

REFLEC TIONS

Volume 01 / Issue 04

Polish, Smoke
& Mirrors:
Everything
You Need
For Big Lie
Brand Building



The unsettling secret of marketing is this: you don't actually need the truth to build a “successful” brand. You just need polish, smoke and mirrors.

A slick finish, a few distracting flourishes, and the illusion of substance. Done well, it's the difference between selling a priceless heirloom and selling a shiny trinket from a dollar store; both can fetch a high price if the lighting is right and the story is tight.

For generations, marketing has been built on this principle. Wrap a product in a story that flatters the customer's self-image. Airbrush the reality. Fill in the inconvenient gaps with charm. And most importantly, keep the camera lens so soft-focus that no one notices the flaws. You're not building a brand; you're staging a magic trick.

In the world of big lie brand building, reality isn't an asset. It's a liability.

Polish is the first tool in the kit. It's the cosmetic surgeon of the marketing world, smoothing out rough edges until the product gleams like it just stepped out of a luxury showroom. Never mind that behind the curtain it's the same tired widget made in the same factory as the competitor's. With enough polish, even a wholesale mediocrity can shine bright like a diamond.

Smoke comes next. A little mystery, a whiff of the unattainable, a suggestion that there's more than meets the eye. In practice, this is vague language about "craft" and "care" and "innovation," paired with visuals that don't tell you much, which is exactly the point. Smoke keeps the audience leaning in, trying to see what's really there, all the while keeping them from noticing what's missing.

Then there are the mirrors. Reflection and redirection. You make the customer see themselves in the brand. This isn't just selling; it's flattery at scale. Tell them the product makes them smarter, cooler, more adventurous, more them. Convince them that buying it is a statement about who they are. And when the product inevitably under delivers, they'll defend it anyway, because now it's tied to their ego.

The reason polish, smoke and mirrors work so well is simple: the economics of attention.

Truth is expensive. You have to live it, build it into the product, maintain it through operations, and then still tell it well. Lies, on the other hand, are cheap. You don't need to fix the product if you can fix the perception. Think about the industries where this works best: luxury fashion, celebrity skincare, "premium" bottled water, inspirational tech. Entire categories thrive on the promise of difference where little to none exists. These brands aren't in the product business, they're in the drama industry.

You could spend millions making the product actually better, or you could spend a fraction of that creating a campaign that makes people feel like it's better. Guess which one delivers a faster return? Guess which one most marketers choose? The truth is awkward. It's messy. It's often too complicated to fit into a tagline or a TikTok. Worse, the truth can be boring.

Take any number of food brands. The truth might be: "We make a decent snack in a factory that's safe and clean, but it's not much different from the next guy's." Now dress it up in smoke and mirrors: "Crafted with passion from only the finest ingredients, each bite is a journey to a better you." Add a beautiful, slow-motion ad of fresh berries falling into a golden bowl of sunlight. Congratulations. You've gone from forgettable reality to aspirational fantasy.

Marketers love to pretend the customer is the helpless victim of the big lie. That's comforting. But the truth is more uncomfortable: audiences often want to be lied to.

They want the fantasy of a skincare serum that “reverses time” or a running shoe that will “unlock your potential.” They want to believe the coffee is sourced by happy farmers who sing in the sunrise and not by underpaid workers in conditions they’d rather not think about. In this way, polish, smoke, and mirrors don’t just sell a product; they protect the customer from the sharp edges of reality. If the truth is unsexy, inconvenient, or morally uncomfortable, the big lie is a welcome relief.

The danger isn’t that the big lie doesn’t work; it works brilliantly. The danger is that it works until it doesn’t. All it takes is a crack in the mirror. A customer sees behind the curtain. A journalist follows the supply chain. A whistleblower goes viral. When that happens, the cost of maintaining the illusion skyrockets. PR crisis management. Hasty rebrands. Apology ads. The audience, once betrayed, doesn’t just stop buying. They turn into an unpaid demolition crew for your reputation.

In the age of the internet, these implosions happen faster than ever. The bigger the lie, the louder the collapse. And yet, somehow, the industry keeps playing the same game. Why? Because marketing still rewards short-term wins over long-term trust.

Most CMOs will be gone before the house of cards comes down, so they focus on the quick win; the spike in sales, the vanity metric, the award-winning ad that makes everyone feel clever.

There's no bonus for truth. There's no KPI for long-term credibility. The big lie is faster, flashier, and easier to sell up the chain. So polish, smoke, and mirrors remain the default toolkit.

At some point, the big lie becomes indistinguishable from the brand itself. The origin story gets rehearsed so many times it hardens into myth. The visuals and language calcify into a protective shell.

Inside that shell, the actual product may change; ingredients swapped, manufacturing outsourced, costs cut, but the perception remains untouched. It's a strange form of brand immortality: the idea of the brand survives even as its reality withers.

This is why so many brands die in spirit long before they die in market. They're kept alive not by relevance or value, but by the inertia and seduction of a good illusion.

Every now and then, a brand does it the hard way. They start with a truth worth telling and then tell it well. They build something that can survive daylight. They don't need smoke because they actually have fire.

These brands are rare not because truth doesn't work, but because it demands patience and discipline; qualities that don't fit well into quarterly reporting. The big lie is tempting because it's quick. The truth is stubborn because it's slow.

But here's the paradox: when you build on truth, you don't need to fear the day the curtain is pulled back. When you build on lies, you live in constant dread of it.

The real magic trick in marketing isn't polish, smoke and mirrors. It's making something that doesn't require them.

That's harder, riskier, and demands more than a marketing budget; it requires actual change, actual quality, actual commitment.

Until then, the industry will keep doing what it does best: creating a perfectly staged performance and selling it as reality. And the audience will keep buying tickets, at least until they get tired of the show.

When that happens, all the polish in the world won't stop the tarnish from showing through.



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.



FEAR
NO
TRUTH

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