Coming Soon: Personalized Campaign Ads

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NEW YORK -- Imagine: You turn on the TV and see a campaign ad. Your neighbor down the hall, watching the same channel at the same moment, sees a different ad selected for her in part because she's Hispanic, single, owns a dog and drinks Bud Light.

For years, politicians have been using massive databases that cover everything from what you drink to what you drive to decide which fliers to mail you and whether to send someone to knock on your door.

But with new technology that can send individualized ads to cable boxes, candidates will soon have an unprecedented ability to send their images into voters' living rooms while tweaking their voice, appearance and policy focus to match each viewer's predilections.

In short, voters' race, income, marital status and favorite brands could soon determine exactly what they learn about political candidates while watching cable TV.

The technology, built to deliver what's known as "addressable advertising," is not yet widely available, but the nation's largest cable operators have made preparations to change that. The No. 1 provider, Comcast Corp., plans to have the service fully rolled out within two years, according to Hank Oster, the senior vice president of the company's advertising sales division.

Once that happens, campaigns and other advertisers will be able to use their own databases to form a list of households they wish to target with a certain message. Comcast and other cable providers could match up such a list with their own customer rolls to get the right ads to the right homes.

The system is already in place on some TVs, but Comcast is unwilling to detail how extensive its trials are, as is New York-based Visible World Inc., one of the providers of the technology.

It's unclear whether the capability will impact political advertising before the 2008 election, but if it catches on, politicians interested in speaking directly to voters will have a chance to get even more personal.

"In whatever medium we can, we want to talk to voters in as individualized a way as we can," says Mark Mellman, a Democratic pollster who worked on Democrat John Kerry's campaign in 2004. "People are particularly anxious to individualize TV ads in that way because they do tend to be more powerful."

In its simplest application, political strategists envision using the technology to tell an environmental
activist about a candidate's position on global warming, while sending information about the candidate's health care plan to those without insurance.

But the technology could also allow candidates to make more subtle adjustments to their mannerisms, speech patterns and appearance. In theory, a voter originally from the South could hear a candidate speak with a hint of a drawl. A dog owner could be shown a glimpse of the candidate's family with their pet.

Such manipulations are hardly new in politics, but the ability to bring such intensive targeting to television could give the candidates added leverage _ and raise new questions about their authenticity.

"There's so much potential for backlash here," says Peter Kim, who analyzes advertising for Forrester Research. Voters will ask: "Why did this candidate say this thing in primarily Hispanic households, versus this other thing in Caucasian households?" he says.

The degree to which candidates can vary their messages is likely to be limited by an increasingly watchful blogosphere, says Tobe Berkovitz, an advertising professor who teaches political campaigning at Boston University.

"That's the thing about this modern, interactive, blogged, YouTubed environment," he says. "You can't send messages that conflict."

Political strategists themselves are wary of the technology, with some worrying that too many ad variations could dilute a candidate's impact.

"How many different messages does a campaign want to have out there?" asks Will Feltus, who helped target media on the Bush campaign in 2004 and is now doing the same for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

In addition, cost could seriously limit what people do with the technology. Producing multiple spots could get expensive for candidates. And while cable companies are unwilling to talk about specific pricing, the more versions of an ad, the more expensive the ad buy is likely to be, says Joan Gillman, media sales president at Time Warner Cable Inc., the nation's second-largest cable provider.

Tara Walpert, Visible World's president, argues the cost would be worth it for candidates. The storytelling power of TV is unmatched, she says.

"There is no other media that today has both the reach or the emotive power that sight, sound and motion bring to a message. And if you think about what politicians are really trying to do, they're trying to move people," she said.

Time Warner Cable has already deployed one addressable technology in 4.5 million households, including many homes in New York, Ohio, North Carolina and South Carolina, Gillman said.

Advertisers in those areas can design a variety of text banners to be placed over a video ad, then select which households see which banners. The household-level targeting technology is in place, but advertisers for now are usually choosing to divvy up the messages by small geographical areas of up to 100 homes, Gillman said, adding that the company sees the program as a precursor to establishing fully addressable video advertising.
A political campaign could use the banner technology—which allows viewers to hit a button on their remote control to respond to text questions—to poll prospective voters on their opinions, ask them whether they would like to receive a mailing or sign them up to be volunteers.

Still, with so many viewers digitally recording programs and skipping commercials, some strategists believe individualized TV advertising will be overshadowed by other new technology that allows voters to interact with their TVs and computers.

Interactive ads and videos can be targeted to Internet users based on their locations, personal information and surfing habits. Candidates also may ask viewers to select longform campaign videos from their cable on-demand menus. And, technology that allows networks to switch-out ad content at the last minute could allow candidates to respond speedily to opponents' attack ads or to national events.