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If You Can Plug a Film, Why Not a Budget?

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ON a trade mission to Japan in November Arnold Schwarzenegger hired a Terminator look-alike to ride through the crowd on a motorcycle, tossing out promotional T-shirts. Mr. Schwarzenegger then took center stage in front of an oversize poster of himself and made a pitch for California beaches, almonds and wines.

On the cover of the Vanity Fair issue for January, Mr. Schwarzenegger and his wife, Maria Shriver, sat grinning from a Harley-Davidson, afforded the full Annie Leibovitz treatment normally reserved for stars with a blockbuster film rather than a political agenda to plug.

For his 2005 legislative debut in Sacramento in January Mr. Schwarzenegger delivered his annual State of the State address with all the hoopla of a red-carpeted opening. On cue, Ms. Shriver blew him a kiss on live television.

Loosen the collar and add a pair of dark Sama sunglasses at that or most any of his other appearances these days and Mr. Schwarzenegger, the California governor, could be pumping the crowds or charming the media as he did in his Hollywood days at his many movie premieres. They were precision events known for their disciplined messages and artful exploitation of his bigger-than-life persona.

As Californians, and most Americans, grow accustomed to seeing Mr. Schwarzenegger playing the role of governor, now barreling through

his second year in office, it turns out that selling politics is not that different from selling movies, at least for someone as good as he was at it.

Just as the ever-pitching actor enticed so many ticket-buyers to the big screen (even his flops grossed tens of millions of dollars), the ever-pitching Republican governor is luring Californians to his political purpose. His public approval rating is about three times as high as that of the Democrat he replaced, Gray Davis, even though California remains a largely Democratic state and Mr. Schwarzenegger's promises to "terminate" its many problems have not yet been fulfilled.

What seemed a year and a half ago a clever gimmick from his Hollywood days, when Mr. Schwarzenegger announced his candidacy for California's top office amid a string of jokes on late-night television, was in fact the beginning of an almost seamless transformation. In an age when the blurring of entertainment and reality is taken for granted, Mr. Schwarzenegger has gone one step farther, blending Hollywood marketing into his governorship in a way that makes them almost indistinguishable.

"You have to do more than just go and have a little press conference," Mr. Schwarzenegger said in a recent telephone interview. "So the spectacle, showmanship, selling, promoting, marketing, publicizing, all of those things are extremely important."

He started doing this years ago in Hollywood, he recalled. "We did all of this to make the people pay attention, the same as in this thing," he added, in a reference to politics. "You also have to think about how you can sell the policy, how can we get it so that everyone in California at home starts paying attention to it?"

Peter Sealey, a former marketing president at Columbia Pictures who is now an adjunct professor of business at the University of California,

Berkeley, said, "He is marketing the governorship just like he did 'Terminator 3.' "

In 2004 Mr. Schwarzenegger sold voters on a huge borrowing plan, not unlike the one that helped undo Mr. Davis, to solve the state's budget deficit temporarily. In November every statewide ballot measure he campaigned for passed. Now he is crisscrossing the state pushing a budget plan and raising millions of dollars to promote his proposals to base teachers' pay on merit and to let retired judges, rather than politicians, draw the boundaries for legislative districts. The marketing plans for those contentious efforts are still in the works, but it would hardly be a surprise to see another display of politics as show business.

As in his Hollywood career Mr. Schwarzenegger relies on friendly media outlets, uses flamboyant public stunts to attract attention and self-deprecatingly jokes about his relentless selling in a way few career politicians would.

But he may turn out to be "only sizzle and no steak," said Martin Kaplan, the director of the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California, which studies the impact of entertainment on society.

"People are happy to be members of Team Arnold because it is so much fun," Mr. Kaplan said. "But at a certain point accountability sets in. So far it's largely feel-good self-promotion."

Some of Mr. Schwarzenegger's critics see something more sinister. They accuse the governor of using his stardom and marketing prowess to distract from bad policies. Several groups have even hijacked his theatrics; on Feb. 6 a group of them flew banners over his Brentwood home that read, "It's No Party for Nurses, Patients and Students - Arnoldwatch.net."

"The governor uses his celebrity as a smoke screen to what's really happening," said Jerry Flanagan of the Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights, which has criticized Mr. Schwarzenegger on issues that include his decision to delay new rules that would require more nurses per patient in California's hospitals, his fund-raising from "special-interest groups" and his support for higher state college tuition fees.

Mr. Schwarzenegger's Hollywood success hinged first and foremost on the calculated cultivation of his celebrity. Accustomed for decades to working the entertainment media with its softball questions, he speaks openly as governor about the way he looks, what he wears and even his love for the over-the-top. Those are things other politicians (consider John Kerry) have avoided throughout their political careers, but it keeps people coming back for more with Mr. Schwarzenegger.

