

No Apologies

APPARENTLY SENDING THE MESSAGE that work-related accidents are unacceptable has struck some as, well, unacceptable. Not so much the message, to be fair, but the graphic vehicle for delivering these unpleasant truths.



ANGELA STELMAKOWICH

There's much buzz about television commercials released by Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) — and some of it not all that kind. The spots are uncompromising, explicit and, at times, stomach-churning.

The current offerings hit a number of "scary" workplace accidents: a busted safety harness and an exploding tank that send a worker plummeting, landing with a crash the viewer can only surmise is the sound made by a battered, if not dead, body; a pipe thrust through the chest of a now-bloodied worker; and the would-be bride, her face doused by boiling grease, replacing all that fresh and pretty with the inevitability of future skin grafts.

That's my favourite. It may be the image of hands daring not to touch a face that threatens to peel away beneath the lightest contact; it may be the screaming that stays with you long after the commercial has silently moved on to the next.

In years past, my "favourite" was the simple image of a worker's convulsive hand, the outcome of an electrical contact, with raw power declared the victor.

The WSIB's approach is enough to set some faces to wince and minds to close. But would peeling skin, a crumpled body or an impaled chest ever be anything but horrific?

Work-related accidents are messy, costly things that leave lasting marks. Anything that dumps them down to pretty things up seems to be somewhat condescending, a bit of "there-there" that is a disservice to workplace realities that we may not want to think about — but really should.

Workplace injury or death is completely unacceptable, completely upsetting. So why not be up front about it?

Showing the aftermath as realistically as fictitious depiction allows should not be viewed as "too much," "too graphic" or "too insensitive."

The WSIB remains steadfast in the face of some unkind cuts, its conviction clear and confident. No apologies are warranted, and none appear to be forthcoming.

Putting the fear into someone through upsetting images seems to be catching on. And the focus on shock and hard visuals may have found a comfortable home with young or soon-to-be workers — those who will serve as the future work force.

WorkSafeBC is posting accident videos on YouTube to get this new generation thinking seriously about workplace safety. It may be animation, re-enactments or recreation, but everything from the fall from a tree to fingers lost to a dough machine happened to someone — for real.

No apologies also from three workers' compensation bodies in Atlantic Canada, when they ran a graphic television campaign in 2006. Each seemed to believe commercials depicting the aftermath of limbs mangled in a warehouse fall or an upper body crushed by a fallen forklift were "A-OK" for driving home the message that workplace health and safety really is a worthy goal.

Graphic images, complete with emotional impact, were regarded as a means to combat the view from 61 per cent of poll respondents in Atlantic Canada who believed that workplace injury is inevitable, just a part of life.

Don't like it? Don't watch. Complacency is the enemy, not tough-to-take images.

Leave closed minds at the door. They're blocking constructive emotions that can be channelled into much-needed action and change on the workplace front.

No matter how upsetting the image, how distressing the thought, how unnerving the scream, stories need to be told. They don't all have happy endings. Time to put that fairy tale to bed.

Split, splatter or crush — whatever gets the job done. Bring it on.

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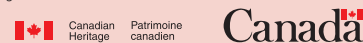
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