The 9-9-9 plan: Old numbers, new spin

Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain has risen to the top of recent GOP presidential polls, in part on the strength of his so-called 9-9-9 tax plan in which he proposes a 9 percent personal income tax, a 9 percent corporate tax and a 9 percent federal sales tax.

Although 9-9-9 has gained Cain much publicity of late, the three nines may actually be a new twist on a decades-old marketing tool — one that prompted former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman to say during a recent presidential debate: “I think it’s a catchy phrase. In fact, I thought it was the price of a pizza when I first heard about it.”

“Consumers have long formed associations over time between good value and that ending,” Eric Anderson, a marketing professor at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management, said of the .99 suffix commonly used in advertising.

According to Joan Phillips, associate professor of business at Loyola University Chicago, our attraction to .99 is a phenomenon known as “the psychophysics of pricing,” in which consumers equate value or savings to a certain dollar amount. As a result, “we perceive $2.99 to be further away from $3 than it really is,” she said.

The numerical pattern of Cain’s 9-9-9 follows the “rule of three,” in which “three is the smallest number of elements required to create a pattern,” Copyblogger founder and CEO Brian Clark wrote in his blog, Copyblogger.com.

“If you want something stuck in someone’s head,” Clark added, “put it in a sequence of three.”

By combining a memorable pattern with a consumer-friendly digit, Cain created a phrase that would stick. A 10-point plan might have been lost on the public, but 9-9-9 caught on.

Loyola’s Phillips noted that Cain, former president and CEO of Godfather’s Pizza, may merely be altering our point of reference by presenting us with something familiar.

“My guess is that he wasn’t pricing his pizzas at $2.44,” she said.

— Ronnie Reese