Weird Vance and Tampon Tim?
Why Some Nicknames Stick and Go Viral

By Gerard J. Tellis

Over the past month, Governor Tim Walz' label "weird" for the Trump-Vance republican ticket has stuck and gone viral. So has republicans' monicker, "Tampon Tim," for Governor Tim Walz.

On the other hand, Kamabla, former President Trump's nickname for Vice President Kamala Harris has not caught on. Neither has democrats' nickname, "convicted felon," for Trump.

For example, Google Trends' data for the word "weird" during the past 15 days are up 20% and are even higher over the week, reaching 28%." Poignantly, searches for "weird" occur alongside "Tim Walz," "MAGA," "GOP," and "J.D. Vance," all keywords in the 2024 US Presidential race. Similarly, Google Trends data for the word Tampon Tim are up …...

Why? Why do some names stick and go viral while others fall flat? Is it mere chance or luck or does science play a role?

My research on YouTube suggests some simple, powerful principles drive the virality of video ads. My summary of research in the social sciences suggests that an entire science underlies why some labels for public figures stick and go viral while others fail. The same principles may also drive the success of brand names and slogans. The following five principles seem critical. The label or phrase needs to be simple, catchy, succinct, rooted in evidence, and resonate with an audience. Succinct means short but packed with meaning. Catchy means a play on words that draws attention, is memorable, or is funny. Resonance means that an audience finds the phrase consistent with its perceptions or long held beliefs. Until that formulation of the words, the audience could not articulate how it felt.

Now let's look at the four examples above. To many democrats, defining The Trump-Vance positions as weird seems simple, succinct, funny, but not unduly harsh. They could resonate with it. On the other hand, "convicted felon" seemed too harsh and not commensurate with the still disputed evidence. Likewise, "Tampon Tim" is short, plays on the alliteration with the letter t, is funny, and nicely captures the governor's advocacy of free tampons in students' rest rooms. To democrats it was heroic. To, republicans, doing so in boys' restrooms seemed a stretch. On the other hand, Kampala, while short and catchy, is ambiguous and not rooted in any of Harris' many idiosyncrasies.

How well do these principles apply to past US presidents? Let's review some notable examples.

For President Bill Clinton, the moniker, "Slick Willie," stuck and slipped into public discourse. This simple, catchy double entendre is rooted in evidence -- his attempt to evade responsibility for his affair with an intern.

For President Barack Obama the moniker "No Drama Obama" caught on because it was simples, succinct, and catchy (rhyme), and rooted in his unflappable public demeanor.

President Donald Trump nicknamed his rival then candidate Joe Biden "Sleepy Joe." The moniker stuck because it was simple, funny, and rooted in his somewhat slow responses, perhaps due to issues with mental acumen.

Abraham Lincoln earned the nickname, "Honest Abe." The moniker stuck because it was simple and succinctly captured his legendary honesty.

Consumers of social media today are bombarded with a wealth of stimuli but limited time to consumer all of them. Communicators need to quickly cut through the clutter with messages that are simple, catchy, succinct, rooted in facts, and resonate with their audiences. Doing so is neither a matter of chance nor of luck but rooted in some well-researched principles. The fruit of successful communication is messages that stick and go viral.

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