

# REFLEC TIONS

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Know Thine  
Enemy & Make  
Real Life The True  
Competitor Your  
Brand Should  
Seek To Beat



**A brand's real competition isn't the other brands in its category. It isn't the one with the bigger ad budget, the latest influencer, or the slicker TikTok.**

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The real competition is the thing you can't brief against, outspend, or outmaneuver: real life. Real life is relentless. It doesn't care about your marketing calendar. It doesn't wait politely for your media buy to kick in. It's the email ping in the middle of your pre-roll. It's the crying kid while your ad plays on TV. It's the traffic jam, the deadline, the dog that needs walking. It's also the birthday party, the beach trip, the first kiss, the perfect cappuccino. It's the entire messy spectrum of what people are actually doing, thinking, and feeling when they're not paying attention to you. And the truth is, they are almost never paying attention to you

**Marketers love to believe their brand exists in a competitive set. That's comforting. It means the only threats are the Coke to our Pepsi, the Nike to our Adidas, the Apple to our Samsung.**

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We can study their campaigns, benchmark their social stats, and convince ourselves that if we just win a bigger slice of this tidy little pie, we've done our job. But the reality is that most people are living in an entirely different pie. They don't care about your brand's category. They don't even think about it until a specific need pops up, and even then, that "moment of truth" is still competing against a million and one other priorities.

# **Real life is noisy. It's urgent. It's unpredictable. It's emotional. It's infinitely more compelling than any brand asset library.**

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The reason most marketing fails isn't because the brand lost to a competitor; it's because the brand lost to whatever was happening in that person's day. You're not competing for share of market. You're competing for share of mind. And real life has home field advantage.

If you want to win against real life, you can't just turn the volume up on your media plan. You have to make work that's worth people putting real life on pause for, even if just for a heartbeat. That means showing up with something so arresting, so relevant, so emotionally charged that it slices through the static. And here's the inconvenient truth: most brands don't make that kind of work. They make wallpaper.

Wallpaper is safe. Wallpaper looks like other wallpaper. Wallpaper ticks the boxes on the brand guidelines checklist. It's pleasant enough to exist in the background without offending anyone. But background is exactly where your brand will stay. Because real life will always beat wallpaper. Real life is a live concert, a heated argument, a belly laugh, a breaking news alert.

# The brands that actually beat real life for attention do so by refusing to play small.

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They either create something so unexpected it hijacks the moment, or they tap into something so deeply human it feels like it belongs in that moment. Sometimes they do both. Think about the brand stories that stick with you; they almost always felt urgent, necessary, or weirdly intimate in a way that made you forget what you were doing for a second.

Beating real life doesn't mean ignoring it. It means knowing it well enough to judo-flip it in your favor. If your audience is overwhelmed, meet them with simplicity. If they're bored, jolt them with surprise. If they're scrolling in a haze, shock them into clarity. If they're celebrating, celebrate louder, or more meaningfully, than anyone else.

It also means admitting that your brand is not the center of their world. The humility to recognize this is what frees you to stop shouting and start actually mattering. Real life isn't your enemy in the sense that you should fight it; it's your training ground. If your work can't survive in the wild of people's actual lives, it's not going to survive at all.

# **The seductions of real life, Netflix binges, spontaneous nights out, deep conversations, petty gossip, are fierce competitors.**

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They offer instant gratification, emotional payoff, social currency. Your brand has to offer something in the same league. Not a product feature. Not a pithy line in your press release. Something that actually makes someone feel something right now.

That might be beauty. It might be usefulness. It might be a laugh they want to share. It might be a gut punch of recognition that makes them stop mid-scroll. Whatever it is, it has to be so in tune with their reality that it earns the privilege of interrupting it.

**Most brands will stay stuck fighting imaginary wars with their category rivals, mistaking competitor analysis for relevance.**

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Meanwhile, real life will keep winning, because it's faster, messier, and infinitely more interesting. The brands that do win, really win, are the ones that stop trying to "own" the conversation and start trying to deserve a place in it.

# **So here's the challenge: Stop benchmarking against other brands and start benchmarking against real life.**

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Don't ask, "Is this better than what our competitor did?" Ask, "Is this more interesting than what my audience is already doing right now?" If the answer is no, you've already lost.

In the end, your brand's greatest rival is not the logo across the aisle. It's the reality happening in the consumer's head, heart, and hands at any given moment. Beat that, and you've done more than win market share; you've won actual human attention. And in today's world, that's the rarest and most valuable currency there is.





## 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 Chiats 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

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.

