

Marketing reality

# Authentic marketing



**Authenticity is becoming a popular word these days. But practising it in financial services is a tough challenge. John Moore explores what authenticity means in people and business and argues for a shift away from image building to innovation.**

Shakespeare gave us the ethical principle – *this above all, to thine own self be true*<sup>1</sup> ... – but, with a delicious sense of irony, had it articulated by Polonius, as slippery and untrustworthy a character as you could wish for. Perhaps this is the challenge of authenticity: it's quite easy to talk about and not so easy to do.

The social psychologist Solomon Asch<sup>2</sup> conducted experiments in the 1950s to investigate the influence of social pressure on perception. A group of eight people

was given a simple visual task to perform – identifying which two of four lines were of equal length. But seven of the eight were in league with the experimenter – and the only genuine subject was always the last to vote. Most of the responses were correct, but sometimes the seven gave unanimous (and obviously wrong) responses – and a third of the genuine subjects then *always* conformed to the group view – and three-quarters on some occasions. This led Asch to warn of a societal tendency to conform that is so strong that people will call black white.

Obviously, a healthy degree of social adaptation is vital for society to function. However, there comes a point at which it becomes destructive: the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 was put down by psychologist Irving Janis<sup>3</sup> to groupthink in Kennedy's "Camelot": this meant that well-founded doubts about the planned invasion of Cuba were repressed – at considerable subsequent cost.

However, inauthenticity among humans will more often manifest itself in a less shocking but more insidious, energy-sapping way. Relationships become dull and false, as participants suppress their real ideas and feelings, perhaps out a fear of giving offence or alarm.

At worst, inauthentic behaviour saps our spirit. It's a human failing that we are often reluctant to express our deeper feelings and desires, for fear of looking foolish or appearing vulnerable. In work, we try to keep up a façade of "professionalism" rather than admit to doubts or fears.

Yet we can all think of examples of people whose imperfections, honestly borne, become attractive. One of the most telling examples of this is Simon Weston. Tragically disfigured by burns in the Falklands War, he has gone on to become a highly respected symbol of courage and fortitude. In an image-conscious age, he is a remarkable exception to the rule of perfection – and this is one of the most interesting benefits of authenticity.

## Authenticity more important

There are several reasons why authenticity in business generally is becoming more important. I also believe that the pressure is being felt sooner and more strongly in financial services. This is partly because of headline-grabbing scandals, and partly because of the harsh economic realities engendered by the recent sustained stock market falls. It's also because money is measurable, and in the end tends to unmask romantic image-building rather cruelly.

And society is changing. Trust in authority is shifting – the results of one of many similar surveys are summarized in Figure 1. Whilst our trust in ourselves remains high, our faith in media is in steep decline. And whatever trust we

once had in advertising has all but vanished – and especially with *corporate* advertising. Fifteen years ago, this was regarded as much more believable than brand or sales advertising, but now is seen in the same vein – and on a par with used-car salesmen!

FIGURE 1 WHAT DO I TRUST?

	1987	2001
My own abilities	80	85
TV news	54	26
Salespeople in clothing stores	23	7
Corporate advertising	20	3
Advertising	8	3
Used car salesmen	15	2

Source: Yesawich, Pepperdine and Brown/Yankelovich Partners National Travel Monitor.

It's not just the media that are losing influence. There is a deeper change in which we are increasingly focused on our own passions and beliefs. David Lewis<sup>4</sup> refers to the contrasting qualities of two films about the sinking of the Titanic. *A Night to Remember*, made in the 1950s, at times seems more like a public information film – this is the correct way for Britons to behave if their ship hits an iceberg. On the other hand, the modern day *Titanic* is focused on the loves and passions of the hero and heroine. Lewis quotes the journalist Bryan Appleyard:

Between these two films, the public realm vanished, to be replaced by the private realm of the authentic self and its fulfilment.

People don't trust organizations, they'd rather trust themselves.

### I can see you!

One of the more interesting effects of the Internet has been the huge increase in the scrutiny and "outing" of businesses. Among the first to point this out were the authors of the Cluetrain Manifesto<sup>5</sup> – who bluntly aver that organizations will find it harder and harder to maintain false images in a talkative, networked economy.

One manifestation of this in the UK is the website [www.dooyoo.co.uk](http://www.dooyoo.co.uk), which includes customer reviews of various financial services companies and their products. For example, I found 91% recommending First Direct, but only 75% praising HSBC – First Direct's parent – and 44% Lloyds TSB. Comments can be positive or negative, and seem unconstrained:

*NatWest customer:* There is another way - vote with your feet, and your money, and leave.

*Halifax online customer:* All in all, a potentially good idea and good rates, but let down by a poor support structure. There are others on the market offering similar services and rates - check them out first.

*Smile.co.uk customer:* Well worth a go. If they bumped up the interest rate just a touch, this would be Nirvana.

