

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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FBI, CIA, AAAA, and CYA

How both the government and the ad industry play the blame game

Today I'm going to share with you the findings of the September 11th commission.

I'm not a committee member, and as I'm writing this they're still holding hearings, but I've already figured it all out:

- There were a number of warning memos and reports that were poorly written and not specific enough. Therefore, the memos didn't scream for immediate attention or call for direct action, and there was no follow-up.
- Top officials didn't meet, share information, agree on a plan, and then communicate that plan down to the lowest levels— the airport workers, INS officials, border patrols, and even ordinary citizens who could look out for danger.
- No one person will be held solely responsible. A number of people in wide-ranging departments ignored the warning signs, choosing to do one or all of the following:

Make political points for themselves and get money for their departments

Concentrate on matters that seem trivial in retrospect

Punch out at 5 p.m. and go home

- Loads of people are now looking to place blame and point fingers. We're hearing "I told you so" and "It's not my job, it's so-and-so's job." And we're hearing complaints about being overworked, understaffed, and poorly trained. Everyone is covering their own ass, choosing to throw other people under the bus while trying to look good doing it.

That's the way our government works.

In other words, our government works like a typical ad agency.

Think about it: Most of the work we do comes in fast and goes out the door fast. Research is limited. Timelines are short. Corners get cut. Major ass-covering happens. And shitty work often results.

How many times have you heard, "Let's just get it out the door"? And once an ad or a project leaves the agency, it's gone. We foist it on the general public and we breathe a sigh of relief that we never need to deal with it again.

That is, unless someone (like a client or distantly removed CD or CEO) isn't happy with the way the work turned out. Then the finger pointing begins:

"The creatives dropped the ball on this one."

"The AE's brief wasn't tight enough."

"The production artist inhaled too much spray mount, so he passed out and we missed the deadline."

But the odds are, bad work is not the fault of one person or one missed step. Agencies that struggle with problems tend to make the same mistakes over and over again, even on radically different assignments. That's because agency management doesn't take the time to collectively understand how the process breaks down and how it can be fixed. They just look for scapegoats. Why? It's just easier that way.

The advertising world faces a daunting future: Not a week goes by that the trade press doesn't report some major level of client dissatisfaction with the performance of the ad industry.

And, just like we won't return to the world that we knew on September 10, 2001, the ad industry won't return to yesterday's world of fat network TV commissions and three-martini lunches. We'll continue to be pressured to perform, and fast. We'll still have to unearth truths to produce world-beating great ideas.

The doomed ad agencies are the ones that are stuck in the past. Many ad agencies today continue to be managed (and mismanaged) under a structure and process that looks the same as it did 20 years ago.

So if your agency is full of blame games, office politics and finger pointing, try to rise above it. Be forward thinking. You can't change the past. How can your agency be a better place tomorrow? Or next week? Or next year?

Do people in your agency ask those questions, or do they prefer to point fingers and find scapegoats?

I truly hope we'll find the right answers. Because there's a whole load of consultants, PR firms, and other folks ready and willing to hijack our clients' marketing dollars.