

# VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS

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## **Advertising For Columbine**

*The message we send to consumers: Be afraid--be very afraid*

Okay, I won't make this a movie review, but I recently saw Michael Moore's new movie "Bowling for Columbine." The film is a study of violence in America, and a culture of fear that seems, in part, to be fueled by media hype.

It's a great movie, and whether you agree with Moore's views or tactics, he makes you think. At least he made me think--because advertising, though not a central culprit in the movie, plays a supporting role.

Has advertising created fear as the primary reason to buy something? Is preying upon that fear the best method of marketing? As advertisers, can we sell our client's goods and services to an audience that's too scared to buy?

Where I live, the nightly local news is a litany of stories about murders, car accidents, robberies, school violence and health alerts. How can an advertiser transition to happy news of "STOREWIDE SAVINGS!" at a commercial break and expect their audience to be receptive?

We preach about understanding consumers' mindsets, but have you ever seen a creative brief that describes a target audience as "scared shitless?"

When people are afraid, advertising loses relevance by assuming everything's OK. Take the recent D.C. sniper shootings. I don't live in the D.C. area, but I really would love to know how gas stations or convenience stores could advertise as if they were conducting business as usual--sending the message of "hey, come in for gas and soda" when people were afraid to get out of their cars.

The release of "Bowling for Columbine" couldn't have been more perfectly timed. In one scene, Moore flashes a montage of reports of the nightly news about everything that we should be concerned about: contaminated food, poisonous snakes, polluted water, killer bees, etc. As if the world was safer and healthier 200 years ago.

All the bad news has a cumulative effect. If you believe what you read in the paper or see on TV, the world is a very scary place. Whether the threat is legitimate or imagined, the fear becomes real. And as ad people know, perception is reality. The distorted view becomes the norm. If you're suddenly afraid to leave your house or pump gas because a random sniper's on the loose, your abnormal behavior becomes normal.

And advertising preys upon that fear. The solution, we say is to buy more--security systems, fences, child safety seats, bacteria-killing handi wipes—to protect against any threat. This, on top of the daily fears of not appearing sexy enough, smart enough, rich enough, or confident enough in the eyes of friends and neighbors.

I think fear is a core tenet of the advertising business. Internally as well as externally.

Look at your agency. Are you surrounded by fear? Fear of ideas being rejected, losing clients (who are also fearful), losing jobs, losing money. So the tendency is to fall in line and not make waves. There's safety in mediocrity. If you speak your mind, or go against the conventional wisdom, you could easily be fired-especially in this economy. Consequently, much of the work panders to the lowest common denominator— fear.

If more advertising were life-affirming, and less fear-inducing, would the world around us feel safer? Would the rest of the culture reflect our positive changes?

“Bowling for Columbine” doesn't have the answers, and neither do I. Unfortunately, I don't believe that ad agencies, ad people, the media or consumers are going to stop perpetuating the cycle of fear, because fear sells. That's what scares me the most.