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## Candidates are far better than nasty ads, silly soundbites

We are entering the funniest period of the funny season, the last few weeks before an important election for Minnesota and the nation. Not funny ha-ha but funny as in weird and at times downright sickening.

But we have a solution.

Listen to the candidates. Hear them out. Tune in debates. Go to forums. Check out the online sources. Ask questions if possible. Listen to the candidates' own words as they wrestle with issues large and small.

Here's a rule to vote by: if a pitch is not in the candidate's own voice, turn it off or chuck it into the recycling.

We have been listening to candidates as part of our efforts to make humble recommendations in local, state and congressional political races. Candidate after candidate has signed in at our front desk, been escorted up to our offices, plopped in a chair at our round table, been given a cupful of coffee or water and asked to solve the world's problems.

We are frankly delighted.

People who want to be City Council members, mayors, legislators, state officials and members of Congress can speak far more eloquently than the 30-second ads would suggest. They care. They have done their homework. They welcome a good argument and stand their ground gracefully when our questioning becomes impertinent, as it must occasionally become in our business.

This is not an endorsement of a particular candidate but of the quality of Minnesota's office-seekers as a whole, at least as we view them from our perch in downtown St. Paul. They are no doubt on good behavior in making their case to us. But they also know they will face at least a little grilling. We are most impressed with those whose solutions we can't quite buy but who won't back down for our benefit. Standing up for one's beliefs — that's a quality everyone admires.

Here are some things we have learned:

- A politician who takes on a high-profile, emotional issue is often accused of doing so for political gain. But that candidate must also put up with that issue's nutty fringe, which can invade hearth and home in ways we never fully understand.
- Knowledge of what an office can actually do — how to pull the levers and push the buttons to get things done — is as important a commodity as having an impressive agenda of things to accomplish. Most candidates understand this instinctively. A few, we find, seem to be running for king. It's an important distinction.
- The discussion of a difficult issue, such as education or Iraq, will eventually yield an answer, but not the one we expect. It will show us how a candidate thinks, how he or she feels about the limits and duties of government and what kind of heart and soul the candidate brings to the table. We find a lot of heart, and a lot of soul, even though we haven't found the solution to better schools or peace in Baghdad.

We have asked candidates impertinent questions that suggest that they're pulling the wool over our eyes. They do not stomp out in a fury, but stand their ground and argue back. They fight with facts and history and knowledge and that heart-and-soul thing, and even if we aren't convinced, we are impressed.

Now, not every voter can have the candidates troop into their kitchen table and answer whatever questions the voter has in mind. But there are opportunities, particularly with the Internet, to hear the actual words of the candidates responding in real time to important questions.

There are forums and debates and Web sites and even transcripts where voters can see and hear the candidate, unfiltered by partisan hacks or ponderous pundits.

The other main option for learning about candidates in high-profile races — the 30-second TV ad — does more harm than good, as one of Minnesota's most respected politicians, former U.S. Rep. Tim Penny, said on these pages last week. Penny urged voters to turn off their ad-besotted televisions and try to get closer to the original sources. Few of us buy a car without doing some research into advertising claims about reliability and safety; why would we accept such claims unquestioned on behalf of our political leaders?

Ditto in many cases for the glossy attack mailings in local races. If candidate A's mailing deals with the problems of candidate B, put it in the do-not-read pile. Let candidate A get that message to you in his or her own words.

As the funniest part of the funny season progresses, these ads will become dumb and dumber. Candidates will unearth obscure issues and depict their foes as public enemies. They will throw frisbees with their children in sun-splashed yards. They will say, "It's for the children." They will attach stupid slogans to complex issues that could, if we heard them out, provoke them to tell us something really important about how they think.

As Penny did, we recommend Minnesota Public Radio's excellent political Web site, <http://minnesota.public>

radio.org/collections/special/2006/ campaign, where anyone can hear the candidates for major offices explain themselves in their own words. For example: Thursday's gubernatorial debate in Rochester between Gov. Tim Pawlenty, Attorney General Mike Hatch and consultant Peter Hutchinson can be heard, in its entirety, via the Web site. Local cable-access channels often carry debates for legislative and local offices. [Debate Minnesota, whose schedule is listed at www.debateminnesota.org](http://www.debateminnesota.org) is conducting legislative debates where we can hear candidates talk at length about transportation, education and other big issues.

We will be sitting at our round table, going round and round on issues that have no single-slogan answer, being impressed with the depth of knowledge and commitment of Minnesota candidates and occasionally firing up an emotional debate where that heart-and-soul thing comes in.

We'll be trying to spend this election windup listening. We invite you to do so, too.

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