

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Wardrobe Malfunctions and Advertising Dysfunctions

Can advertising still surprise people when real-life is even more jarring?

I was channel-surfing during last year's Super Bowl halftime show.

That's right, I missed seeing live Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction, or "Nipplegate" if you prefer. Of course, I saw it replayed many times on talk shows. It has become the primary memory people have of Super Bowl XXXVIII.

So, despite the pre-and post-game hype, and the creative triumphs like a farting horse and toilet paper sticking out of a quarterback's butt, the commercials didn't leave a lasting impression. Hundreds of millions of advertising dollars took a back seat to the spontaneous display of a tit.

Because of the uproar over last year's halftime show and the crass TV ads, the early word is that most spots this year won't be aiming to out gross-out each other. I think that's a step in the right direction, but not because last year's spots were bad.

Simply put: Nothing's shocking anymore. At least nothing the advertising industry can come up with.

I mention this because of the spec Volkswagen Polo TV spot that made the rounds last week—mentioned on blogs in addition to landing in my e-mail box. In the spot, a would-be suicide bomber pulls up to an outdoor café in a VW, and then, from a POV across the street, we see an explosion confined to inside the car—the bomber dies, but the VW survives intact. "Small but Tough" is the payoff tagline.

When I first saw it, I just didn't have much of a reaction beyond a nonchalant "Oh that's kinda clever." While it's possible a small QuickTime movie diminishes the impact of the spot, I just didn't find an ad poking fun of a suicide bomber all that funny. But I also didn't find it shocking, offensive or in bad taste. No, my reaction was worse:

I simply wasn't affected.

The ad guy in me says it's because years of flipping through award shows annuals mean I see fewer and fewer ideas that are truly original, provocative, or stimulating. But the human in me has a different take. I've become desensitized--my brain numbed over constant exposure to real-time tsunami footage, a mudslide, a few Amber Alerts, a lingering war, basketball players who punch out fans, Paris Hilton's scandals and Fox's "Who's Your Daddy?"

And even though I've got my own problems to deal with, these events invade my senses—because I am a reader of magazines, a viewer of TV, a surfer of the Internet. Which means I am a prime target for many advertisers and their messages.

So when Mother Nature is the one that's pushing the envelope, and real world events are happening outside the box, what the hell is so edgy about advertising?

Our industry is facing a time where commanding an audience's attention will require more than simply making ads that are shocking or outrageous. No, I'm not suggesting a move towards dull or milquetoast work. But we might need to redefine what constitutes cutting-edge work. Maybe writing ads with intelligence can be considered pushing the envelope. Or maybe telling the truth will now be viewed as edgy.

Still, I'm looking forward to seeing what this year's Super Bowl brings us. We'll see some funny ads, some clever ads, maybe some gross ads. But we may not recall them a week later if reality proves to be more memorable.

Oh, you want memorable? The next time you're told to push an idea farther to make it truly "breakthrough," rip your Creative Director's shirt and expose a nipple. That'll cut through the clutter for sure.