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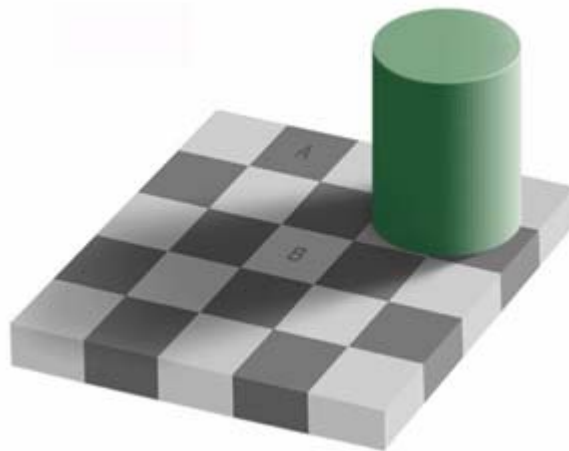
Perception Is Not Reality

ASACKER

“I’m not interested in trying to work on people's perceptions. I am who I am, and if you don't take the time to learn about that, then your perception is going to be your problem.”

— *Jim Brown*

Jim Brown is right: Perception is not reality. Reality is reality. But Jim is deluded if he thinks that people are going to take the time to learn the facts about him. Not today. Not when time is people’s most scarce and precious resource. Instead, they’ll speed read him. They’ll make meaning out of what little bit they hastily perceive. It’s up to Jim Brown to capture their attention, stimulate their interest and strategically help shape those perceptions. But alas, Jim is not interested in that kind of work. If you are, please take a good look at the following illusion:



Do you see the squares labeled A and B? You probably perceive them as being different shades of grey, huh? They’re not. They’re exactly the same color. Now, you can take as much time as you like to contemplate that reality, but it is highly unlikely that your perception will change. I could even provide you a detailed, scientific explanation to support the fact that they’re identical colors, but you still wouldn’t believe me. You can’t help it. It’s simply the way your brain is wired.

Your mind does similar things in the marketplace. You believe that SUVs are safer than smaller cars. You feel that dirty airplanes are not well maintained. You assume that if it’s organic, it must be better for you. You think that Tylenol is safer and more effective than acetaminophen. You believe that Southwest Airlines has the lowest fares. You know that Duracell batteries last longer than the store brand. You’re convinced that \$4 golf balls fly farther and straighter than \$1 balls.

Truth vs. Fact

In his book *Story*, the legendary screenwriter Robert McKee wrote, “What happens is fact, not truth. Truth is what we think about what happens.” Facts are reality (Smaller cars are safer than SUVs). Truth is perception (Bigger is safer). Facts are the way things are (It doesn’t matter what golf ball you hit; it’s still going to end up in the woods). Truth is the way your brain view things; your thoughts, opinions, evaluations, feelings and conclusions (You’re a winner . . . like Tiger. So you need a ball with a swoosh on it). You believe that your truths *are* the facts. We all do.

This is a difficult concept to grasp. Not because it’s intellectually challenging; it’s not. Rather, because it’s difficult to *feel*. For example, do you feel that you are the outgrowth of a spinning sphere that is rocketing through space at more than twenty times the speed of a bullet? Probably not, but those are the facts. So what does this have to do with marketplace success? Everything! Because the cold, harsh reality is that your audience judges you based upon the very little bit of you that they hastily perceive. They speed read you, and prejudge you with their resultant feelings.

So, what do most organizations do to address this reality and influence customer perceptions and behavior? They work like hell to persuade people with all of their facts—data, specs, studies, voting record, et al. Big mistake. Instead, they should be working to understand and appeal to people’s truth, because perception conditions their sensibilities and subsequent actions. Sure, they’ll back up their emotional decisions with your facts, so you should definitely make them available. But don’t waste your time and money leading with them. Don’t believe me? Just ask Al Gore how far he got trying to persuade people with the “facts” about global warming.

For a recent example of how a company is appealing to its audience’s truth, there’s Clorox’s strategic decision to co-brand its new “green” cleaning product with the Sierra Club. The Sierra Club is America’s largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization. To environmentally conscious people, the Sierra Club brand means “green.” The Clorox Company makes cleaning products, most notably the powerful agent bleach. To most people, the Clorox brand name means “effective.” By combining the two brands on the package, they’re attempting to strategically influence customers’ truth; namely that a cleaning product from a cleaning company can’t be truly “green.” It’s all about perception.

Now, please don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying that the marketplace is all about image. In fact, it’s just the opposite. Today the substance of a brand is as important, if not more so, than the sizzle in creating resonant associations and giving customers the subsequent feeling (The Sierra Club made darn sure that the Clorox product met its high eco-standards before adding its stamp to the brand). What I am saying is be obsessed with your audience’s truth, and design your business to appeal to that truth. Perception may not be reality, but it drives your customers’ feelings and actions. And if you don’t take the time to learn about that, then *their* perception is going to be *your* problem.