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Science & Health

Photo Desk

Small Business

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Golf Guide & Game

Today's Paper

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Report On Business

National

International

Sports

Comment

Top Stories

Cartoon

Columnists

Facts & Arguments

Editorials

Letters to the Editor

Send letter to the

Editor

Entertainment

Columnists

Headline Index

TODAY'S PAPER COMMENT

CPAC viewers getting their 10 cents worth

By HUGH WINSOR

Friday, June 11, 2004 - Page A8

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If you're No. 2, Madison Avenue tells us, you have to try harder. And if you are even farther down the pecking order, you have to try really hard, which is what CPAC, which describes itself as Canada's political channel, is doing in this election.

CPAC began life as the Parliamentary Channel and except for political junkies and insomniacs, has not always been a household name. But that seems to be changing in this volatile campaign.

According to Barry Kiefl, president of Canadian Media Research, CPAC's audience is up 60 per cent over the previous year. The most recent measurement gives it a weekly reach of about 1.1 million viewers, competitive with CTV's Newsnet, but considerably smaller than CBC's Newsworld. CPAC's web traffic has also increased dramatically -- 17,404 visitors in the second week of the campaign, an increase of 90 per cent from the week before the election.

Although CPAC has ramped up its regular programs and added several new approaches, the factor that put it on the media map has been its decision to run a daily tracking poll, produced by a relatively low-profile survey firm, SES Canada Research Inc.

All political parties do daily tracking but in the past, most media outlets have not published what are often referred to as rolling polls, partly because of the cost and partly from a concern about methodology. CPAC plunged in with its daily report, and it now has an impressive stack of press clippings to show how all of the big guys, including this newspaper, have been reporting it.

SES caught the Conservative surge and the Liberals' decline before other outlets. SES also produced an analysis indicating the Conservatives' reputation on social issues is hampering attempts to attract female voters.

CPAC's broader purpose is to build an audience for its other election coverage. While other networks have one broadcast bus each, CPAC has three. CPAC is doing bilingual phone-in shows as well as telecasting a series of commercial open-line programs across the country plus its regular nightly campaign wrap-up.

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Globe Poll

Ontario has introduced a bill to allow restaurant customers to bring along their own bottles of wine. Do you approve of this idea?



Yes



No

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Morning Smile

Q: What cuisine do you get when you cross road kill with a popular low-carb diet? A: SplatkinsPeter D. Pawelek

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Since carrying CPAC is mandatory for all cable and satellite providers (for which each cable subscriber pays 10 cents a month), CPAC boss Colette Watson says she has an obligation to provide services that television viewers can't get elsewhere.

Perhaps the best example of CPAC's unduplicated service is the direct feeds from the leaders' campaigns. Whereas conventional television reports from a campaign event may include 30 seconds of actuality, CPAC may run an hour. A recent illustration of its value was a Stephen Harper press conference last week when reporters, responding to an apparent Conservative breakthrough in the polls, asked him whether he would seek some alliance with the Bloc Québécois were he asked to form a minority government.

CPAC viewers would have seen Mr. Harper respond "you can't manage a minority government the way you manage a majority." He added he would have to deal with it "on an issue-by-issue basis." At no point did he utter a word about an "alliance" with the Bloc.

But that is not how the newspaper headlines and television news stories played it, leaving the impression Mr. Harper would seek some formal arrangement with the Bloc. Liberal campaign strategists then seized on the misleading reports, incorporating them into a negative advertising campaign.

Even if CPAC's only contribution to this campaign (and it is not the only contribution) is to provide a check on other media, cable subscribers are getting their 10 cents worth.

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