

Fahrenheit212

11 LEVERAGING AUTHENTICITY

IN THE NEXT ECONOMY, YOU'RE EITHER BONA FIDE OR CAST ASIDE.



Boiling Points
INNOVATION PERSPECTIVES

THE POINT: Authenticity is in the eye of the consumer. And those eyes are more far-sighted than ever before. Delve deep into what it means to keep it real, and your brand too can sell an ideal.

LEVERAGING AUTHENTICITY

IN THE NEXT ECONOMY, YOU'RE EITHER BONA FIDE OR CAST ASIDE. HOW TAPPING AUTHENTICITY CAN TRANSFORM YOUR BRAND.

Authenticity means different things to sidewalk handbag shoppers and Civil War Re enactors. But both would most easily define it by what it is not. It's not a fake. It's not a knockoff or a replica. It's a lot harder to say what authenticity is.

Lionel Trilling, who delivered a series of lectures on the subject at Harvard in 1970, says that authenticity "implies the downward movement through all the cultural superstructures to some place where all movement ends, and begins."¹

Shakespeare said it better: "This above all: to thine own self be true."²

Authenticity cuts straight to the core of our true selves, the alpha and omega of who we are. It looks back to what we were (the century-old Confederate Officer's sword the replica is modeled on) and forward to what we want to be (the genuine leather Prada with signature lining).

So to understand how we can leverage authenticity for the future, we have to understand how the meaning of authenticity has evolved through the past.

THE RISE OF AUTHENTICITY

In simpler times, when farmers plucked their suppers from the earth, everything was authentic because it all came straight from the source. Scarcity of resources meant there was no opposing force, nothing fake to qualify the real against.

With the Industrial Revolution came abundance of resources, and a whole host of opposition. Natural commodities were manufactured into goods. Trilling's cultural superstructures emerged. Mass production, mass consumption, mass marketing and mass media created a climate of endless reproduction, and Modernists realized their world was more complex. Reproductions had to be distinguished from the originals. With that goal in mind, authenticity was redefined – it was whatever came first.

But for Post modern thinkers like Jean Baudrillard, the original was not only becoming increasingly elusive, but ultimately ceasing to exist. As mass production and mass media evolved, we could no longer differentiate the copies from the original.³ Everything was now a cultural construct; nothing could be traced back to its source. Fredric Jameson insists that in this context, history lost its linear thrust into the present.⁴ We no longer had a strong sense of where we had come from, so we had to look elsewhere for authenticity.

In this way, market forces propelled the rise of authenticity. In the shift from the Agrarian Economy to the Industrial Economy, abundance of goods meant there were more choices, but the external cues (naturalness, originality) that would inform these choices became less reliable, and authenticity became more subjective.⁵ It was no longer a function of an object itself, but rather the intention it was bought and sold with.

To borrow James Gilmore and Joseph Pine's useful vocabulary from their economic Theory of Everything, the Industrial Economy gave way to a Service Economy with a new authenticity imperative: quality. As consumers recognized the power in choosing from a range of slightly differentiated goods, customer service and sincerity emerged as signifiers of quality.⁶ These human touches resonated with consumers seeking a reflection of their individuality in the things that they buy. And the more customized the purchasing process became, the more buying behaviors began to reciprocally shape identity and sense of self.

AUTHENTICITY IN CONSUMER CULTURE

Michel de Certeau was the first to point out that consumers adapted to a culture of mass production by ascribing personal meanings to mass-produced goods.⁷ Consumer culture holds its own against a compelling market dynamic by restructuring it as taste. Post-modern consumers are better informed, more involved, and increasingly individualistic. The new measure of authenticity is how a consumer feels about a product.⁸

As goods and services lack currency on their own, consumers instead seek out memorable experiences that engage them on an individual level. In Gilmore and Pine's framework, the Service Economy matures into the Experience Economy. Personal lives are linked to purchasing lives, with expertise and assistance on the market to enhance the value of life moments.⁹ Consumers sacrifice some degree of self-sufficiency, seeking, in exchange, a lived-in self that aligns more to the ideal self-image.

