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Strike the Pose

Is advertising's angst for real, or just for show?

There's much talk of fear in America, but in certain circles, it seems to more closely resemble angst. Comedians profess concern about being funny. Studio executives worry about what kind of movies to make. And advertisers and agencies say they're no longer sure how to sell.

Microsoft changed its Windows XP tagline from "Prepare to fly" to "Yes you can." Abercrombie & Fitch pulled the plug on a racy catalog. Coca-Cola scrapped its relatively new theme, "Life tastes good." (How about "Death tastes bad" instead?)

On the other hand, American Express is running TV spots gingerly celebrating New York's return to normalcy. And a laundry-soap marketer is going ahead with its plan for a mass-mailed sampling of its fine white powdery product. America's detergent manufacturers will not be cowed! Maybe they can cross-promote with Playtex gloves.

So, what's the right approach?

I understand Microsoft's concern. I can already hear the "Prepare to die" cracks. And I see Abercrombie's point—women are dressing more

conservatively, we're told, the better for scrambling over rubble, so why advertise risqué pre-attack clothing?

But what's the deal with Coke? Does life taste less good now?

A week after the attacks, my 8-year-old daughter signed a memorial book at the Museum of the City of New York. Her inscription: "I am sad for all the people who died, but I am glad I am alive." Crudely stated, perhaps, but one can't argue with the sentiment. Life does taste good. One could argue it tastes better than ever.

Grey's top creative, Steve Novick, recently opined in these pages that advertisers now need to find "an honest, fundamental, emotional link to your brand, and develop it." True, but wasn't it true before Sept. 11? It's been clear for some time that, say, shooting gerbils out of a cannon was fun and attention-getting but no substitute for a more resonant message.

Now, there are certainly reasons to be cautious. Old lines and images can take on new meaning today. I was reminded of this while watching *Ghostbusters* recently. Explosions and flames shooting from the top of

a tall building, debris raining down, a police car destroyed in the chaos—where have I seen this recently?

I also recently stumbled upon an American Airlines print ad showing a plane in flight and the line, "Now there's more room than ever inside." I assume they meant legroom, not unsold seats. And a billboard for Maker's Mark near ground zero carries this unfortunate headline: "A hit from way off Broadway."

But at least some of the newfound concern about offending sensibilities is, well, posturing. Fretting in public—whether you're a performer or a marketer—may go some way toward showing your heart is in the right place, whether it is or not. Grapple visibly with the question of whether mindless action films are appropriate, then put out another mindless action film. See how it works?

What lessons have we actually learned? Advertisers need to be sensitive to audiences' needs and to the general mood and present their value proposition in a way that's compelling.

Hmm. Remind me again what's new about the post-Sept. 11 world? ■