I am not attaching great significance to individual comments but illustrating how easy it is for people to access other customers' views and experiences. I am sure this will dilute still further the brute force effectiveness of conventional advertising.

And if you are worried by this, wait until someone starts a UK version of the American [www.internalmemos.com](http://www.internalmemos.com), where employees are posting internal memos – good

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and bad – that circulate in their business. In such times, I am not sure we can ever speak of an "internal" communication again. Or if you're really unfortunate, you may find your business gets its own "hate" site, such as [www.chasebanksucks.com](http://www.chasebanksucks.com) or the extraordinary [www.allstateinsurancesucks.com](http://www.allstateinsurancesucks.com) where articles include "Allstate screws another little old lady from NY".

Quite suddenly, business finds itself transparent in ways that were inconceivable even a decade ago. I don't think most marketing people have really caught up with the implications of this.

### More of the same won't work

Oddly, the prelude to this new transparency saw the rise of "brand strategists", who abandoned straightforward expressions of what businesses do and what they believe, in favour of complex image-building. As a result, we live in a world where we are constantly having to decode communications from businesses. As someone who has run a lot of focus groups, I can bear witness to the high level of scepticism of the average consumer. It's not that they are offended by the inauthenticity of advertising – they have simply learnt to filter out and ignore most of what companies try to tell them, or translate it into what they assume is real.

It's an interesting human characteristic that when engaged in unproductive behaviour, a human response is often to do *more of what is already not working*. In a heated argument, we think the answer is shout louder or use even cruder language. The alcoholic seeks

salvation in ever greater consumption of stronger brews. So, in a climate of suspicion, some marketers seem to think the only solution is to push images with ever greater force and ingenuity. I wonder if trends like guerrilla marketing are really just another last desperate throw of these dice.

The world of financial services is awash with such image-building, but I seriously question its effectiveness.

**Image building gone mad ?**

Among many examples, Barclays seem to have zig-zagged from one Hollywood movie theme to another in recent years. First there was a Blade Runner style mini-epic to portray them as service orientated. Later there was the infamous “Big” campaign fronted by Sir Anthony Hopkins. Now, it would seem, Big is so 20th Century, and we have Samuel L Jackson trying to persuade us that Barclays are “Fluent in Finance.” This coincided with my partner’s local branch making a euro–pound transaction the wrong way round.

Even more bizarre is the area of fund management. This has never been very near to the cutting-edge of marketing but it does seem particularly prone to vainglorious image building. Perhaps the most bizarre in recent times is the advertising of Invesco Perpetual. Here we see people clutching prized items – Muhammad Ali’s boxing gloves, Judy Garland’s shoes, Geoff Boycott’s cricket bat. These have been bought, we are told, with the proceeds of their shrewdly invested Invesco funds. Invesco are not some dreary fund management company... no, they are modern good fairies, making our heartfelt dreams come true. As if.

This is a remarkably similar strategy to several other fund managers, but the real surprise is in the very small print. Here we discover that the person shown is actually an *employee* of the company. Then we also find that “the item shown is illustrative of the original.” So let’s recap, the happy customer is not actually an independent customer but an employee, and that prized item they’re showing me is a fake. Now what exactly is there in Invesco’s advertising that **is** straightforward and clear?

I am amused by the thought that this work may be the result of hundreds of man-hours of discussion, market research, creative pitches etc on the part of the advertising agency and their client. I daresay somewhere in the process, a breakthrough “consumer insight” will have been claimed. But I wonder how much plain speaking and authentic human responses were articulated in those meetings?

The production of image advertising calls to mind the manipulations that went on around the arranged marriages of renaissance royalty. As the intended

partners were often thousands of miles apart, elaborate efforts were made to present the would-be spouse with flattering images and stories about the beauty, intelligence and fertility of their putative mate. A great deal of energy went into cunning stratagems to flatter and deceive all concerned, to the point where contact with reality was virtually lost.

Similarly, agencies and clients devise ingenious image campaigns with lots of intriguing jargon about brandscapes and brand footprints and goodness knows what else. Only for the client to discover, often many millions of pounds later, that the market is more a twenty-first century rave in Ibiza than a charming royal court – and that the artfully constructed fantasies of the admen are largely drowned out or ignored by an already vastly over-stimulated public. Some of the most interesting advertising practitioners are now recognizing this.<sup>6</sup>

If only that energy could have been invested in finding some genuine innovation to offer the tired old consumer!

**Word of mouth**

As we move further and further from the idea of “admass” – an amorphous lump of heterogeneous consumers who can be programmed to think the way we want – so the value of word-of-mouth referral increases. People would rather trust personal recommendations than what they find in the media.

David Lewis<sup>7</sup> argues that we are moving from a time of hype to one of buzz, which he summarizes as follows.

