

Editorial: California GOP needs more than new packaging

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There were two key questions coming into the California Republican Convention in Sacramento last weekend: Would party leaders acknowledge that the GOP needs to shift on certain issues to have a chance of regaining power in California? Or would they take a Madison Avenue approach, and attempt to put new packaging on an old product?

Based on certain comments by party leaders, it appears that Madison Avenue is winning.

Speaking to the Northwest Regional caucus, incoming California GOP chairman Jim Brulte blamed outside groups for suggestions that the party should have an internal discussion about policy positions.

"I refuse to buy into this Democratic plan, which is perpetrated by the media, which is that we ought to spend the next six months arguing with ourselves about what we believe," Brulte was quoted as saying by the Calbuzz blog, written by a pair of veteran newspaper journalists.

"We're Republicans – we know what we believe," said Brulte. "We're the party of Abraham Lincoln, we're the party of Ronald Reagan. We're the party that believes in individual liberty and greater personal freedom and individual rights. We believe in smaller government and lower taxes and greater parental control and more local control."

In other words, no need for the party to shift positions on immigration, reproductive rights, gay marriage, voting access or other issues that have alienated Latinos, women, gays and

lesbians, African Americans and younger voters. All the party needs to do – the thinking goes – is improve the messaging, taking it directly to voters instead of filtered through the media.

To their credit, many California Republicans recognize that new packaging alone won't sell their product. Former Lt. Gov. Abel Maldonado told the Bee that many Latinos "want people to fight for them to allow their grandpa and grandma to have the opportunity to become a legal resident."

Meg Whitman, who supported Proposition 8 when she ran a losing race for governor against Jerry Brown, has now signed a legal brief stating that gays have the constitutional right to marry.

Republicans are also trying to build a "farm team" by electing libertarian-leaning Republicans to local offices. These are candidates who are more consistent in getting government out of people's lives when it comes to abortion, same-sex marriage, medical marijuana and other issues.

The small-government theme is a winner for Republicans, but only up to a point. Voters want California Republicans to succeed partly because they want a check on Democrats – always eager to enhance benefits for public employees and help other favored constituencies. But voters don't want the party of Abraham Lincoln to stop investing in universities, transportation systems, flood-control levees and other public works. Lincoln was a big advocate of public infrastructure – think transcontinental railroad – a fact that Brulte and other Republicans forget as they seek to attach the modern GOP to Lincoln's legacy.

We think that, despite their internal divisions, Republicans have an opportunity to win back voters in droves. But if their leaders fall back on old sound bites and conspiratorial excuses instead of taking an honest look at their policies,

they will only dig themselves a deeper hole. They need to stop digging.