

Get Real and Prosper: Why Social Media Demands Authentic Brands

by William Faust and Leigh Householder

With the growing number of company-sponsored opportunities for interactive digital experiences, William Faust and Leigh Householder stress the need for authenticity. They reinforce their premise with a rich array of cases, and elaborate how, more than just being engaging, these sites should connect with consumers in distinctive ways, be relevant to the brand and the customer, and be something individuals want to share with friends.



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It was no surprise that they picked the elves—150 million of us did, too. Creative leaders at OfficeMax and its agency partner, Toy, had done the research. They created more than 20 holiday games designed to “go viral,” to enchant us, to make us play and then pass the experience on. ElfYourself.com, an addictive little application that lets users personalize dancing elves with pictures of themselves or their friends, was the clear winner. It launched in 2006, and in the holiday seasons since, it has netted impressive traffic—200 million visitors in 2007, 40 percent of whom were in the hard-to-reach-online 55+ crowd—and notched remarkable achievements, like being the hottest holiday greeting site two years in a row.

But what were the *real* results? OfficeMax’s same-store sales plummeted 7.5 percent during last year’s holiday season. It posted losses over several quarters while category leaders, like Staples, remained well in the black. The elves were fun, but they were just buzz: a freebie sponsored by a brand, not a powerful connection to that brand. While OfficeMax’s elves were dancing, Staples took a very different approach. It launched the “easy button”—a fictional device that solves your business problems instantly. The promotion connected to a basic human desire (for life to be easier) and shared something important about the core of the brand (that Staples is a nimble problem-solver).



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Staples has built on the campaign over time—using it in in-store merchandising and to drive traffic, as well as advertise the brand—and counting on it to deliver word-of-mouth relevance. Easy has become the central message, the authentic part of the Staples story that never changes. It has also become part of the social consciousness as a colloquialism—like “Where’s the beef?” and “Time to make the donuts.”

These two cases speak to the central challenge of social media design: creating something that is both engaging to customers and true to the core of the brand, finding that one thing that people inside and outside the company can connect to and recognize themselves in. Often that means not only thinking about what the customer would enjoy, but also defining what’s true to the brand. Elves will always be fun. But easy is fun *and* authentic.

The impact of social media

The concept of *choice* has changed radically over the past few decades, and the rise in social media use by consumers is only accelerating that shift. Selection is no longer something that feels luxurious; instead, a glut of ambiguous options crowds our lives from the morning cup of coffee to evening television programming. We’re overwhelmed with commercial messages, inundated with contrived experiences, and tired of over-produced pitches for our time and attention. But our response hasn’t been to stop buying and recommending. It’s been to become more savvy, more discriminating consumers.

Increasingly, we choose brands that we sense are authentic and more genuine than their competition. We mentally calculate both value and values, looking for companies we can trust. Social media has enabled us to do this in both broad and remarkably personal ways (Figure 1). And, in transforming our access to information and opinions, social media has also created new demands for brands (Figure 2). These can be boiled down into three requirements:

Be knowable. Social media eschews commodities. It rewards brands that are distinct, that have something real that consumers can connect to.

Be relevant. The right idea is about the brand, but it’s also about the customer. It answers the ongoing question, “Why should I care about your brand today?”

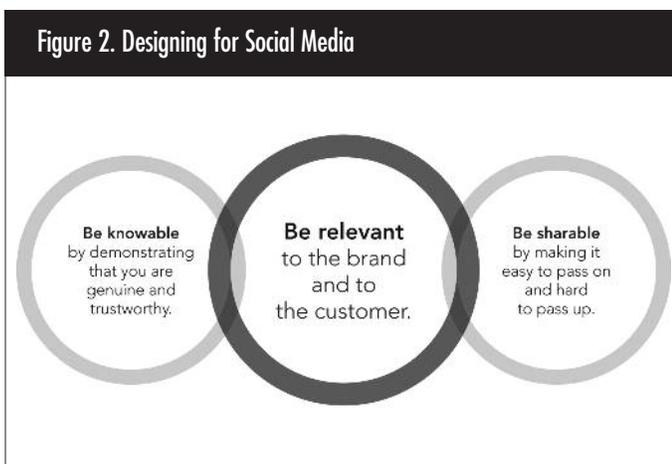
Be sharable. The social media message is almost always different from the advertising message. This makes it easy for someone to proudly share that message with a friend.

