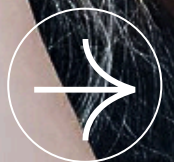


REFLEC TIONS

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Can Brands
Really Afford To
Tell The Truth,
The Whole Truth
& Nothing But
The Truth?



Brands love to flirt with the truth. They sidle up to it, wink at it, borrow its shine, and then slip away before the relationship gets too serious.

They give us fragments of truth, polished, edited, airbrushed truths. But the whole truth? That's rarer than an honest politician. And yet, there's a strange optimism to be found in the idea that brands could, if they really wanted, tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Not only could they survive it, they could actually profit from it.

But let's start with reality. Most of what brands say is, at best, half-truths. They highlight what flatters, obscure what doesn't, and hope consumers are too distracted or too forgiving to notice. They tell you how much protein is in the snack bar, not how much sugar. They rave about "crafted in small batches," leaving out that those batches are churned out by the tens of thousands. They market sustainability with leafy green imagery while quietly pumping out plastic packaging that will outlive your grandchildren.

The brand world runs on selective honesty. This is not exactly shocking. Brands are, after all, the public face of capitalism.

And capitalism, by design, does not reward total transparency. The logic is simple: tell just enough truth to persuade, but never so much that it puts people off the purchase. That logic is ingrained. It's cynical, yes, but also effective, at least in the short term.

Yet here's where things get interesting: consumers are no longer as gullible, docile, or distracted as they used to be. They have the internet, the world's largest bullshit detector. They can look up your ingredients, your labor practices, your CEO's tax filings, and your carbon footprint in the time it takes to brew a cup of coffee. They know when they're being spun. They've become fluent in the language of marketing fluff, able to spot the weasel words and empty promises a mile away. The gap between what brands say and what people believe is widening into a chasm.

And in that chasm lies opportunity.

Because the truth - raw, whole, unvarnished - has a strange magnetic power. It disarms people. It cuts through noise. It earns trust in a way no glossy campaign ever could. When a brand admits its weaknesses, confesses its imperfections, or simply speaks plainly, people listen. They're startled, because they're not used to it. And they lean in, because honesty feels almost radical in a world of endless spin.

Consider Patagonia, the oft-cited example. They don't just say "buy our jackets." They say, "Don't buy this jacket," pointing out the environmental cost of consumption. It's honest to the point of being counterintuitive, and yet, it works. Sales grew.

Or look at Domino's Pizza, which flatly admitted its pizza had been terrible, then showed the work they were doing to fix it. People didn't mock them; they rewarded them. They recognized the courage in owning up.

The lesson is simple: honesty can sell.

But let's not romanticize it. Telling the whole truth doesn't mean pouring every ugly fact onto the table like a confession at a 12-step meeting. It doesn't mean brands must revel in their sins. It means treating consumers as grown-ups, capable of handling complexity, contradiction, and nuance. It means being upfront about trade-offs, about where you're strong and where you're still failing. It means refusing to hide behind platitudes when real answers are demanded.

Imagine if a fast-food chain came out and said: “Our burgers are not health food. They’re indulgence, they’re salt and fat, and we know it.

But we also know they bring you joy on a Friday night, and that’s what we’re here for.” That’s honesty. Or if a fashion brand admitted: “Yes, our clothes are made in overseas factories. We’re working to make conditions better, but we’re not there yet.” That’s honesty. Or if a tech company said: “Yes, your data fuels our business. We can’t pretend otherwise. But here’s how we’re protecting it, and here’s what we’re not doing with it.” That’s honesty.

Would such candor scare some people off? Maybe. But it would also attract others; the ones sick of being talked down to, spun around, or distracted with shiny promises. The truth polarizes, but that’s part of its power.

There’s also a financial logic here. In an economy where brand trust is fragile, honesty itself becomes a competitive advantage. When trust collapses, consumers don’t just switch products, they abandon categories altogether. Think about the erosion of trust in big banks, or in mainstream media, or in politics. Once the lie is exposed, the whole category pays the price. Brands that step out of the shadows and own the truth can insulate themselves against that collapse. They can stand apart as beacons of credibility in a marketplace of smoke and mirrors.

But let's be clear: this isn't about virtue signaling. Consumers can smell false virtue as easily as they can smell a bad fish.

A brand that wraps itself in moral righteousness while hiding its failings is worse off than one that makes no claims at all. The only way to play this game is with radical honesty. Half-measures don't cut it.

Of course, telling the whole truth is risky. It requires courage. It means giving up the safety blanket of spin. It means embracing imperfection in a culture that worships polish. But here's the secret: imperfection is more believable than perfection. And believability is the currency of modern branding.

**So yes, it is realistic to
imagine brands telling the
truth, the whole truth, and
nothing but the truth.**

Realistic because they have no real alternative. The age of spin is running out of runway. And optimistic because, when they do, they don't just win applause, they win loyalty. They win forgiveness. They win longevity.

The brands that will thrive in the next decade will be the ones that stop pretending, stop editing, and stop hiding.

They will be the ones that embrace truth not as a campaign, but as a way of doing business. They will make peace with their flaws, show their work, and trust their customers to see them as they are. And those customers, tired of being bullshitted, will reward them.

The truth is not the enemy of commerce. It is its last, best hope.



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.

