

Money & BUSINESS

StarTribune • D3

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A long, hard look in a clear mirror

To regain consumers' trust, executives must determine their companies' true gifts and tell the truth about them.

By Deb Fiorella

It should come as no surprise to hear that consumers have lost their trust in business. Thanks to Enron, Tyco, Martha Stewart, Arthur Andersen and others whose names are now synonymous with corporate scandal and greed, consumer confidence in business is so weak that intensive care is in order.

How did this happen? How did consumers' distrust of business become so strong?

In a word: authenticity. Or more accurately, lack of authenticity.

It's a pretty simple concept, authenticity. At its simplest, it means being who you say you are. It's having a public face that is the same as the private one — one that is unfabricated, sustainable and true. It's about making sure that you can deliver on your brand promise every time.

That's it: simply being who you say you are. Not saying you're one thing when you're actually another. Delivering what you promise. Of course, that's not to say that you can't set goals and try to improve — that's different. But being authentic means stating your position and being able to live up to it. Always.

Imagine this scenario: You're the CEO of a large company that provides a utility to the public. One day you decide you want your company to be known as the leader in providing excellent

customer service. You instruct your ad agency to create a print campaign touting your new position. Your tagline is changed to reflect your "exceptional" customer service, and you train your customer-service employees to include the new verbiage when answering the telephone.

You're so enamored with your new rebranding effort that a new corporate identity system is developed.

But what if the customer service doesn't improve? What if customers can't get answers to simple questions? What happens when the customer-service technicians arrive four hours past their promised arrival time or not at all?

What happens is a disconnect between what your brand promises and what you deliver. What happens is a breakdown of consumer trust. Consumers no longer believe your company's promises and, if not remedied quickly, their distrust might soon turn to open hostility. What happens is the kind of environment we're experiencing today.

What if you, as CEO of our imaginary company, had chosen an authentic brand identity? Imagine you had chosen to take a look at your company's strengths and weaknesses and discovered that while your customer service was less than stellar, you most often were first to market with new technology. If you had been true to your company's corporate

self, your brand identity could have reflected that competitive edge, and you could honor your brand promise.

While authenticity might not be the only thing necessary to restore consumer trust, it's a good start. But authenticity is not easy to achieve. Authenticity requires a strong leader who understands that a strong brand happens from the inside out and who is willing to commit the time and resources necessary to ensure that all of a company's people, products and services are aligned to deliver on their promise.

Often it's easier for a company to decide what it wants its brand positioning to be, regardless whether it's true or not.

We once had a client that was a small division of a larger organization. The department head wanted his business unit to be positioned as the "leader in providing data solutions."

The problem was they weren't. Although they were striving to be seen as leaders, they just weren't there yet. Rather than simply agreeing with them and creating an identity around their desired position, we helped them understand that because they couldn't deliver on their brand promise yet, they would quickly lose credibility.

Unfortunately, not all companies can see the value in this. Executives from another company, a start-up, asked us to create an identity around a brand position they had developed. When we asked questions about how they were going to deliver this brand experience, we were given vague answers that didn't give us a good feel for who they real-

ly were. Ultimately, we decided to remain true to our brand and walk away from that project.

Companies of all sizes struggle with brand authenticity. Even as Wal-Mart prepares to defend itself against wage lawsuits and a national gender-discrimination lawsuit recently granted class-action status, the world's largest retailer airs TV ads featuring female employees touting what a great place it is to work.

A number of companies do have authentic brands: Even after being acquired by a large corporation, Aveda continues to live up to its brand promise of environmental responsibility in its products, people and community giving.

Medtronic is an authentic brand. In fact, former CEO Bill George literally wrote the book on authenticity in business. George's book, "Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value," details how authenticity must be a top-down initiative. After years of studying leaders and their traits, George concluded that leadership begins and ends with the strength and honesty to be oneself — not by emulating others.

Achieving and maintaining authenticity is hard work. But if the result is restoring consumer confidence, it will be work that's well worth the effort.

About the author

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