Brands that can’t meet these demands increasingly find themselves “lobbing elves” at their customers—launching disconnected campaigns and experiences that people may like, but don’t connect to the brand.

How do you prepare your creative team to meet these challenges—to create experiences that connect with your brand instead of dilute it? The answer comes most commonly from having an authentic brand.

Figure 1. Connecting with Brands on the Social Web

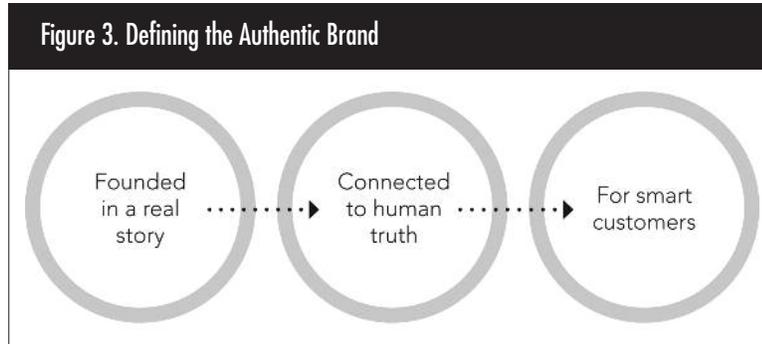
Broad	Personal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading and writing peer reviews in thousands of public forums • Understanding the larger social impact of brands • Quickly accessing reams of brand history—every campaign, every goof, every accolade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking one-on-one with company spokespeople and employees • Making a brand part of our social networking identities • Seeing which products our closest friends have used or recommend



What is an authentic brand?

Simply put, an authentic brand is a brand that’s clear about what it is and what it stands for. It’s a brand that is built from the inside out versus one that panders to the latest trend, fad, or customer segment. More deeply, it’s a brand with a real story, a connection to a fundamental human truth, and an appreciation of its smart customers (Figure 3).

Few brands meet this standard better than Zappos and BMW’s Mini.



Zappos

Since its founding in 1999, Zappos has grown to be the Web’s largest shoe store. Or—as CEO Tony Hsieh might put it—it has become the Web’s largest service company that just happens to sell shoes. Hsieh and founder Nick Swinmurn designed the core of the brand that way from the very beginning. Today, the commitment to exceptional customer service is indoctrinated into all new employees before they hit the call center or the warehouse floors.

New associates get five weeks of core values training, during which they’re actually encouraged to quit (with a \$1,000 bonus for throwing in the towel) if they think the brand isn’t right for them. Oh, and greeting them at their desks is a 300-page customer service manifesto featuring hundreds of short essays written by the company’s employees and business partners.

This genuine story about service connects to the fundamental human truth that we want to

feel taken care of, even if in a small way. We want to believe someone “has our back.”

Zappos also meets the third requirement of an authentic brand—demonstrating an appreciation of the intelligence of its customers.

Authentic brands embrace their customers. They see them as the savvy people who have selected their product, who hold the brand to its values and help it evolve over time. Zappos sees its customers as fashionable, comparison-driven shoppers. The company recognizes that it’s difficult to buy shoes online—to know what they’ll feel like and how they’ll fit—until you have the shoebox in hand. With free shipping and free returns, Zappos makes it easy for its customers to take the plunge.

