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Bush hires advertising executive to pour out PR messages over Afghanistan

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TOM BROKAW, anchor:

NBC News IN DEPTH tonight. The war on terrorism on many fronts. Tonight, first evidence of an aggressive new drive on the public relations side. The Bush administration has hired a legendary advertising executive, named Charlotte Beers, to try to apply the good old American salesmanship to a skeptical world. IN DEPTH tonight, here's NBC's Andrea Mitchell.

ANDREA MITCHELL reporting:

The audience, the Islamic and Arab street where hatred of America is born in refugee camps and nourished by terrorist propaganda. The State Department's newest weapon, Charlotte Beers, a Madison Avenue trailblazer who clearly is not a typical diplomat in a pinstriped suit.

Ms. CHARLOTTE BEERS: This is definitely the most elegant brand I--I've ever had to work with, and I have a lot of facets of the brand. First it's President Bush and Secretary Powell embodying the brand. That's a pretty inspiring place to start.

MITCHELL: Branding America? Her marketing skill and promoting brand name helped her become CEO of two of the biggest ad agencies.

Mr. BOB JEFFREY (J. Walter Thompson North America): What Charlotte will do is something that really connects with the hearts and minds of those people, because at the end of the day, that's what we're in the battle for, hearts and minds.

MITCHELL: Instead of selling Uncle Ben's rice, now she's selling Uncle Sam.

Mr. COLIN POWELL (Secretary of State): Well, guess what? She got me to buy Uncle Ben's rice, and so there is nothing wrong with getting somebody who knows how to sell something.

MITCHELL: How do you sell America to a sometimes-hostile audience?

Ms. BEERS: I--I dislike that phrase, selling, because that's way too arrogant for where we are now. I think that the best we can do is open a dialogue of mutual respect and understanding. I'd actually be very satisfied with that.

MITCHELL: They know their message has not been getting out, so now Beers coordinates the propaganda war on the ground and in the air. Leaflets dropped today over Afghanistan. And a new tactic, a rapid response team to counteract bin Laden and the Taliban's messages in Islamabad and throughout the Middle East. For instance, quickly sending out a former ambassador to go on Al Jazeera television immediately after bin Laden's latest video.

MITCHELL: And after months of not agreeing to go on Egyptian television, the secretary of state this week defending the war on Egypt's Nile news channel.

Mr. POWELL: Ramadan is a--a very important religious period for Muslims throughout the world.

MITCHELL: But can any of this compete with bin Laden's powerful message of terror and hate?

Mr. MICHAEL SHEEHAN (Former State Department Counterterrorism Coordinator): It's not going to be any easy spin job done by any experts from Hollywood or Madison Avenue.

Ms. BEERS: You know, I'm not as awed by the bin Laden propaganda machine as the world is at this point.

MITCHELL: Until now, no one has successfully challenged bin Laden's message. But now a former ad executive is leading the campaign to make sure bin Laden does not have the last word. Andrea Mitchell, NBC News, Washington.

BROKAW: Up next, with consumer confidence low, automakers are going to extremes to get Americans to buy cars. How can you get the best deal?