

# Marketing Lessons from the Oval Office

By Stephen E. Seckler

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"Take government off the backs of the great people of this country." In 1980, Ronald Reagan spoke these words at a presidential debate with Jimmy Carter. He went on to a decisive win in that election, and in his first inaugural address he declared: "Government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem."

While these messages never resonated with me (I've always leaned left of center), what I have come to realize is that Reagan really *was* the great communicator. More than almost any other president in U.S. history, Reagan understood how to construct and deliver an effective marketing message.

I've also come to appreciate that regardless of what we think of the message or even of the messenger, we can learn a lot about selling legal services (good and bad) by observing the occupant in the oval office (and the candidates vying for that office). Here are some of these lessons.

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## Keep It Simple Stupid (the KISS method)

A lot can be said about Reagan's rhetorical style and why he was so successful in convincing the American public to turn on government. A significant key is that Reagan was able to simplify complexity and not get bogged down in the details. He understood that crafting a succinct slogan would do a lot more than communicating a complex message.

Contrast Reagan's message about government with President Joe Biden's messaging on the second infrastructure package (a package I completely support). Build Back Better has to be one of the worst names ever crafted for a bold piece of legislation. And the bill itself was too complex for anyone to understand. In fact, while polling demonstrated that a majority of Americans supported the contents of the bill (including me for the most part), no one actually knew what it contained. As of the writing of this article in February 2022, much of the legislation seems dead in the water.

What is the legal marketing takeaway? When you are trying to market your practice, your message needs to be simple and memorable.

When someone asks what you do, don't list everything. Pick one, two, or maybe three problems you solve for clients. Say it in a way that is memorable.

Chris Murphy of Scalli Murphy Law in Everett, Massachusetts, introduces himself by saying: "Call me if you or someone you know is in the back of a police car or the back of an ambulance." Saja Raoof, an immigration lawyer in San Francisco, calls herself a "border wall destroyer." Mark Hankin, an IP lawyer in Los Angeles, says, "I protect what you have in mind."



Contrast that with the general practitioner who does real estate closings, divorce, trusts and estates, OUI, corporate law, and bankruptcy. Or compare those taglines to the following description I saw on someone's LinkedIn profile:

I'm a transactional attorney concentrating in corporate, business, commercial lending, and finance law. I negotiate and close joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions (buyers and sellers), asset dispositions, securities issuances and other capital raises, recapitalizations, restructurings, buyouts and takeouts, as well as various types of business and real estate financing (ranging from venture and private equity to asset- and property-backed bank financing). . . .

It actually goes on from there.

Keep in mind that a LinkedIn profile should be littered with keywords so that you can be found when someone does a search. In fact, this language could actually be part of an effective profile. But your headline, and certainly the first sentence of your "About" section—and similarly your elevator pitch—should be short and sweet.

## Repetition Is Effective

Another lesson we learn from presidents who succeed in winning the hearts and minds of their followers is that constant repetition can be very effective. If you take a simple message and repeat it over and over again, people will believe you. Trump's 2016 campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," was easily repeatable (and sold a lot of hats). If you look at the winners of presidential elections throughout history, you'll see simple slogans repeated over and over: "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" (Reagan again). "Compassionate conservatism" (George W. Bush). "Hope and change we can believe in" (Barack Obama).

As lawyers, we are trained to be the smartest person in the room. But coming up with "new material" is not necessarily the best way to be remembered. Putting evergreen content on your website and speaking on basic topics in your field is more important than brilliance. (The only exception to this is when you are trying to hone a highly technical reputation and want to be known as the leading expert in your field.)

Trusts and estates lawyers, for example, can post articles on their website on why new parents need to have a will, set up a durable power of attorney, designate a health care proxy, etc. Employment attorneys can speak about how to effectively terminate an employee. Corporate lawyers can speak about traps to look out for when selling a business.

## Align Yourself with Supporters Who Will Amplify Your Message

Presidents understand that in running for office and in selling a policy to the American public, they need supporters who will amplify their message. Like all other presidents, George W. Bush used his "bully pulpit" to advocate for military action in Iraq. To build support for the operation, he enlisted Secretary of State Collin Powell and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice to speak in support of the action.

As a lawyer in private practice, it is important to build strong relationships with referral sources who will tout your expertise and think of you when their clients have a need.

If a couple is in therapy and it becomes clear that divorce is inevitable, you want that therapist to give you a ringing endorsement when asked to recommend a good lawyer. If someone is talking to their accountant about getting investors for their business, you want that accountant to give that business owner your name as the "go-to" lawyer. If a parent in your kids' class is looking for a lawyer to prepare a will or represent them in a personal injury matter, you want the parents you know to recommend you (because they have seen you at PTA meetings, at drop-off, or on the soccer field.)

## Speak in Terms of Common Interests and Shared Values



Presidents know that finding communities with common interests and values is a great way to garner political support. Many Republican candidates since Reagan have courted the Christian right. But Barack Obama found out the hard way how that can backfire when he made his comment about people who “cling to their guns or religion” (a message that might have played well in liberal blue states but not so well in the heartland).

In building your network of clients and referral sources, look for people who share your interests and your values. See [“Building Your Business Relationships Through Religion, Politics, and Humor”](#) from the January 2022 issue of *GPSolo eReport*.

## Be a Great Listener

Bill Clinton is the president who is probably best known for being a great listener. In the fictional account of his presidential run, *Primary Colors*, Clinton is described as someone with aerobic listening skills. He has the gift of making everyone, even everyone in a large room, feel as if he is really listening to them.

The single most important skill in developing your practice is being a great listener. By being a great listener, you will hear about the problems your clients, potential clients, and referral sources are trying to solve. You will be able to help them solve those problems either by referring them to a resource that can help or by providing your services to them or their clients.

## Hire Great Marketing Professionals

In the Bush versus Dukakis election, we saw how George H.W. Bush used a crackerjack marketing team to tar Michael Dukakis with the “Willie Horton” ad. Horton, a convicted murderer, committed assault, armed robbery, and rape while on furlough from prison under a program that was in place in Massachusetts while Dukakis was governor. During the same campaign cycle, Michael Dukakis appeared in a photo shoot sitting in an army tank, where he looked very silly and out of place. Clearly, Bush’s campaign team led by Lee Atwater made the better choice (at least when viewed solely from the standpoint of effective marketing).

Just because you are a great lawyer doesn’t mean that you are great at advertising. With the rise of digital marketing and social media, there are a lot of choices to make and a lot to know. Choose marketing experts to help you.

## Conclusion

I get great inspiration from watching how politicians get their messages across. While I find some of these messages truly outrageous, I know there is a lot to be learned.

If you want to get more legal work, follow the experts. There is no harder prize to win than getting elected to the office of president of the United States. Be a student of those who have succeeded and those who have failed. It will help advance your practice in ways that will make your career more fulfilling. And maybe you’ll make your practice *great again!*

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