

TOM

Authenticity Schmauthenticity!

ASACKER

“I was on a bus and it was the middle of the night. And I had a box of crackers and a can of Easy Cheese. But it was the middle of the night, so I could not see. I could not see how much Easy Cheese I was applying to each cracker. So each bite into the cracker was a surprise as to how much Easy Cheese I had applied. Which makes me believe they should have a glow in the dark version of Easy Cheese. It’s not like the product has any integrity to begin with. If you buy a room temperature cheese that you squeeze out of a can, you probably won’t get mad if it glows in the dark too.” —Mitch Hedberg

If the company takes Hedberg’s wacky advice and produces a luminous version of Easy Cheese, would it be “authentic?” Hedberg alludes to the original product’s lack of integrity, but what of authenticity? What exactly *is* authenticity, as it applies to companies, products and services? And is it something business should pursue? Those questions have been gnawing at me for months, as I continue to read countless pleas for companies to “be authentic” in scores of books, magazines, articles and blogs.

The word “authentic” is derived from the Greek *authentikós*, which means original or genuine. It implies that a thing is the real deal and not a knock off or sham. On the other hand, the word “integrity” is derived from the Latin *integritās*, meaning wholeness or soundness; something uncorrupt. This would seem to say that glow in the dark Easy Cheese may be authentic, but it is certainly not sound. At least not as a form of “cheese.”

“We have a hunger for something like authenticity, but are easily satisfied by an ersatz facsimile.”

— George Orwell, c. 1949

When it comes to the marketplace for products and services, soundness may be desirable but authenticity is irrelevant. “Be authentic” is a vapid statement: It does nothing to help inform decision-making. What is a business expert telling you when they tell you to “be authentic?” Are they saying, “Stay true to your heritage?” Are they advising you to be transparent and disclose your intentions? Are they admonishing you to run your business from your heart; to stay true to your moral and aesthetic sensibilities?

Take a look at some well-known, modern day brands. Is Starbucks being authentic? It started as a local coffee bean roaster and retailer. In fact, the owners of the original business rejected Howard Shultz’s suggestion to sell beverages, because they believed coffee was something to be prepared at home. What

about Google? Weren't they a bunch of techies with a strong aversion towards advertising? And Timberland was a rugged, outdoor performance brand, not a fashion-obsessed, hip-hop icon.

The world's largest manufacturer of cell phones, Nokia, started as a wood pulp mill. Ben & Jerry's had a long-standing moral principle that no one in the company would earn more than seven times what the lowest paid worker earned. Take a look at its compensation today. And underdog Southwest Airlines, the largest airline in the United States, was always the "low price" carrier. Have you compared their prices lately? Oh, that's right. They don't make it easy for you to compare their fares.

Most people simply aren't interested in "authentic" products and services; ones produced by amateurs in small batches with caring and, dare I use the word, love. What they want is a perfectly executed performance that provides them with superior value for their time and money. Yes, today they want you to *reflect* the reality of the passionate amateur. But they want you to do it in a sanitized, enhanced way; like an Ansel Adams photograph portrays the Sierra Nevada landscape.

In any event, there is no objective measure of marketplace authenticity (other than in the world of collectibles and currency). There is nor "right" way to produce or market anything. And even if there were, would that "way" be more desirable? What's an authentic bank? One that opens at 10, closes at 3, and keeps those cheap pens chained to the counter? The original Santa Claus was dressed in green garb. And most people don't want a fresh hen from a local farmer; they want a packaged, free-range hen from Perdue.

What consumers really want is a good act. Like theatre goers, they want to suspend disbelief and "get lost" in a well-crafted and well-executed brand experience—consistency, sincerity, and a perfectly attuned expression of *their* desires, sensibilities and identities. For whether it's bland, mass produced food, a "quality" product that frequently needs repair, or insincere communication from a faceless financial institution, it's the poor script and/or shoddy performance, not the deviation from its origin, which consumers refer to as "inauthentic."

So I say, "Authenticity schmauthenticity!" "Be authentic" is a hollow cry. It smells of the marketing puffery we chide. Instead, follow the lead of brand auteurs like Apple's Steve Jobs, Ronald Shaich of Panera Bread, Brin and Page of Google, and Disney's Robert Iger. Dream big! Stay tuned in to the changing marketplace. Always be in beta. Have a fanatical attention to detail. Put your people at the heart of the brand, making sure that everyone understands his or her role in making the brand the star. And always, always put on a great show.