

# REFLEC TIONS

Volume 01 / Issue 09

“Every lie  
we tell incurs a  
debt to the truth.  
Sooner or later  
that debt must  
be paid.”



**“Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth. Sooner or later that debt must be paid.”**

---

Valery Legasov’s line in Chernobyl was meant as an indictment of political deceit, but it just as easily applies to the world of brands. Because brands, at their worst, are elaborate machines for lying. At their best, they are stories—true stories—told with conviction. And in between? They are a mess of half-truths, spin, and empty promises waiting for the debt collector of reality to show up at their glossy glass office doors.

The problem is not that brands lie outright. Most don’t claim something as absurd as “our soda cures cancer” or “this detergent will make you immortal.” Their lies are softer, subtler, and somehow more insidious. They sell illusions: a sneaker that supposedly delivers transcendence, a burger that supposedly equals happiness, a luxury bag that supposedly gives your life meaning. These aren’t explicit falsehoods. They are emotional overpromises. They stretch reality so thin it eventually snaps. And when it snaps, the debt to truth comes due.

**We've seen it happen. Oil companies promising green futures while pumping carbon into the air. Tech platforms promising connection while delivering division. Fast fashion promising empowerment while hiding sweatshops.**

---

The lie is always dressed in beautiful clothing, always wrapped in sleek campaigns, always whispered with a smile. And yet, sooner or later, the consumer smells the rot underneath. That's the essence of Legasov's line: you can never escape the ledger. The world keeps score. Lies add up. And the truth is patient; it doesn't mind waiting decades for its due.

A brand lie is not free. It may buy you a quarter or two of sales, maybe even a decade of dominance, but the interest compounds. Volkswagen's "clean diesel" was a lie that carried the debt of billions in fines and irreparable damage to its reputation. Pepsi's tone-deaf Kendall Jenner ad was a lie of relevance—pretending a can of sugar water could heal cultural wounds—and it cost them not just ridicule, but a generational dent in credibility.

The point is not that these brands failed because they lied, but because their lies were eventually exposed. That's the brutal efficiency of reality. No matter how many brand managers you hire, no matter how many awards you win, no matter how many influencers you pay, the truth is always waiting to collect.

**But let's not only wallow in cynicism. If lies incur debt, then truth, properly told, generates compound interest of another kind. A true story, powerfully expressed, doesn't just sell, it endures.**

---

Take Patagonia. Its story is grounded in actual practices, actual values, actual decisions. They don't promise to save the planet with a jacket. They tell the truth: consumption itself is the problem. And because their story aligns with their actions, it rings true. The result is a brand not just profitable but culturally immortal.

Or Dove. The "Real Beauty" campaign struck a nerve because it wasn't promising women they'd become supermodels if they bought a bar of soap. It was telling the uncomfortable truth: the beauty industry had spent decades distorting women's self-image. By admitting that, Dove didn't just sell more soap—they reset the conversation.

Truth doesn't need polish. Truth needs courage. A true story doesn't always make you look perfect. It might expose your flaws. But those flaws are where trust is born. Consumers don't believe in perfection. They believe in humanity. And humanity is messy, contradictory, incomplete.

# Why don't more brands just tell the truth? Because the truth is terrifying.

---

Truth says: our product isn't for everyone.

Truth says: we don't always get it right.

Truth says: our company is a work in progress.

And brands, raised on the steady diet of quarterly earnings and market share metrics, are allergic to anything that smells like vulnerability. They want total addressable market, not selective appeal. They want bulletproof positioning, not honest contradiction. They want to be loved by all, not trusted by some.

So instead, they decorate their lies. They hire agencies to lacquer spin into storyboards. They parade consultants to give the illusion of credibility. They obsess over optics. But deep down, they know the debt clock is ticking.

# **We live in an era where the repayment of truth is accelerating. Social media has made every consumer an auditor.**

---

Every lie has a half-life shorter than ever before. The supply chain can be filmed. The factory can be leaked. The bad customer service call can go viral. The fake claim can be fact-checked instantly.

This should terrify brands. But it should also liberate them. Because if the lie gets exposed faster than ever, the truth can also spread faster than ever. A true story, told with clarity and consistency, can ignite movements overnight.

Think about brands like Ben & Jerry's, which publicly takes political stances, not because it makes shareholders comfortable, but because it aligns with their founding truth. Or Oatly, which leaned into its awkward, oddball honesty about oat milk being both weird and wonderful. These are not perfect brands. But they are real. And in the age of radical transparency, real is rarer than ever.

**True story brand building is not a slogan. It is a discipline. It means interrogating your own company until the lies fall away. It means asking: what do we actually do that matters? What's the truth we're avoiding because it feels too raw, too unpolished, too unmarketable?**

---

And then it means telling that truth again and again, until it becomes not just marketing, but memory. Because that's what brands ultimately are: collective memories about what a company has done, not just what it has said.

The best brands are the ones whose stories are indistinguishable from their actions. Nike's "Just Do It" works not because the slogan is clever, but because it resonates with decades of sponsoring athletes who embody resilience. Apple's "Think Different" still echoes because it reflects a history of disruptive products. These are not lies polished into truth. They are truths amplified into culture.

## **So yes, the Chernobyl quote is a warning. But it's also a map for brands willing to follow.**

---

Don't mortgage your credibility for a short-term spike. Instead, invest in truth early. Build your brand not on borrowed time, but on earned trust. Because the bill will always come due. And when it does, you'd better hope you've been living in the black.

True story brand building is not just a moral stance. It's a competitive advantage. It's harder to copy, harder to fake, and infinitely more enduring. The truth, once embraced, becomes a moat no competitor can breach.

In the end, the real choice is simple: you can pay interest on lies for the rest of your brand's life, or you can let the truth pay you dividends.

One path is shiny, and seductive, but bankrupt in the end. The other is harder riskier, but enduring. And if you need a reminder of which to choose, remember Legasov in that cold Soviet courtroom: the truth doesn't go away. It waits. It watches. And it always collects.





## 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.