BMW’s Mini

From Carnaby Street to the European rally circuit, the Mini brand has achieved legendary status since its original launch in 1959. Over the years, ownership of the zippy models passed from British Motor Corporation to Rover and then onto BMW, which decided to redesign and relaunch the car in 2001.

The cult car had to bridge the old and new and be seen as an independent brand despite the

Zappos: An Authentic Brand

Real story: The Web’s largest service company that just happens to sell shoes

Human truth: We want someone to take care of us

Appreciation of customers: Whatever it takes to make your day better

Mini: An Authentic Brand

Real story: Driving should be fun

Human truth: We want to feel good about how we spend our money

Appreciation of customers: This is part of your identity; celebrate it

perception of its new parent company as a premium manufacturer. To do that, BMW built Mini's largely independent brand story on the experience of driving the little car and on the core belief that driving could be guilt-free again—that grownup life deserved a playful kick in the pants.

That core belief easily connects to the human truth that we want—whenever we can—to feel good about what we buy. We want to believe that small can be better, that practical can be fun, that a status symbol can be the less expensive alternative. Mini appreciates its smart customers by helping them to celebrate their association—with the brand and each other. It recognizes that what you drive says something about you and that Mini owners just can't stop talking about their cars.

How authentic brands affect design

An authentic brand enables writers and designers to more easily create meaningful experiences in social and conversational media (Figure 4). It creates a known story that each creative approach must build from. It's a recognized character that has to wear each campaign's new clothes.

Mini's approach to social media has clear roots in its authentic brand. Mini knew its owners were uniquely passionate about their cars. So it designed relevant marketing that further connected those owners to Mini—encouraging owners' delight and pride through experiences they knew customers would talk about on- and offline. From RFID-activated billboards that recognize and greet owners as they motor by, to sticker books that let owners deck out tiny versions of new models, to gravity-defying outdoor installations

that position cars climbing halfway up city skyscrapers, Mini creates experiences that beg to be shared in offline and online conversation.

Zappos leverages its authentic brand in even more customer-centric ways. Despite its delightful television campaigns and clever packaging, Zappos' primary source of new customers remains word-of-mouth and word-of-mouse recommendations.

It powers those stories in two key ways: experiences and "brag tags." The brag tags are a collection of creative "I HEART ZAPPOS" badges for bloggers who write testimonials about their Zappos experiences—testimonials that are collected and stored in a special fan section of the website.

Of the thousands of Zappos stories floating around the web, one of the best is from Zaz Lamarr. She had intended to return some shoes to Zappos, but when her mom passed away, she just didn't have time. Zappos arranged to have UPS come pick up the shoes—and then sent her flowers:

"When I came home this last time, I had an email from Zappos asking about the shoes, since they hadn't received them. I was just back and not ready to deal with that, so I replied that my mom had died but that I'd send the shoes as soon as I could. They emailed back that they had arranged with UPS to pick up the shoes, so I wouldn't have to take the time to do it myself. I was so touched. That's going against corporate policy.

Yesterday, when I came home from town, a florist delivery man was just leaving. It was a beautiful arrangement in a basket with white lilies and roses and carnations. Big and lush and fragrant. I opened the card, and it was from Zappos. I burst into tears. I'm a sucker for kindness, and if that isn't one of the nicest things I've ever had happen to me, I don't know what is."



Zappos also takes on the social web in direct ways. Hundreds of Zappos customer services employees are on the Twitter social networking site. Some solve real service problems. Some just build relationships. Thirty to forty more write blogs designed to connect people with the genuine Zappos brand.

Authentic brands in action

Beyond these two larger brand stories, the social web and conversational world are filled with examples of brands that have either leveraged or abandoned authenticity. Here are a few.

Selling burgers

Authentic:

Burger King's Whopper Freakout

If there's one thing BK is known for, it's the Whopper made your way. That burger has been a menu staple for 50 years and is as strongly linked to the brand as "special sauce, lettuce, cheese" is linked to the Golden Arches.