"It's great talking about changing image," he said, responding to a question about his preference as governor for high-fashion suits (many made for him by Giacomo Trabalza of Los Angeles, who also makes suits for Jack Nicholson and Michael Douglas). "I tell you, for 20 years I ran around in leather," he said, talking about his work clothes. "Now to run around always in suits, it is a wonderful switch."

Friends and colleagues from Hollywood say Mr. Schwarzenegger's appropriation of the marketing lessons of the movie business sets him apart from almost any other political newcomer, even that other actor-governor, Ronald Reagan, who was the master communicator to Mr. Schwarzenegger's master salesman.

IN his Hollywood days, Mr. Schwarzenegger would begin to promote a new movie on shows like Johnny Carson's, then move on to the morning national news shows, celebrity shows like "Entertainment Tonight" and finally local news programs. His interviews were invariably funny, and always about the movie. And he would engage

in publicity stunts like showing up at the Cannes Film Festival in 1993 with a 75-foot blowup of himself to promote "Last Action Hero."

"There is a list of actors in Hollywood who will not work a movie," Mr. Sealey, the Berkeley adjunct, said. "Arnold will. He will press the flesh and do the satellite interviews one after another. The local news team from Cincinnati will ask the same thing that five minutes earlier the Kansas City team asked. It doesn't matter. He will work that."

These days all politicians are taught by their handlers to stay on message, repeating the same graspable ideas over and over, but Mr. Schwarzenegger lived that mantra as a one-man sales team pushing movies for more than two decades, and before that his championship bodybuilding.

"You have to make sure you keep your eye on the ball and don't go on about something irrelevant," he explained in the phone interview, citing as an example interviews for the 1984 movie "Terminator."

"Even though the question was, 'When did you start working out, Arnold?' I wanted to promote 'Terminator,' " he said. "I didn't want to talk about working out. I only had three minutes on the interview show, so I immediately turned it."

The self-deprecation he often deploys is another sales technique lifted from his past life, when he would poke fun at his acting prowess and then promise to make up for it with "action, action, action" in his films. That technique endeared him to many at the Republican convention when he opened his speech by saying: "What a greeting. Wow! This is like winning an Oscar! As if I would know."

"Watching him now and knowing him then I would say people don't change," said Tom Sherak, a partner in Revolution Studios who, as a marketing executive at 20th Century Fox in the 1980's and 90's,

worked with Mr. Schwarzenegger on four films. . "Arnold Schwarzenegger never went anywhere in our end of the business without being prepared."

In another gambit he perfected in Hollywood, Mr. Schwarzenegger sometimes says or does something provocative and gets all the attention he craves. This explains his famous taunting of Democrats as "girlie men" and "stooges." "That's what gets you headlines," Mr. Schwarzenegger recently told the editorial board of The San Jose Mercury News.

John Burton, a Democrat who retired in January as the leader of the California Senate and is no stranger to Mr. Schwarzenegger's social circles (their mutual friends include Tom Arnold and Jamie Lee Curtis), described Mr. Schwarzenegger as the ultimate "pitchman who believes his own baloney."

"Reagan wasn't Arnold, and times are different," said Mr. Burton, who worked with both men. "Governor Reagan had this sincere 'aw, shucks' way about him. Arnold loves to go for the raw meat."

The key to Mr. Schwarzenegger's success in both worlds, said Larry Kasanoff, the chairman of Threshold Entertainment, who worked on two movies starring Mr. Schwarzenegger, is that he knows how to create a buzz. "Be the best and be outrageous" is Mr. Schwarzenegger's mantra, he said

That has political consultants salivating about his future, in which some see a presidential campaign, if a nascent movement to amend the Constitution to allow a foreign-born person to be president ever gains momentum.

"He is authentic and very comfortable in his skin," said Gerald M. Rafshoon, the film and television producer who was President Jimmy

Carter's communications assistant. "This is something we are constantly looking for in candidates, and we are constantly disappointed."

Mr. Schwarzenegger said it all requires a good deal of practice. Like an actor striving to deliver lines "from your gut rather than just from your throat," he said, he works constantly at presenting himself as "real" in his public appearances.

While his wife can read something once and master it, he said, getting it right is more of a struggle for him. When he prepared for the State of the State address, he read the script repeatedly to become familiar with the words ("I still work much harder at English," he said) and to feel comfortable with its rhythm.

"The more often you do something, the better you get," he said. "I come from the world of reps. Remember that. It is all reps."