

## **Authenticating the Brand: a Miracle Far Beyond the Capacity of an Ad Campaign - By David Lemley**

It was Abraham Lincoln who said, "How many legs does a dog have if you count the tail? Four, calling the tail a leg doesn't make it a leg." Human beings need ways to create meaning in an effort to define themselves in today's world of hyper-choice. In our increasingly get it now, Photoshop the cheekbones and work out the details later world, we the people, are desperately seeking Reality, Truth and Authenticity.

In their book, *The Experience Economy, Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage*, Joe Pine and James Gilmore teach us that everything has become a service because availability and quality are not supposed to be issues anymore. I love these guys! Joe was kind enough to send me the first chapter of their new book, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. It's a timely read, as the experiences we choose to allow into our lives become distinctive markers of our own self-identification. If we align ourselves with experiences that are inherently false, untrue and disingenuous, then we naturally conclude that we ourselves have similar qualities.

**The truth:** Transparent brands that create meaningful customer experiences end up gaining market share while spending less on paid media than any advertising agency would like. The secret: time, a ton of vision and integrity. I have seen arguments that this movement is based somewhat on the power consumer, who wants to be as extreme with their health as they are with outdoor sports. However, having worked hundreds of days with the folks at REI, I can tell you this: everyone, regardless of lifestyle, is sick of the lies. It is not exclusive to Richard Florida's "Creative Class Hipster Doofi" (plural of Hipster Doofus) who are flooding cities like Seattle, Portland and San Diego to soak up the active lifestyle. Rather, it's a natural, human response, after being lied to so many times, to believe that nothing is real until it proves itself.

Message to Brand Owners: quit with the false promises or wither away in the next few years as The Experience Economy comes into full bloom.

### **A formula for Authenticity: Think Different in the Third Place?**

I know, I know, one more catchy insight about Starbucks and Apple is enough to make you hurl Frapuccino onto your iPhone. But I cannot help myself, because there is a formula: Authenticity.

The reason Brands like Apple and Starbucks have established loyal followers is that they are who they say they are. You experience what they say you will experience. Everything else, from in-store merchandising and signing, to R&D, to HR, to advertising, exists to help authenticate the experience. Category leadership oozes from these benchmark Brands because their followers believe the promise. They believe, not because of the advertising, but because they are living the promised experience. It helps them to find meaning in their lives. In the over-Branded world of promises upon promises, these Brands are seen as authentic by their cult. Authenticity is merely doing what you say and/or cleaning up any mistakes with honesty and humility.

### **Let's be different, Together**

The idea of belonging to something is such an underestimated idea in marketing. It's time for all of us, once and for all, to peel ourselves from the plastic-coated illusion that today's consumer is a mass audience living in a homogenous market. The world is moving from Sell, Sell, Sell! to the extreme opposite: one-to-one communication. I am a strong believer in one-to-one marketing when done from a cult-like perspective. Strong consumer Branding is about belonging. The human race needs to belong. Most people misuse Darwin quotes to underscore the theory that man is an isolationist, content on his island. Darwin actually regarded man as a pack animal whose survival is predicated on group inclusion. The modern versions of this might be fraternities, football fans and FaceBook.

As our world continues to pick up speed, this relevance has increased exponentially. Previous generations used family, social clubs and religion to create markers of personal identification. Today, with all of those on the wane, Brands are the new religion. And everyone is a seeker. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you tell the truth about it, promote it and demonize those who do not agree with your world view. "If I chew this whitening gum while standing on that slave-free woven area rug, drinking organic beer made in America, what does that say about me?"

Somewhere along the journey from burning live leather on the range to creating an exciting ad, we forgot something: we forgot to deliver. You can make promises all day long – explicitly through your product claims and advertised messaging or implicitly through tone and manner –but to be seen as real in an increasingly unreal world, you need to deliver on the experience you promise.

### **Two scams: SEARSBOOK and JCPENNEY Lovemarks.**

I took my kids to Sears recently for back to school shopping. What a waste of time. I had money and wanted so desperately to part with it, because I had fallen in love with the idea behind SEARSBOOK...SEARSBOOK and JCPENNEY Lovemarks created big awareness, followed by a feeling that we were totally suckered because any spells of "Mystery, Sensuality and Intimacy" that were cast by clever advertising scams (yes, when you don't tell the truth its called a scam), crashed to the poorly tiled floor amid a limited merchandising mix that doesn't match that morning's ROP. Lack of inventory, lack of associates on the floor, no clear departmental signing and not even any Muzak sends a clear, yet depressing message: anyone who shops Sears for BTS either has kids who simply need uniforms or the parents themselves have self-esteem issues. Advertising, no matter how fantastic, cannot solve business (Brand) issues unless your definition of Brand is so out-dated that it's time to hang up your shoes. Advertising cannot create Brand (only strong business leadership can). Even the advertising greats agree, it can only create awareness. So you better have the house in order before inviting company over.

I really don't blame Sears or JC Penney as much as I blame their agencies. C'mon Guys, could you stop trying to win at Cannes for two minutes and actually help your clients with their real business (Brand) challenges? Don't get me wrong, Kevin Roberts is a super smart man; smart enough to hire Bridget De Socio and let her rock the joint. My question to Mr. Roberts: was Lovemarks for JC Penney a responsible approach to their Brand initiatives as outlined by their CEO, Mike Ullman?

### **Authenticity is not for wimps.**

It's called long term business (Brand) strategy. Authenticity requires telling the truth about what you believe in, what you stand for and not changing your position for short-term gain. It's something that advertising agencies typically do not excel at because there is no media spend. So, next time your ad agency starts talking about Brand as a media spend, it may be time to clean house.