

# Voices From the Crowd: Becoming an Informed Voter

By Miles Wickstrom

I have some bad news and some worse news. Which would you like first? The bad news: 2012 is an election year. The worse news: a veritable tsunami of campaign advertisements is heading our way. Very little of what we hear in those ads will be true. We will hear claims made without substantiation, conclusions reached using faulty data, and assumptions based upon fallacious reasoning. So here's my version of a public service message. You are about to learn the four key steps to becoming an informed voter. Practice this simple four-step process and you will be able to identify what is fact and what is fertilizer.

The first step to becoming an informed voter is to gather information from multiple sources with multiple perspectives. If you wanted to learn more about an environmental issue and the only sources you went to were Earth First, Greenpeace and the Friends of Whales, is it possible to end up with a rather skewed point of view? You bet. However, if you blended in some information from the Wall Street Journal, Science Magazine and the Christian Science Monitor, you are much more likely to produce a balanced collection of data from which a reasoned

conclusion could be drawn.

Finding reliable media sources is a tricky proposition in itself. The days of Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite are gone. Television news anchors today are not journalists. They are entertainers. Their success is measured by their ratings, not by their journalistic accuracy.

Which is a good segue to the second key step which is to question the source of the information. Did you ever see the movie "Thank You For Smoking"? It is a satire about a spokesman for the tobacco industry who travels to schools and town hall meetings with graphs and charts and stacks of data that prove – prove – that smoking not only is not harmful, it's actually beneficial.

Guess where all his information came from? Sure, the tobacco lobby. Again, the movie was a spoof, but it was exactly on target. We are inundated every day with outrageous claims that are made with a straight face. The secret to becoming an informed voter is to find out who is making the claim and if they – like the protagonist in "Thank You For Smoking" – have a dog in the fight.

Willie Brown, the former mayor of San Francisco, probably said it best: in politics, a lie that goes unchallenged

becomes the truth within 24 hours.

The third step is to question our own biases. The trouble with bias is that we have already formed an answer before anyone's even bothered to ask a question. One bias many of us share is a bias towards quick fix solutions, or what Madison Avenue calls "instant gratification".

If you drove to Barnes and Noble, you could easily find at least half a dozen diet books that claim you can eat all you want and still lose weight. Absurd, yes, but they sell. Let's connect a few dots. If millions of people buy diet books, dot dot dot, then how come obesity is a growing problem in this country instead of a shrinking one? The answer is simple - our bias towards quick fix solutions compels us to buy books that tell us what we want to hear.

Unfortunately, what is true for diet books is equally true for campaign promises.

The fourth step to becoming an informed voter is to question the conclusion. Do the facts support it? There is a fallacy of logic known as causation / correlation error. Think of a teeter totter where facts sit at both ends, but there's really nothing in between that connects them. Here's an example: ice cream sales and shark attacks go up in

the summer. Those are facts. Can we conclude, therefore, that eating ice cream causes shark attacks? Of course not. Here's another: 92% of people involved in fatal collisions are right handed. Does that mean that right handedness causes traffic fatalities? Ha! Let's try one more: the price of gasoline is rising. Barack Obama is president. Can we conclude then that President Obama is driving gas prices up? Totally ridiculous, but we've all heard it, haven't we?

I will leave you with this thought. Ralph Nader wrote a non-political book several years ago about the lessons he learned from his father. As a young boy, he sat at the dinner table each night and told his folks what he'd learned that day in math and science and history. His father would suddenly interrupt him and ask, "Tell me, son - did they teach you to think, or did they teach you to believe?" During the next six months, we will be buried in an avalanche of slick campaign advertisements written by some highly paid people who want to influence the way we vote. Do those highly paid people want us to think? Or would they prefer we believe? The answer to that question defines the difference between informed voters and sheep.

## Vernonia School District Gets Tough on Tobacco to Protect Student Health - Youth Tobacco Use Rates Higher Than the State Average

On Thursday, April 12 the Vernonia School Board passed a new model tobacco policy for the Vernonia School District that deepens a focus on creating healthy learning environments for all students. This is important because in Columbia County youth use rates are significantly higher than the state averages—11 percent of eighth graders and 20 percent of eleventh graders smoke and 9% of eighth graders and 14% of eleventh graders use chew tobacco.

Tobacco use can be particularly harmful in youth. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 80 percent of adult smokers started smoking before the age of 18. Younger people are more likely to become addicted. That's why the updated policy now includes tobacco products that are most enticing to students such as tobacco strips, orbs and nicotine and other nicotine delivery devices. The policy also prohibits any tobacco advertising on school grounds and at school functions. It has

been developed to follow state statute and therefore, stands for all campus activities, even when school is not in session or children are not present.

"Nicotine is highly addictive and tobacco carries a mix of toxins and carcinogens. That's why it is imperative to take a proactive approach to keep youth from initiating tobacco use. This means reducing their exposure on school grounds," said DeAnna Pearl of the Vernonia Prevention Coalition. "Data shows that even cigarette 'lookalikes' are harmful because it gives kids an unrealistic perception of the risks associated. For that reason, e-cigarettes are also banned from the campus."

The policy was developed collaboratively with student groups; the Vernonia School Wellness Team and the Tobacco Prevention program staff from the Public Health Foundation of Columbia County. It was informed by American Lung Association's guidelines and a property assessment by students.

"Policy is an important part of

creating a culture of change and help create healthy places to live, work, learn and play," added Sherrie Ford, from Public Health. "The fact that the policy was developed by a true representation

of the school shows how important health is to this community and how much tobacco is recognized as a threat to our youth."

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