FIGURE 2: FROM HYPE TO BUZZ

	HYPE	BUZZ
Style	Autocratic	Democratic
Content	More likely seen as devious	More likely seen as truthful
Typical media	Advertising	Conversations, websites
Examples	Press releases	Rumours, gossip
Reaction	Distrust	Trust

This is echoed by commentators such as David Weinburger<sup>8</sup>, who champions the value of human conversations over corporatespeak.

**The authentic route**

Woody Allen described his ambition to “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. And then see if I can get them mass-produced in plastic.”<sup>9</sup> This brilliantly satirizes how conventional marketing approaches authenticity. Actually delivering authentic value, with appropriate emotional resonance, is more of a challenge.

Firstly, I would argue that authenticity, like charity,

starts at home. A company in which people are frequently inauthentic and manipulative in their dealings with colleagues and suppliers will not succeed in being authentic to customers. The advertising I criticize is the direct product of inauthentic agency–client relationships where superficial bonhomie often conceals profound suspicion and distrust. Developing authentic relationships with other humans, under the pressures of business life, requires a very high level of attention and is not easy.

Often, humour in a company is a powerful clue to its real beliefs and values – which are often at odds with the stated ones. It is fashionable to talk about selling customers “whatever they’ll buy” or pricing things “as high as we can get away with”. I think most people are left wondering if this is only a joke or whether it’s actually a deep truth about the attitudes of the humorist.

Many companies operate on the same principle as Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*: “You can’t handle the truth!”. I wonder how many financial firms would show the bravery of Shell, a company that had been criticized severely over the past couple of decades on issues that would now be classed as corporate social responsibility?

Their current website includes a no-holds-barred forum<sup>10</sup> in which people can challenge – in very blunt terms – the company on any of its policies. And people do. But the company tackles most of the big issues very openly elsewhere on the site, and has attracted many plaudits as well as brickbats.

Secondly, to achieve authentic success a company must recognize the difference between creating value and making a profit. This distinction is easier to grasp in the case of, say, Pret a Manger: there we *can* see how a very positive customer experience makes possible premium pricing. For financial services this is distinction is harder; because the product benefit is largely or wholly money-based – and future-based, rather than being tangible today. Pret clearly shows a purpose beyond profit – but what’s the purpose of fund management beyond making money for all concerned?

Thirdly, well-practised authenticity is not about being pious or humourless. Some versions of socially-responsible investment seem prone to this. Anyone who has experienced Southwest Airlines in the States will have realized it has a culture that embraces fun as well as economy. It may be no coincidence that this airline has emerged from the downturn after 11 September in far better health than its competitors, having kept its customers and staff.

Fourthly, to make a success of authenticity, a business must change its emphasis from image to innovation. The Virgin brand may have its flaws, but the Virgin One account was a brilliant innovation that created genuine value all round. Its advertising is often unglamorous with long copy. There is an underlying presumption that you *can* teach consumers something and not treat them

like idiots. It interests me that Barclays, while guilty of much vain image-building, has also committed heavily to buy and develop the Woolwich Openplan concept, which takes the Virgin One idea further.

And, finally, for authenticity to flourish in a company there must be an appetite for it among employees and exemplary leadership. I use the word “exemplary” deliberately, as leaders must “walk the talk” in order to

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build respect. This personal quality has often been eroded in marketing departments which have become enslaved to an outdated philosophy of image-making and hype. I believe that marketing people need to reassess fundamentally how they are going to create value for their organizations and support a culture of greater directness and honesty. Otherwise, they will be increasingly marginalized. ■

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<sup>1</sup> *Hamlet* I.iii.78

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Asch, *Studies of Independence and Conformity: A Minority of One against a Unanimous Majority* Psychological Monographs 70: 9 (1956) and Asch (1958) *Effects of group pressure on modification and distortion* [In Maccoby, EE, Newcomb, TM, and Hartley, EL (Eds) *Readings in Social Psychology* New York Holt, Reinhart & Winston]. The experiments are also described by Tom Heuerman in an excellent article on authenticity available at [http://www.amorenaturalway.com/pamphlet\\_15.htm](http://www.amorenaturalway.com/pamphlet_15.htm)

<sup>3</sup> *Victims of Groupthink* Boston MA Houghton Mifflin, revised edition 1983 – a fascinating insight into the workings of Kennedy’s “West Wing”.

<sup>4</sup> *The Soul of the New Consumer* London Nicholas Brealey Publishing 2000

<sup>5</sup> See [www.cluetrain.com](http://www.cluetrain.com)

<sup>6</sup> John Grant *After Image* HarperCollins Business 2002; Mark Earls *Welcome to the Creative Age* John Wiley and Sons 2002

<sup>7</sup> *op cit*

<sup>8</sup> See [www.smallpieces.com](http://www.smallpieces.com)

<sup>9</sup> Presumably with grateful thanks to James Joyce. See *Without Feathers*, Random House, 1975

<sup>10</sup> See [www.shell.com/tellshell](http://www.shell.com/tellshell)