To get the social web talking about the sandwich again, one real Burger King restaurant took the Whopper off the menu for the day. Customers were told it was simply no longer available, and offered Wendy's Singles and Big Macs as consolation. The genuinely funny, very authentic story was told in an eight-minute program on WhopperFreakout.com that was widely passed around the social web and eventually even featured in the brand's television commercials.

Not Authentic:

McDonald's We Love to See You Smile campaign

Even if there isn't a microsite, the social web is more than happy to take the offline and put it online themselves. Consider McDonald's ill-fated "We Love to See You Smile" campaign, full of touching portrayals of good-natured counter help happily handing off trays to McDiners.

A nice story, but one not authentic to McDonald's. Surly reviews popped up everywhere on the web, deriding the ads and telling stories of crabby and disinterested McDonald's employees who all but ruined their days. Note

that the Burger King campaign reminded customers of how much they liked the Whopper, whereas the McDonald's commercials invited scrutiny of the restaurant's customer service.

Trying out Facebook

Authentic

FedEx's Launch a Package application

Like many companies, FedEx wanted to expose its brand to social media, but needed a relevant way to do it. So it studied how people use the various tools, looking for a gap.

The answer was found on Facebook. One of the limitations of Facebook is that you can't attach a document or image to a message the way you can in email.

So FedEx built an application called Launch a Package that met that need and fit its core brand perfectly. Members who download the application can add an attachment to any Facebook message in one click.

The results were immediate: 100,000 installs in 48 hours and more than 50 percent of users returning more than 10 times after install. The tool became the first branded app to hit #1 on Facebook's Most Active page.

Not Authentic

Citi's Magnetic Poetry

Citi is advertising with some of music's superstars—Mary J. Blige and Nickelback. The artists are featured in national print, online, and television advertising, as well as in giveaways and promotions.

They're also on Facebook. Not as themselves, but as part of a magnetic poetry game that lets users choose a phrase starter from either artist and have fun matching and completing their lyrics.

Surely the use of celebrity is time-tested—even if it has a tenuous connection to the brand core. But the creation of a gimmick (magnetic poetry) for social media abandons the authentic brands of both the musicians and the bank. This tactic provides engagement for customers, but no value back to the brand.

Borrowing from Americana

Authentic

Ford's Drive One Campaign

The people who build your car matter. This is part of the story of any American car maker, but it became particularly dear to Ford as layoffs loomed and market share slumped. To leverage the power of that authentic American spirit, the company designed a campaign to reconnect the people of Ford to America's drivers.

The campaign was called Drive One. On television, you may have passed by it, thinking it was just another car commercial asking you to "try me, too." But for the social web, it was much more authentic. Ford called on all employees and friends of the business to ask their friends and family to try the brand—to take a test drive. It rallied real people's pride in their craftsmanship; it connected back to the patriotism of the American car and our powerful awareness of the challenges in Detroit.

Employees and friends made the recommendations everywhere they communicate—in person, online, and via the social web.

Not Authentic

Chevrolet's Silverado advertising

GM tried to pull at those same American heart-strings to launch the new Silverado model. In a campaign called Our Country, Our Truck, rugged workers drove the Silverado across rambling farm country to the tune of John Mellencamp's song "Our Country."

Peer reviewers and customers alike attacked the campaign—saying the ads were less than genuine, since they came from a company that had recently laid off tens of thousands of hard-working men and women, backed up by music from a songwriter known for giving Americana a biting edge.

Promoting product

Authentic

Ikea Everyday Fabulous

Ikea's authentic story is rooted in helping people create fabulous interior design on everyday budgets. Its ongoing guerrilla and social campaigns bring that "good design can transform

the ordinary" vibe to life all over the world.

In recent years, Ikea has tailored covers for park benches and bike seats ("a little fabric makes a big difference"), designed beautiful bus shelters and subway cars, and built pop-up showrooms on sidewalks and full living rooms on the sides of buildings.

