

timesunion.com

And now, it's back to the usual sponsors

TV stations did a good business in political ads this campaign season

By **CHRIS CHURCHILL**, Business writer

Click byline for more stories by writer.

First published: Wednesday, November 5, 2008

Suddenly, they're gone.

Turn on the television today and you'll hear no references to "Taxin' Tonko," repetitive replays of Sandy Treadwell announcing his support for President Bush, or any of the other political bromides that in recent weeks dominated Capital Region airwaves.

And hardly anyone, it seems, is unhappy to see the wave of campaign advertisements vanish — save the television station executives who got an unexpected boost for their budgets.

"In a big political year, you go in with certain expectations," said Steve Baboulis, general manager at WNYT Ch. 13 in Menands. "In general this year, we exceeded those expectations."

The race between Kirsten Gillibrand and Treadwell was particularly fruitful; the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics says the 20th Congressional District contest was the nation's most expensive, with more than \$9 million spent by Oct. 15.

The advertising push came as TV stations worry about a slowing economy and declining advertising revenue from car dealers and retail stores. The push was so intense, in fact, that it sometimes seemed hard to find an ad for anything other than a wannabe candidate.

"You've been seeing them back to back to back," said Paul Conti, a former WNYT news director now teaching journalism at The College of Saint Rose. "It's been a tough year for the media business. Having that kind of demand is certainly good for the bottom line."

Conti added that political advertising has a benefit to stations that other ads don't: The campaigns pay cash.

"You're not waiting 30 to 60 days for that money," he said. "They come in with certified checks."

Other media, like newspapers and Internet sites, don't share the campaign-spending bonanza. Jennifer Stromer-Galley, a professor of political communication at the University at Albany, said television advertising typically accounts for about 90 percent of a campaign's communications budget.

"Television (advertising) is very expensive," she said. "But for campaigns it's still very critical because it reaches a mass audience very quickly."

Stromer-Galley is studying how campaign spending is moving to online media, but said that shift is most noticeable at the presidential level — and barely exists in local campaigns.

Station general managers declined to say exactly how much revenue the political advertising generated.

But they said this year's revenue came from unusual sources.

New York stations rarely garner revenue from the presidential campaigns, because the state is considered a lock for Democrats. Typically, it's the big statewide races — like a Senate or gubernatorial race — that produce big ad pushes.

This year, though, brought two competitive Congressional races, plus a host of contested races for seats in the state Legislature.

Those races, of course, have concluded — a relief to viewers who'd grown weary of the commercials.

But the relief may be short-lived, because the end of campaign advertising only clears space for something many viewers find just as annoying: holiday commercials.

Chris Churchill can be reached at 454-5442 or by e-mail at cchurchill@timesunion.com.