

How Authentic Is Authenticity?

Authenticity is a word that is used a lot in marketing these days, but what does authenticity mean? Whether a brand is two years old or a hundred years old, the quest for authenticity is at the forefront of branding discussions and is, perhaps the guiding principle when developing advertising and marketing strategies. But defining it is a struggle and there is plenty of room for mistakes. We struggle to define our brands within this vague concept only to appear, on occasion, as disingenuous. Before leaping into building a marketing strategy around this concept we have a simple but profoundly important question to ask. Is there any authenticity in "authenticity"?

From an anthropological perspective, authenticity once was tied to a cultural construct and typically represented an idealized version of the past. Even if that past was relatively brief in the grand scheme of history, even if it was tied to a single individual around with an idealized perception had been built, it was still part of a symbolic system that pointed to key elements of character and meaning. Authenticity placed the contemporary group, in this case the shopper, into a symbolic lineage with the past, giving it legitimacy and defining a structure for what is and is not "real." In other words, "authenticity" is a kind of invented tradition and a series of symbolic markers that people believe represent how things should be.

Marketers and brands speak to these invented traditions and align themselves with them such that consumers look to them as being endowed with a powerful sense of meaning. Elements of the brand are charged with emotional power and cultural cues that tell the buyer, "This brand is good, this brand is honest." In doing this, we brand around a sense of invented tradition – think of the use of James Dean in jeans ads. The person has been stripped of his human qualities and made into a symbol that represents a few key cultural motifs, which in turn are transferred to the brand by association. "Invented tradition" is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. Hence Coors' seeming imagery of pristine rural settings that mirror an idyllic past, or Dodge using idealized working-class men in their truck ads. But the peculiarity of "invented" traditions is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious. They are representations from a current standpoint and may in fact have little to do with the time periods, the person or cultural norms they claim to represent. The problem for brands that follow this model is that the representation can quickly become trite or simply unbelievable. They become easy targets for a cynical population that has a remarkably powerful tool, namely social media, for attacking the imagery and messages as flat, unrealistic, or opportunistic.

So if establishing a sense of authenticity is the goal of a brand, how do you go about doing it? You start by uncovering a set of consistent and shared values, a shared



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passion for a larger cultural sense of meaning and by drawing the people making up the consumers of these shared ideals into the daily life of the company. You don't just pitch the brand, you embrace it in the truest sense of the term. Sam Adams is a truly marvelous example of a company doing this. The brand taps into that sense of shared meaning with their customers by living the ideals they represent and displaying the consistency between experience and message through their advertising and company practices. A good brand in an extension of the target audience, it is not a logo, a catch phrase, or a mission statement. The audience and the brand become inseparable.

The authenticity of brand in the case of Sam Adams is not a set of traditions in the standard sense. They talk, of course, about the product and the flavor, but they reach beyond that to explain the story behind the beer. They humanize and historicize the company and its people, turning beer into a way of life rather than an object. Marketing becomes less about selling a product than it does about ongoing engagement between the people buying the products and the producers themselves. Rather than being a purely transactional engagement, the consumer and the company, the brand, become part of a shared interaction. In breaking down the Us/Other interaction the company becomes a member of the population rather than an external force with whom people interact only at the cash register.

Conversely, look at Michelob's attempt to establish a similar sense of authenticity. The marketing campaign revolved around producing messaging very similar to that being produced by Sam Adams. Attempts were made to establish a connection between the brand and the quality of ingredients. The brewers are highlighted as is the history of the brand. However, Michelob spends most of its time talking about Michelob rather than establishing a sense of shared experiences and history between the brand, its people and the larger beer culture. The authenticity the brand strives to represent appears cynical because the message becomes a façade, a mask. The reality is that Michelob makes some genuinely terrific beers and has a long history from which it can draw. The problem is that its attempt to establish a true sense of authenticity stops short of building a shared dynamic between the brand and the shopper/consumer population.

The take away is simple. Authenticity does not stem from borrowing imagery or messages that exemplify an ideal state. It does not stem from touting your experience, age, quality, or benefits. Tapping into a sense of authenticity and making it stick comes from a brand being able to become an integrated part of the lives of its consumers in a sustained, shared way.



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