

REFLEC TIONS

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The Need
For More Brands
To Make More Work
That Makes More
Of Us Feel
Seen



Most advertising has perfected the art of saying absolutely nothing about the lives of real people.

It's all airy abstractions, generic smiles, and stock-photo sunshine. If you were to believe the bulk of adland's output, life is a frictionless sequence of moments: you laugh with friends, sip a drink, gaze meaningfully into the distance, and of course buy the product. Meanwhile, actual life is messier, harder, funnier, and far stranger. But you'd never know it from the wasteland of clichés brands churn out.

This isn't a harmless creative preference, it's a failure. Advertising is supposed to be a mirror of the world, not a fogged-up bathroom mirror that hides every wrinkle, crack, and complexity.

The point of brand storytelling isn't to erase reality until we're left with a glossy fantasy no one's living; it's to reflect enough truth back to people that they feel, in some way, seen.

More often than not, brands treat “being seen” as if it’s either too risky, too niche, or simply not worth the effort.

When brands refuse to acknowledge the real texture of our lives, they aren’t just missing a marketing trick, they’re erasing the very people they claim to care about.

They’re saying, “We’d rather pretend you’re someone else. Someone neater. Someone easier to sell to.” Which is a hell of a way to alienate people who might otherwise have been customers for life.

This is why Apple's work in "The Greatest" is a rare example worth remembering.

It doesn't just pander to some imagined demographic. It looks straight at a group of people, the disabled community, who are rarely portrayed in advertising without pity, tokenism, or condescension. And it doesn't do it with melodramatic strings or heartstring-tugging narration; it lets their own experiences, in their own contexts, take the lead.

The ad follows real people in real situations, showing the way Apple's accessibility features integrate into their daily lives. It's not some over-engineered metaphor or overlit "aspiration." It's functional. It's relatable. And it's joyful. There's a kind of dignity in the way it treats its subjects, no "inspiration porn," no airbrushing the truth. It says: We see you. We've thought about you. You matter to us. Which, in an industry obsessed with chasing the biggest "total addressable market," is almost radical.

That's the thing: seeing people is not the same as targeting them. Targeting is a marketing exercise. Seeing is a human one. Targeting tries to find the right wallet. Seeing tries to understand the life attached to it. Most brands get stuck at the first stage because they're afraid the second will make their message "too specific" or "too real." But here's the irony: the more truth you put into your work, the more universal it becomes.

“The Greatest” works not only for the people in it, but for everyone watching.

Because the human truth it carries, wanting independence, connection, and agency, is one we all share. It makes us feel something about the brand beyond “they make good devices.” It makes us feel they get it. And getting it is a huge differentiator in a market drowning in sameness.

The industry’s obsession with mass appeal is the very thing that often makes ads feel like they’re for nobody in particular. In trying to speak to everyone, they speak to no one. You end up with soft-focus montages and voiceovers that could be selling phones, insurance, or yogurt. The category disappears, the product disappears, and worst of all the people disappear.

What if more brands flipped that? What if they stopped treating “relatable” like a synonym for “watered down” and started treating it like a competitive advantage? What if they dug into the specifics of people’s lives, the details only real observation can uncover, and built creative around that? What if they showed the rough edges, the unfiltered moments, the human contradictions? It’s not that every ad has to be a documentary, but it should at least contain a pulse.

**The truth is, people know
when they're invisible in the story.
They know when they're being
replaced by a stock image of
“someone like them.”**

They know when a brand has done the bare minimum to “check the box” of representation. And in an age where your audience can, and will, call you out instantly, pretending to see people is worse than not seeing them at all.

“The Greatest” resonates because it doesn’t pretend. It doesn’t overcompensate. It just puts people at the center and shows how technology fits into their actual reality. It trusts the audience to see the value without the ad yelling about it.

It’s also effective. When people feel seen, they remember you. When they remember you, they talk about you. When they talk about you, you win. Not because you gamed an algorithm, but because you connected on a level that algorithms can’t replicate. That’s how you get lasting loyalty instead of momentary clicks.

Advertising has the power to shape culture, but it also has the power to reflect it.

Too often, it does neither, opting instead for a beige nowhere-land that exists only in mood boards. But the brands that choose to step into the real world, to engage with real lives in all their specificity, can do something far more meaningful: they can make people feel visible. And visibility is a deeply human need, one that goes far beyond the transaction. The opportunity is sitting there, wide open.

Every category is full of lives worth showing, communities worth celebrating, realities worth capturing.

But the work will require brands to get comfortable with imperfection, with complexity, with letting go of control. It will require them to see their audiences as people before they see them as customers.

That's the point: people first, then product. That's what "The Greatest" gets right, and what so much advertising gets wrong. If more brands followed that lead, we'd get more work that matters, more work that makes people stop and think, "That's me." And maybe, just maybe, we'd start to believe advertising isn't just capable of selling us something, but of actually seeing us for who we really are.

Because at the end of the day, no one's going to remember the ad that replaced reality with a generic smile. But they will remember the one that looked straight at them and said, without words: I see you. I know you're there. You matter. And that's worth so much more than a perfect lighting setup.



Gordon Gerard McLean

So I'm the one behind the mystery moniker. Here's a bit about me. Originally from Dublin, I've spent 25+ years as a brand strategist in a variety of creative companies; from Sheffield to London, Istanbul, New York, and Cupertino, CA.

I'm fortunate to have helped launch, build and reinvent some of the world's best brands; including Apple, Bacardi, Bank of Scotland, Bing, Bombay Sapphire, EA Games, GE, Gillette, Grey Goose, Guinness, Halifax, Hilton, Holiday Inn Express, HSBC, Perfect Day, Radisson, Sandy Hook Promise, SAP, ServiceNow, Vodafone, Wells Fargo, and Yerba Madre.

I've also been lucky enough to lead a body of work that's been recognized for its commercial impact by the IPA and Effies, for its strategic thinking by the Jay Chiat's and ARF, for its cultural impact by the MoMA, Emmys and TED, and for its creative excellence by The Clios, One Show, Cannes Lions, D&AD, and others.

Now based in LA, I fly solo under my nom de strat, Fear No Truth, helping agency, start-up, and marketing leaders, wherever they are, to find, tell and manage their brands' true stories.

Let's LinkedIn.

A man with a mustache and sunglasses is sitting in a motorized wheelchair. He is wearing a yellow shirt and dark pants. The wheelchair has a blue handle and a red button. He is looking to the right. The background is a textured, grey wall.

FEAR
NO
TRUTH

Fear No Truth is an independent strategy practice, based in LA, that helps agency, start-up, and marketing leaders everywhere to find, tell and manage their brands' true stories.

