

ADVERTISEMENTS CAN'T HOLD HANDS

This is the story I've been anticipating since August, in which McCain cannibalizes his GOTV resources to buy more ads.

Sen. John McCain and the Republican National Committee will unleash a barrage of spending on television advertising that will allow him to keep pace with Sen. Barack Obama's ad blitz during the campaign's final days, but the expenditures will impact McCain's get-out-the-vote efforts, according to Republican strategists.

McCain has faced a severe spending imbalance during most of the fall, but the Republican nominee squirreled away enough funds to pay for a raft of television ads in critical battleground states over the next four days, said Evan Tracey, a political analyst who monitors television spending.

The decision to finance a final advertising push is forcing McCain to curtail spending on Election Day ground forces to help usher his supporters to the polls, according to Republican consultants familiar with McCain's strategy.

The vaunted, 72-hour plan that President Bush used to mobilize voters in 2000 and 2004 has been scaled back for McCain. He has spent half as much as Obama on staffing and has opened far fewer field offices. This week, a number of veteran GOP operatives who orchestrate door-to-door efforts to get voters to the polls were told they should not expect to receive plane tickets, rental cars or hotel rooms from the campaign.

Because GOP enthusiasm was so low this year (especially GOP enthusiasm for McCain personally), McCain got a very late start on ground game—it didn't really get started until he put Palin on the ticket. That means that the McCain campaign was recruiting volunteers when they should have been IDing voters, and IDing voters when they should have been persuading undecided voters and now—having realized that they not only have to deliver on McCain's pollster's promise that all undecided voters at this point will break for McCain, but they also have steal away some of those voters presently committed to Obama—they're eating their seed corn to try to win this election.

Aside from the problem I've pointed out before—that it's probably not the best tactic to surge your ad spending after up to half the voters in a particular state have voted—there's one more huge problem with this tactic. McCain might persuade these undecideds, at least some of them. But he's also got to make sure they go to the polls. And many of these voters are precisely the kind of lukewarm potential supporters than need some hand-holding to show up at the polls.

But McCain just cut back his efforts to hold these hands.

As I said, this problem really goes back to the summer, the period when (though the press would have had you believe that Obama, not McCain, faced the big problem within his party) McCain had not yet won the love of the base of his party. And, not having energized those people who form the backbone of volunteer efforts in the Republican party, he was forced into playing catch-up this fall. Even aside from the Faustian bargain he made to play catch-up (his pick of Palin turned out volunteers but doomed his efforts to persuade swing voters and moderate Republicans), his basic problem then, and now, is that he has done too little too late.

Let's hope it stays that way.