

# VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS

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## **Safe, Shit, and Everything Else That Happens**

*Life isn't pretty. So how do people handle advertising that isn't pretty?*

It's amazing that, in this age of warp speed pop culture and instant blogosphere controversies, media events of nearly 4 weeks ago are almost forgotten. But two of them popped up concurrently that are still on my mind.

I'm talking about the movie "United 93" and the Volkswagen Jetta "Safe Happens" campaign made by Those Dudes In Miami. The movie and the ad campaign have quite a bit in common, I think.

When the trailer for "United 93" came out, and when the movie subsequently opened, quite a number of people objected. They didn't want to think about what happened on 9/11, nor did they want to see it replicated on screen, whether they had a personal connection to the victims or not. Even after nearly 5 years, for some people, it's 'too soon.' And it may always be too soon.

Yet the movie has been widely praised, and Oliver Stone is working on his own interpretation of the day. Once again, the machine of pop culture will continue to prod our sensibilities, whether we're ready or not. The media (of which advertising is a component) makes the tragedy a part of the collective consciousness, inescapable for anyone who watches TV or reads a newspaper.

Which brings me to "Safe Happens." Not the first ad campaign to show car crashes, but the spot is jarringly well-made. Too much for me.

See, my brother died in a car crash. And every time I hear about a fatal accident on the news, or see the remnants of one when I'm rubbernecking on the highway, my mind goes right to my brother. I can't change that. It's been 4 years, but it'll always be too soon for me.

Given a creative brief to promote Jetta's superior crash ratings, I don't know that I would've written a TV spot with a car crash. And if I were the client, I don't know that I would have approved the spot. But I'm not saying that the commercial shouldn't have been made, or shouldn't have aired.

Conversely, I imagine that there are other commercials that provoke people in various ways when I remain unaffected. Maybe you have one of your own; even jaded advertising professionals have personal taste boundaries that can be crossed.

"Safe Happens" typifies what many in the advertising business doggedly tout: ads that show "simple human truths." In the case of the Jetta spots death, or the fragility of life, is one of those simple human truths. Which certainly differs from

most car ads. "Zero down, no interest and no payments until 2008," well, there's probably not much truth to that.

On a grander scale, we're just beginning to see what happens when the pursuit of "simple human truths" evolve from silly examples (say, what women really talk about when they go to the bathroom in pairs) to the new 'shit happens, but Brand X understands' examples. While more reality may make for more compelling advertising, I believe the ad industry has a responsibility to not be gratuitous just to sell product. We shouldn't be eager to shove too much adverse human truth in the face of consumers, who get bombarded with all sorts of messages they weren't seeking out.

A constant barrage of simple human truths may ultimately be the downfall of advertising, and our culture in general. Particularly if the messages are more provocative than entertaining. Pay any attention at all, and you'll notice the media pushes one shocking pop culture event after another. And by pushing one shocking ad campaign after another, our industry is following trends rather than creating them.

Will consumers find it disconcerting that movies like "Flight 93" and campaigns like "Safe Happens" hit the culture with intensity and disappear just as fast? Ask yourself: could you handle the intensity of that movie or ad campaign, along with the controversies surrounding them, on a regular basis?

We need to ask those questions sooner rather than later. Because people may decide, for the sake of regaining their sanity, to cut off their media consumption altogether.

And the ad business won't survive if that happens.