

ADVERTISING

Claiming authenticity now suggests dishonesty to consumers

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Young affluents are tuned-in to marketing tactics; image courtesy of Michael Kors

By FORREST CARDAMENIS

NEW YORK The marketing of "authenticity" has reached a breaking point and needs to stop, according to strategists from The Future Laboratory at the U.S. Retail & Luxury Futures Forum on Oct. 21.

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While once a new way for a brand to market to a niche audience of young consumers, claims of "authenticity" are now so widespread as to become meaningless. Instead, brands must distinguish themselves in other ways, or else they will be perpetually behind on trends and reveal inauthenticity in obvious attempts to cater to consumers.

"The authenticity bubble is about to burst," said Chris Sanderson, co-founder of [The Future Laboratory](#). "People are looking for something different, and authenticity is one of those overused words that actually gets in the way of a proper brand proposition. People see right through it and feel like they're being sold to."

Stuffed

Today, consumers are extremely knowledgeable about marketing and advertising, meaning that they are weary of "stuffocation," or commercial bombardment. Too many advertisements make the brand's end goal to generate revenue too transparent and turn off consumers.

Similarly, the adoption of trend words, especially long after others have done it, alerts consumers of a brand's concerted attempt to cater to them, or to claim authenticity rather than actually having it. The same applies to other buzzwords like "artisanal" and even "innovative," "bespoke," "all-natural" and "organic."

"What started as a movement by a people who are about change and about difference has become a marketing trope," said Tom Savigar, chief strategy officer of The Future Laboratory. "This age group has moved on and now when we think about millennials we still think we're talking about someone young. A millennial is not someone who is young."

According to data presented by the strategists, more than half of Americans believe the word "organic" is an excuse to charge more money.

Although consumer movements and types of the past, namely the "hipster" or the "yuccie" (a young urban creative and cross between a hipster and yuppie) have alerted brands to the significance of health- and socially-conscious signifiers such as authenticity, fair-trade and proper sourcing, nothing gives away inauthenticity faster than jumping on the bandwagon. However, this does not mean that brands can abandon these values.

"We are not saying you can't be authentic, but the lexicon of authenticity has been so parodied that you have to find a new way to express yourself," Mr. Sanderson said.

One way to do this is to focus on the present and the future and moving beyond heritage. Claims of authenticity should not be focused on what a brand has done in the past but should instead be built into their current offers.



Saint Laurent ad

The speakers highlighted the controversial dropping of "Yves" from Yves Saint Laurent's name as a forward-thinking initiative. It continues to honor the past in the name "Saint Laurent" but does not seek to entice today's consumers with the name of somebody who is no longer with the company.

"Transperience," a portmanteau of "transient" and "experience," was also cited as an honest way of delivering that message to consumers. One hotel in Warsaw, Poland created a shoppable space but also gave guests an opportunity to meet the designers of the items for sale, tour their studio spaces and ask them questions.

Following the demographic that first made "authenticity" a brand value for new trends and values also gives clues as to what kind of marketing will be effective. The prevalence of irony among and the marketing savviness of these consumers create new possibilities in tried-and-true marketing tactics.

For example, celebrity endorsements and spokespeople are common advertising methods, but everybody knows that the celebrities are paid to take part. Why not acknowledge that directly instead of ignoring it and compromising an honest look?

Ricky Gervais Optus ad

That's what Optus, a telecommunications company in Australia, did by tapping Ricky Gervais to announce a deal with Netflix. In the ads, Gervais talks about being called and how he has little interest in what he is endorsing but won't turn down a good payday.

This kind of transparency validates rather than ignites a consumer's cynicism and thereby can situate a brand as being a friend or compatriot of the consumer. If luxury brands do not ally themselves with consumers in this way, mass brands might take away the opportunity.

Keep it real

Other changes in the media landscape also allow new ways for a brand to be genuine without outwardly claiming it.

While print still has a firm place in the media mix for luxury marketers, online content and social media allow for new ways to tell a brand's story, according to panelists at Luxury Retail Summit: Holiday Focus 2014.

Where brands used to be expected to come up with content each season, consumers now have an appetite for branded content on a consistent basis. Keeping heritage at the forefront and allowing influencers to share their take on a brand can help brands keep up with this demand and retain a level of authenticity ([see story](#)).

Honesty is not something that is merely claimed, but demonstrated, particularly on social media.

Any brand can create a social media account, but using these platforms to create a natural extension of the label and leverage social clout to generate sales and loyalty is another matter, according to Aliza Licht, formerly known as "DKNY PR Girl," at Luxury Interactive 2015 on Oct. 13.

Social media has shrunk the distance between brands and consumers, but bringing these parties closer together has

also destroyed traditional business/customer relationships. To be successful on social media, consumers need to be treated like equals and people, otherwise social presence could, counterproductively, push consumers to competition ([see story](#)).

"For too long, brands have begged, borrowed and stolen indignities, languages and aesthetics from the contemporary culture in the hope that they will attract the unknowing consumers," Mr. Sanderson said.

"Be straight in what you stand for and say," Mr. Savigar added. "Reflect and innovate with the consumer in mind and as yourself. Have we worked hard enough to make our product excellent, or do we need to put the word 'artisan' in front of it?"

Final Take

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