponents, or by the leading Democrat in the race, Jerry Brown, but by an independent expenditure group formed by labor unions and Democratic consultants.

Sean Clegg, campaign manager of the group, Level the Playing Field 2010, said the new approach enabled campaigns to reach voters who watch television with a DVR, which allows them to skip advertisements, as well as people who tune out television altogether.

“Meg-a-Tar is designed to go broadcast and viral at the same time,” Mr. Clegg said.

Still reeling from the high-spending and better focused re-election campaign of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, four years ago, the independent expenditure

group is taking early shots at Ms. Whitman in an effort to counterbalance her significant financial advantage over Mr. Brown.

According to the latest campaign filings, Mr. Brown has \$12 million on hand versus Ms. Whitman's \$30.5 million. A billionaire, Ms. Whitman has already spent \$39 million of her own money.

Level the Playing Field 2010 is betting that its anti-Wall Street message will play well in this fiscally embattled state, hence its use of an ad that focuses on Ms. Whitman's use of her private plane while at eBay, and pre-I.P.O. shares she took while on the board of Goldman Sachs.

Mr. Tracey of the Campaign Media Analysis Group compared the new technology to the morphing ads of a decade ago, when Republicans depicted Democratic candidates' turning into Bill Clinton on the screen. "This is a brand new genre," Mr. Tracey said. "There is a playbook for negative political ads, with scary music, but there is no playbook for this."

Nutty-looking ads made on the cheap are perfect for California, said Mr. Tracey and officials on the campaigns, because the marketplace here is huge, expensive and soaked with high-profile news, from celebrity doings to regular budget crises and multiple political campaigns.

"It's a very difficult, cluttered media environment to break into," said Julie Soderlund, a spokeswoman for Ms. Fiorina, whose campaign placed the two videos on YouTube and waited for the world to react, as it did, largely with mockery. "The fact is, the more people write about the Web videos, the more people watch them, and that is the whole idea."

Chris Lehane, a political consultant and co-founder of Level the Playing Field 2010, said it cost about \$30,000 to create the Whitman avatar, and then several thousand dollars to produce the ads it appears in, compared with about \$20,000 to \$50,000 in production costs for traditional political ads. (The estimates do not include the price of buying air time.)

But having independent groups smack around the competition is always risky for candidates, because slime sent flying from the interest groups can end up sticking to the candidate it was intended to help.

Still, Mr. Brown, who faces only minor candidates in his primary, has done no ads of his own, and recently appealed to the California Democratic Party, at a Laborers' International Union meeting in Sacramento, to "attack" for him. His spokesman, Sterling Clifford, said the remarks were aimed at the chairman of the party, John Burton, and "any other interpretation of them has no basis in facts."

Both Mr. Clifford and Mr. Lehane said there was no coordination between Mr. Lehane's group and the Brown campaign. Ms. Whitman's campaign was incredulous.

"They're the result of Jerry Brown's cynical demand that his union front groups 'attack' Meg while he pretends to be the 'nice guy,' " said Sarah Pompei, a spokeswoman for the Whitman campaign. "It's the entrenched and dysfunctional status quo at work, right in plain view."

In the Republican primary, Ms. Whitman is opposed by the state's insurance commissioner, Steve Poizner.

In a recent California Field Poll, Ms. Whitman was favored by 46 percent of 748 likely voters surveyed, compared with 43 percent for Mr. Brown, with a margin of sampling error of plus or minus four percentage points, and enjoyed the support of 63 percent of Republicans compared with Mr. Poizner's 14 percent, with a six-point margin of error.

In contrast to the other campaigns, and reflective of her deep pockets, Ms. Whitman has released very traditional, technically lovely spots extolling her virtues, as well as some negative spots aimed at Mr. Poizner.

For better or worse, said Ken Goldstein, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and the director of the Wisconsin Advertising Project, the new round of unconventional ads plays to the fact that it is hard to get noticed in California.

"There is a lot of stuff going on, between the huge health care battle, a Senate primary and the gubernatorial race," Mr. Goldstein said. "So there is incentive to be outrageous to get through all the noise."