

Christine O'Donnell's Extreme Empathy

By Marty Beckerman

She's not a witch, because you're not a witch. And she's you! (Not like you, but literally... you.) This is a strange way to relate to voters, but it might actually work with women, according to Dori Molitor, CEO of WomanWise, a marketing consultant firm that has helped brands such as Dunkin' Donuts, Baskin-Robbins, Healthy Choice and UnitedHealthcare better engage women consumers. We spoke to Molitor about how a TV advertisement that baffles men could win female hearts and minds.

ESQUIRE: *So, has O'Donnell salvaged her campaign from Bill Maher's wrath?*

DORI MOLITOR: Given all the controversy and hoopla in the media, the execution is very calm, simple, and clean. She's attractive, she's articulate, she's charismatic, she's relatable — as a counter to all the frenzy, it's very good. But there's nothing in the messaging that answers the question, "Why are you like me?" She doesn't say what she believes in, just that she'll go to Washington and do what "you" would, but we all have differences. It's a nice tone but has no substance. This was her big chance to set things straight, but all she's saying is nothing — there's nothing tangible or specific.

ESQ: *But she's specifically targeting women with this one, right?*

DM: This is softer in tone, which is probably very intentional. "I'm you" would perhaps relate to women more, because she's obviously not a man. You can see her eyes, her expressions, and feel she's there with you. Women are naturally more collaborative and inclusive when they speak — it's a circular, "we're all in this together" outlook, not a hierarchical pyramid — so she's saying, "let's all come together, girls, I'm you and I'm your voice." She's playing into that one-for-all, "let's do it together" spirit. That's apparent in the strategy behind it. Women gravitate towards that.

In the end, women are looking for authenticity — they won't vote for her just because she's a woman being treated unfairly by the media, or whatever the perception is, because it all comes down to the issues. She has charisma, but that alone isn't enough to change women's perception of her, aside from not perceiving her as a witch.

ESQ: *Isn't "I'm You" the approach that all politicians take? George W. Bush was an Ivy League educated son of the blue-blood elite, but everyone wanted to have a beer with him.*

DM: The boldness here is more extreme. I see this as an interruption, a breather, a moment of pause. If a male politician did this advertisement, men would see it as weak because of their aggressiveness and assertiveness. And because of the extremism in politics now, being in the middle and playing the old game isn't going to work. This will get people to stop because it's so different, which may be her strategy.

ESQ: *Much has been written about how women in politics, from Sarah Palin to Hillary Clinton to Margaret Thatcher, have always had to balance feminine qualities with masculine ones. Is O'Donnell going too far in one direction here?*

DM: That's who women are. It's true that women are more nurturing and intuitive, but they also have strong beliefs and opinions — women take a stand, in politics and in business, and some naturally gravitate toward leadership. It's natural and authentic. But right now there's too much theater in O'Donnell's campaign. She can get past the witch controversy, but first she has to really give people something they can relate to.