But if we have lost sight of the object purchased, we are increasingly afflicted with the post-modern condition – loss of meaning. In a world clouded with deliberately staged experiences, purchasing decisions are driven by how real consumers perceive the offering to be. The Experience Economy trades exclusively on authenticity.¹⁰

Internalizing authenticity has made it ultimately subjective, but has also given it self-awareness. We appraise authenticity instinctively by drawing on its whole history, from the natural and organic to the oldest and original to the customized and sincerely well intentioned. The past is still in some ways the ideal form of authentic experience, but it's not some objective idea of the past. It's a subjective ideal filtered through a long history of shared memories and tailored to individual aspirations.

Businesses need to offset consumers' lost sense of objective reality with an understanding of the difference between what is real and what we perceive to be real. Rendering authenticity is the new business imperative.¹¹

AUTHENTICITY IN BRAND CULTURE

In the Industrial Economy, brands were cultural engineers, dictating the wheres and whens of consumption. Authenticity was granted by cultural authority, and any recognizable brand name had this in abundance.¹² But this eventually roused distrust of cultural authority – there were so many products to choose from that they couldn't all be right. So when the power shifted to the individual consumer, brands had to adapt to the conditions of the new economy.

The brands of the Service Economy were not engineers wielding cultural blueprints, but cultural resources. They were useful ingredients in the consumer's recipe for a unique social identity. They treated consumers like people, and the best of them treated consumers like the people they wanted to be. They distanced themselves from the profit motive and concentrated on the human touches, lest consumers suspect tinges of manipulation and insincerity in commercial intent.¹³

But with the self-awareness of the Experience Economy, brands are understood to be commercial entities. Distance from the profit motive is suspicious – being authentic means being true

to yourself, as well as to others. Authenticity is now achieved by making a positive contribution as a cultural resource to society collectively while also making unique contributions to individual consumer identity projects. In this way, authenticity is predominantly rendered through storytelling. The authentic brands of the Experience Economy are citizen-artist types, painting pictures of individual growth from visions of collective good.¹⁴

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF AUTHENTICITY

Looking forward, the vision becomes more significant than the image. The next generation of brands sells not products, services or experiences, but outcomes. In other words, the consumer is the product. And the consumer alone can decide the authenticity of the outcome on offer. We are entering a Transformational Economy of higher purpose where authenticity means guiding people to a better way.¹⁵

But the lofty ideas of transformational authenticity in the next economy do not overwrite the indicators of authenticity that came before. Instead, the definition of authenticity has shifted from a dichotomy of real and fake to a matrix comprised of varying degrees of realness and fakeness where there is more space for brands to maneuver based on their understanding of what consumers perceive them to be.¹⁶

The same cues are there, but the stakes have gone up. In the Transformational Economy, previous notions of authenticity are reframed as causes – i.e. being “green”, historically preservationist or user-friendly. Consumers use these causes to assess the authenticity of transformations through the lens of their individual subjectivity. And brands that demonstrate a particular understanding of the nuances of authenticity can secure a strong position on the real side of the authenticity matrix to fully leverage the concept for the benefit of the brand, the consumer, and the greater good.

NOTES

1. Lionel Trilling. **Sincerity and Authenticity** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 12.
2. William Shakespeare. **Hamlet**, Act I, Scene III.
3. Jean Baudrillard. **Simulation and Simulacra** (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).
4. Frederic Jameson. **Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism** (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).
5. David Lewis and Darren Bridger. **The Soul of the New Consumer: Authenticity – What We Buy and Why in the New Economy** (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2000), 3.
6. James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine. **Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want** (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 2–3, 45–79.
7. Michel de Certeau. **The Practice of Everyday Life** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
8. Douglas B. Holt. “Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding”, **Journal of Consumer Research**, 51: June 2002, 70–90.
9. Gilmore and Pine, 46–50.
10. Ibid., 1.
11. Ibid., 18.
12. Holt, 80–81.
13. Ibid., 81–83.
14. Ibid., 87.
15. Gilmore and Pine, 45–50.
16. Ibid., 95–114.

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