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Winning ways

By S.S. YOGA

Candidates on the campaign trail, especially greenhorns, would be wise to heed pointers that can help them win people's hearts.

WHAT you see is what you get. Unless you are duplicitous, your character is often reflected in the way you carry yourself. But what if you are basically a good person at heart but dress like a bum? Would your goodness come through or would your dress sense put off any attempt to even recognise it?

Visual impressions count unfortunately, especially first impressions. While dress sense is just one factor, there are many others and they contribute to that intangible thing called image. And in the midst of campaigning in Malaysia's 12th general election, politicians and candidates find themselves having to fine-tune their image as seen by potential voters. That is, if they care about how they are perceived and that it will contribute to a successful outing at the polls.



Loud and clear: Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, the Barisan Nasional candidate for the Lembah Pantai parliamentary seat in the 2008 general election, giving full



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attention to what a constituent has to say. Showing attentiveness to the people is one way to win their confidence.

Dolly Kee, director of Image Power and D'Kee Image Power Sdn Bhd, points out that voters will decide who gets their votes, based on many factors. One factor will be the visual image of the candidate. As she puts it, "people buy people first," meaning the impression the politician gives sells itself to the voter.

Image consultant Wendy Ng, founder of Chapter One, says image is about establishing a deliberate and favourable impression to help others believe what they see.

Kee agrees that image positioning is cultivated but it should be done professionally.

"The right image is a combination of substance and packaging. It is just as much about grooming as delivering results. People judge others based also on their words, actions and body language. For new politicians, what voters see and hear from them will make an impact as they have no other basis on which to judge them," notes Kee.

Ng adds that the image you want others to have of you, and the image you think people currently have of you, should be distinguished.

"Most people want to be described as competent, of strong character and integrity, and committed to their work. But research shows that the most favourably regarded traits are trustworthiness, humility, capability, and a caring nature," says Ng.



Father figure: BN candidate for the Bukit Bintang parliamentary seat in the 2008 general election, Datuk Dr Lee Chong Meng, getting chummy with a toddler. Baby-kissing is a regular activity in a candidate's campaign, because it promotes bonding with the people.

Winning ways

All the various factors that shape an image, including physical appearance, are dependent on time, situation and place – what Kee calls, image appropriateness. When it comes to grooming, explains Kee, for men, the power garment is the suit. One can lose the jacket and keep the tie (or even lose that) depending on the setting and occasion.

For women, she says a skirt suit is considered the norm and to feminise that or a pantsuit, light accessories should be used. “You should portray yourself as a leader first, a woman second.”

But Kee agrees that in Malaysia, traditional clothes like the *baju kurung* and *sari* have been accepted as office wear and can also be used. For men, though, she says traditional wear should only be used for appropriate occasions.

Ng, on the other hand, thinks women should not enter politics trying to look like men. She adds that womanhood should be placed first, since it contains different potentials and strengths from that of a man.

“Women politicians should portray a softer image which women can relate to and men will not feel threatened. Having the ‘iron lady’ trademark may be a disadvantage. Your fellow male colleagues will feel that you are a threat to them and women voters cannot relate to you,” points out Ng.

As for colours, Kee notes it should be darker tones like navy blue, brown and the standard black as they give an authoritative image. For an informal setting, light colours will suffice. For women there are more options when it comes to colours. Red, for example, is a colour women can carry but for men it would look really iffy, says Kee.



Fashion statement: What's with that sash thing again? Aspiring

Yang Berhormats should know that the general election is not a beauty contest.

Ng looks at it in terms of image priority, so if credibility is what the candidate is aiming for, then darker colours and conservative clothing is the way to go. But if it's likeability that is the concern, than lighter colours and textured fabrics are perceived as friendlier.

But there are exceptions to every rule as Britain's Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher ably demonstrated. Kee says for new candidates, it is better to stick to the tried-and-tested, as image is an important factor for them. It would be risky to go against the norm, but for established candidates who have built up credibility as leaders, alternatives are viable but it has to work for them.

Body language can sometimes derail a candidate. Kee explains that mannerisms, gestures, and facial expressions have to be congruent with what the candidate is saying. She notes that the electorate can pick up any disparity and will see the politician as a fake.

Being consistent and congruent – this is something politicians have to watch out for, says Ng. “It takes years to build up a good reputation, but a single mistake to destroy everything.”

Kee says that a case in point would be making agreeable noises about women's rights while campaigning, but disparaging women in Parliament later.

All that baby kissing is also important during campaigns and never fails to impress, says Kee. It creates a connection between voters and the candidate.



When in Rome: Barisan Nasional's Datuk Chor Chee Heung sharing a meal with residents in the last general election in 2004. A candidate will endear himself to the voters if he does what the locals do.

Politicians must realise that professional reputations and images are not shaped overnight, says Kee. It is something they have to keep working at. Politicians are public figures, so they have to act as if their behaviour is being observed at all times, adds Kee.

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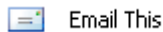
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