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Obama breaks ground tonight with 30-minute ad

Sen. Barack Obama is going where millions of voters spend their evenings - their own living rooms - when he stars in a 30-minute paid commercial tonight on national TV that will serve as his big media finale in the 2008 presidential race.

The Democrat's unusual coast-to-coast pitch to voters - with a price tag some have suggested is in the \$3 million range - is another reminder that after two years of campaign ads, events and stump speeches, even the closing arguments in this campaign are breaking boundaries.

The Obama ad - part biography, part campaign commercial - will be hard to miss. It will be broadcast locally at 8 p.m. on CBS5 - between "Access Hollywood" and "Deal or No Deal" - and also on NBC affiliate KNTV and BET.

This is the first time a major-party presidential candidate has bought 30 minutes of time for a single commercial on national TV.

Michelle Obama, speaking Monday night to Jay Leno on "The Tonight Show," said it will put her husband "all over the place ... but I don't know what they're calling it."

"This was always a great idea - to make sure that if something bad happened, if there was an October surprise, you had a placeholder where you could ... deal with a game-changing event," Obama supporter and fundraiser Wade Randlett said this week. "But in the absence of that - God willing - you have the opportunity to do what Barack started yesterday (Monday), which is to bring the process full circle."

With just six days until the election and polls showing Obama leading Sen. John McCain by anywhere from 6 to 14 points in national polls, Obama supporters like Randlett say the Illinois senator's big buy on the national media stage is not just a campaign commercial and is not just targeted at swing states or undecided voters. They say it's about making an appeal to all Americans about what lies ahead if he becomes president.

"What (Obama) said from day one, what this campaign was always about was to ... put it in context," said Randlett. "This is about bringing the country together, getting past race and ideology - and getting ready for the hard work."

Bob Gardner, a San Francisco adman and GOP strategist who helped create media for Republican President Gerald Ford in 1976, notes that H. Ross Perot, a Reform Party presidential candidate in 1992, bought half an hour of TV time to explain to Americans how he would "get under the hood" and fix the system.

He drew as many as 16 million viewers for those televised lectures, which were complete with pointers and charts.

But Gardner also notes that as the adman for Ford, "we did live 30-minute (TV) shows in battleground states in the last 10 days. We called it "President Ford's Traveling TV Circus."

Gardner said that in that election - before cable TV and the Internet were widespread - the concept was more simple: "You'd go to Philly and put on a half-hour show with highlights of the campaign. And the emcee of the show was (former sportscaster and baseball player) Joe Garagiola," who served as the kind of "Joe the Plumber" everyman of the era, Gardner noted. "After the filmed highlights, Garagiola would interview Ford."

Obama's effort, Gardner says, can make sense - especially for a campaign that is up in the polls and flush with cash.



"If you've got it, you might as well flaunt it," Gardner said. "I'm sure it will focus on his themes. There will be talking heads ... and 'man on the street' interviews, probably with white blue-collar workers. They'll try to assure these groups that he's acceptable."

Unlikely to make an appearance, Gardner predicts, will be some of the more liberal members of Democratic party, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean, Massachusetts Rep. Barney Frank or Connecticut Sen. Chris Dodd. They might only remind voters, especially those in the middle, he said, of the pressures Obama may face from his own party once elected.

Golden Gate University marketing Professor Michal Strahilevitz says that Obama's big show still "has one potential downside ... it reminds everyone that Obama has a lot more money and that John McCain is definitely the underdog."

Since Obama opted out of the public financing system - leaving him free to raise and spend money with no limits - the Democrat has held a decided advantage over McCain, who has had to pull ads from states like Michigan to stay under his \$84 million spending limit.

But throughout the campaign, Obama has - in his communications and "selling" strategy - managed a more consistent and more consistently reassuring approach than McCain has offered, Strahilevitz said.

While Obama has stuck to the economic issues as central, "McCain has muddled his message more," she said.

"The fact that his emotions seem to go up and down is really an issue when most Americans ... are scared," she said. "And when you're scared, you don't want to be around someone who is. You want, 'Everything is going to be OK; we will get through this.' "

Author and communications expert Ruth Sherman says Wednesday's media blitz by Obama could have some voters, especially those who are facing home foreclosure and tough economic times, wondering, "Why is he spending all this money? It could look like excess, overkill."

But the 30-minute show could also provide an effective platform for Obama to "show who he is and what his life has been like ... so people can understand he's not the elite the other side is trying to portray."