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What are the Right and Wrong ways to Commemorate September 11th?

By Holly Epstein Ojalvo

As the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 approaches, people organizations and institutions are gearing up to commemorate it. The question is, how? Where's the line between respectful remembrance and insensitive opportunism? When are tributes meaningful and when are they excessive?

For years, Madison Avenue steered clear of events that marked the anniversary of 9/11, anxious that any participation could be perceived as exploitive. As the 10th anniversary nears, however, marketers, media companies and advertising agencies are changing course, involving themselves with sponsorships, screenings, fund-raisers, programming and other highly visible activities.

Those taking part include American Express, AT&T, Best Buy, CBS, Chrysler, Clear Channel, Condé Nast, Discovery Communications, General Motors, Google, Home Depot, National Geographic, Time Warner, Verizon and The New York Times, which is publishing a commemorative section.

They say they are being particularly careful to be conscious of the meaning of Sept. 11, 2001, and avoid anything that could be deemed tasteless or crass.

But experts wonder whether the public will be able to draw a firm line between a television special and a 9/11 memorial drink; between commemorative publications and replicas of the Twin Towers that light up in red, white and blue; between advertisements asking for donations and ads for a health club offering first responders discount rates that expire on Sept. 11.

"We've been saying to people, there's probably no right way to do this," said J. Walker Smith, executive chairman at the Futures Company consultancy, which is to release this month a report on public attitudes toward 9/11.

"If I were a marketer, I would let the moment pass," Mr. Smith said. "Anything you do could be seen as self-serving or disrespectful."

"On one level, you want to convey a sense of empathy and patriotism," Ms. Salzman said. "On another level, there's a belief that every milestone in American history has been turned into a marketing opportunity." "This is a subject none of us wants to think of as commercial," said Pamela Maffei McCarthy, deputy editor of The New Yorker. "The main thing is for something like this to feel authentic and organic" rather than a sales pitch from giant corporations, Ms. Senecal said.

Joe Daniels, president of the memorial, said he was "not overly worried" that the public would look upon all the coming marketing and media activity as inappropriate. "The vast majority of people involved are trying to do the right thing," Mr. Daniels said, adding that the campaign for the memorial ought to resonate because it uses "authentic voices of people connected to the events to speak to the fact that 9/11 touched all of us."