Not Authentic

Target Rounders

If Target has made missteps in the social world, most of them are rooted in designing for control rather than connection.

One of the best examples is the Target Rounders campaign. Rounders were teenagers and college students to whom Target gave freebies and large discounts—in exchange for their promotion of the brand on the Rounders site and on the Facebook group page. Members of the Rounders group were told to "keep it like a secret" from other users.

Of course, there are no well-kept secrets on the Internet, so word quickly got out, leaving Target exposed to charges of buying word-of-mouth. Sure, this was inauthentic; but what's particularly strange is that the tactic was completely unnecessary. Good recommendations for Target products run rampant on the social web.

Winning frequent flyers

Authentic

Southwest

"You deserve the freedom to fly." Southwest's plainspoken approach to affordable air travel has been the brand's touchstone since its founding in 1971.

Southwest has recently entered social media through its blog and through creative campaigns designed to get people talking. The campaigns take on other airlines that promise low prices with an initial affordable ticket—and then pile on fees and surcharges. The creative content pulls the lid off those hidden charges. For example, in a full-page newspaper ad, Southwest pits its \$69 price next to a competitor's \$69 price. When the newspaper page is held up to the light, the reader sees a litany of hidden charges under the competitor's price.

The frank blog discussion and got-to-blog-about-it advertising are social in a way that's true to Southwest. The company retains the plainspoken character and the simple brand promise.

Not Authentic

Jet Blue's Happy Jetting campaign

Anchored in a landing page and community games, the Happy Jetting campaign promised to bring "humanity back into air travel." It spoke of happy flight attendants, happy passengers, and an overall joyful experience.

Six months later, bloggers and reviewers threw the campaign back at JetBlue when the company announced plans to charge for blankets, pillows, and other small travel conveniences.

Brands that leverage their authentic core in social media use these essential gut checks on authenticity:

- ◆ Is it a true reflection of who we are?
- ◆ Are people ready for the message?
- ◆ Will we be able to stand behind this over time?

Authenticity begins at home

Surprisingly, the way to create a more authentic brand may be to stop listening to your customers and start understanding what you are and what makes that desirable. Granted, consumers have had a strong hand in shaping brands for decades—whether it was in focus groups instead of on Facebook, or via traditional research versus RSS (real simple syndication). But one way or another, we've been letting customers determine what a brand means for a long time.

And perhaps that's where the danger lies. If the latest research says consumers want a brand that's easy, then our next advertising campaign is about easy (even if what we're best at is really exceptional service). Or if the market wants a telecommunications company that's innovative, then our new website focuses on innovation (even if we're really the best at delivering value). The market may be right, but are we the best brand to deliver exactly what the market wants?

These of-the-moment campaigns cause brands to stumble even more in new mediums. With few simple, compelling truths about the brand, even the best writers and designers seek out what people want. They find the elves. The magnetic poetry. The John Mellencamp song. The buzz. Unable to connect the campaign to the core of the brand, they do the best they can, applying a thin veneer of voice and color, and they launch it.

The easiest thing to do in branding and in advertising is to tell the story the market wants to hear. The hard road—the one that leads to the greatest reward—is to tell the story that's real and make it matter. That means knowing what your company is at its core, and using your genuine, authentic story to power the creative.

Getting there means turning your view from the outside to the inside and finding the right balance between these two perspectives. It requires you to delve deep into the company's history, philosophy, and vision—to talk to those on the frontlines about what customers say you do best and where your brand loses elasticity. In most cases, you'll find the story is already there. You just have to uncover it. Invest in telling it in a memorable and meaningful way, and have the discipline to let it guide everything you do. And while social media—or similar channels yet to come—might be a catalyst for more authenticity today, building a brand that's true to an organization's core competency, its DNA, and its cultural roots is a timeless concept that should be considered for almost any brand, regardless of industry, type of product, or kind of organization. It's just the right thing to do. ■

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