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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: Martin Kaplan of the Annenberg School for Communication on the Bush administration marketing strategy of going to war against Iraq

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BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor:

Say that customer research shows that a proposed new product has not reached a tipping point in the public consciousness. What's needed to form a critical mass of support is a coordinated marketing strategy. The product is the Bush administration's policy toward Iraq. Martin Kaplan is associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California and a longtime student of the marketing of both entertainment and public policy.

Marty, foreign policy in the context of marketing--that a bit too cynical of us to see it this way?

Mr. MARTIN KAPLAN (Associate Dean, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California): Well, you might think so, except on Sunday, Andrew Card, the White House chief of staff, when asked why the administration had not been aggressive about making its case to the American people, said the reason they'd waited until Labor Day was, from a marketing point of view--I'm quoting him--"you don't introduce a new product in August." In that sense, the White House is the purveyor of products; in this case, it's of foreign policy.

BRANCACCIO: Bush administration has a problem. Doesn't seem there's a critical mass of opinion, either here or abroad, to oust Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Mr. KAPLAN: Right. And so last Sunday, their envoys fanned out to all the networks. And so on CNN, Fox, NBC, ABC and CBS, on the morning talk shows, were representatives of the administration making its case, as a kind of curtain-raiser to the events of the last 24 hours.

BRANCACCIO: Almost as if they had to launch a movie or some big project like that.

Mr. KAPLAN: Well, exactly. They have to break through the clutter. At all times in contemporary life, we are being bombarded with messages; some people say 3,000 to 5,000 a day. The question is: How can anyone, even the president of the United States, break through that clutter, especially in a context as complex as this one?

BRANCACCIO: Well, very complex because there's a competing story, which was the September 11th anniversary, this week.

Mr. KAPLAN: Yes, and there are the prior competing stories, which involve corporate corruption and shark attacks and child kidnappings and so on. So the question was: How would the administration get through there and, also, change their message? Because, of course, their message had been 'regime change.' It then moved to 'disarmament and the threat of weapons of mass destruction.' And then it had to include the issue of Bush vs. the dissident Republicans, Bush vs. Kofi Annan and the UN. And we had the high drama of Kofi Annan releasing to the press his speech, which preceded President Bush's speech, the night before because even the secretary-general of the UN is worried about getting his message out in the midst of the clutter.

BRANCACCIO: So the UN secretary-general gets the speech out last night, and then it's responded to almost immediately.

Mr. KAPLAN: By President Bush, who in, I think, an admirable piece of jujitsu, essentially embraced the secretary-general and said, 'Yes, the UN should be furious that Saddam Hussein is thumbing his nose at them, and so we, together, must make sure they do what we want.' So rather than being isolated as a unilateralist, Bush joins and tries to reframe the UN's anger as his own.

BRANCACCIO: But any marketing strategy has to have a good sense of its intended set of consumers, if I dare use that term.

Mr. KAPLAN: Yes, indeed. And so now there are several audience who will, no doubt, be polled for their responses. Already the reporters have fanned out to Capitol Hill and to the world's capitals to find out how it played, and I'm sure, in the next 24 and 48 hours, we'll get lots of instant polls and call-in numbers to say how it's playing from Peoria to Pyongyang.

BRANCACCIO: Marty, thank you very much.

Mr. KAPLAN: Thank you.

BRANCACCIO: Martin Kaplan is also director of the Norman Lear Center at USC.