

REFLEC TIONS

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The Truth Is
Stranger
(And More
Compelling)
Than Most
Brand Fiction



Here's something no brand strategist, social media manager, or creative director really wants to admit...

The best, most compelling, most unforgettable content on the internet today isn't coming from their campaign. It's not coming from the carefully mood-boarded, tone-of-voice-approved, hyper-targeted piece of "storytelling" the agency just spent three months crafting and another three weeks approving through twenty-seven rounds of feedback.

It's coming from a teenager with a phone. Or a grandmother on Facebook Live. Or a cat dressed as a shark, on a Roomba, being chased by a duck, around a kitchen.

Because the moment the smartphone put a high-quality camera into everyone's hands, reality started producing better stories than marketing ever could. And it's been doing it relentlessly, with no budget, no brief, and no media buy; just raw life, unfiltered, unsanitized, and uninterested in how "on-brand" it looks.

Now here's the uncomfortable bit: real life is winning. And brands are losing. Badly.

In the golden age of advertising, brands got to define the frame. They could control the lighting, the talent, the setting, and most importantly, the story.

Consumers saw the world through the lens the brand wanted them to see. A Pepsi ad in 1995 didn't have to compete with a livestream of a raccoon stealing someone's phone or a first-person video of a volcano eruption shot by a tourist who didn't even know how to hold the camera straight.

But now, the feed is the great equalizer. Every piece of brand content sits right next to whatever life just coughed up. And the real world is an absolute master of timing, absurdity, and drama.

Think about the videos you've remembered this year; the ones you've replayed, sent to friends, quoted, or thought about days later. How many of them were ads? And how many were weird, funny, chaotic, or oddly touching glimpses into actual life? The guy skateboarding down the freeway with a hair dryer in hand. The cat filter that interrupted a live TV report. The wedding proposal where everything went hilariously wrong.

That's not brand genius. That's just reality doing what it does best: being unfiltered, unpredictable, and deeply human.

The irony is, brands have been chasing “authenticity” for years now. It’s the buzzword of every strategy deck, to the point of awks at this stage.

Be authentic. Show the real you. Capture real moments. But authenticity, actual authenticity, is terrifying for brands, because it means giving up control. It means letting in the mess, the awkwardness, the stray detail that doesn’t fit the guidelines.

And brands don’t like mess. They like consistency. They like their fonts lined up, their talent on-message, their stories perfectly arced toward a positive brand impression. But real life isn’t interested in your positive brand impression. Real life is chaotic, and chaos is magnetic.

The raw, messy, unscripted stuff sticks because it’s not trying to sell us anything. The woman in the background of a news interview walking Liam, her pet lizard, on a leash? She’s not thinking about brand alignment. The kid who accidentally photobombs his mom’s Zoom call in a dinosaur costume? He’s not asking if it fits the campaign narrative. That’s why it works. It’s just happening.

There's also a deeper problem for branded content: truth isn't just stranger than fiction; it's faster.

By the time a brand has noticed a cultural moment, decided to “jump on” it, written a concept, shot it, and gone through approvals, the moment's already over. Meanwhile, the person who actually experienced it has already posted it, and racked up 12m views.

Brands keep talking about “real-time marketing,” but reality is the only thing that actually operates in real time. The rest of us are just trying to catch up.

And here's where it gets brutal: the gap isn't just about speed or authenticity. It's about emotional connection.

When someone films their dad seeing the ocean for the first time, or a firefighter rescuing a terrified dog, or an old couple dancing badly but beautifully in their kitchen; those moments hit because they're pure. There's no manipulation, no copywriting, no underlying commercial agenda.

Brands can mimic the form, use handheld footage, shoot in natural light, cast “real people” instead of models, but they can't replicate the intent. Because branded content always has an agenda. And audiences can sense it, instantly.

The result? Branded content often feels like an uncanny valley version of reality.

Everything looks almost real, but something's just a little too polished, a little too staged. The laugh is slightly too perfect. The moment feels slightly too convenient. The coffee cup label just happens to face the camera.

We don't consciously clock all of these cues, but our brains do. And our brains tell us: this isn't life. This is marketing pretending to be life. Meanwhile, life itself doesn't need to pretend. It just has to keep rolling.

This is the point where some optimistic marketer might say, "Well, then, brands should just embrace real life! Capture actual real moments with real people!" And sure, that sounds great on a whiteboard. But in practice? It's terrifying for a brand to truly hand over the mic.

Because what if the "real" moment doesn't make the brand look good? What if it's awkward or boring or contradictory? What if the customer says something off-brand?

That's the risk. And that's exactly why reality wins; because reality doesn't care about the risk. It happens regardless.

So what does this mean for branded content?

It means the bar has shifted. The audience is no longer impressed by your ability to stage a perfect lifestyle shot. They're impressed by your ability to surprise them, to make them feel something that doesn't feel pre-approved.

It means you're not just competing with other brands; you're competing with reality itself. And reality is prolific. It's dropping thousands of tiny, powerful, absurd, touching, hilarious, heartbreaking moments into the feed every single second. It means if your content feels like content, it's already lost.

This doesn't mean brands can't win. It just means the game is different now. The winners won't be the ones who produce the slickest work, but the ones who can tap into that same strange, compelling energy that reality has, by loosening their grip on control, letting in the unexpected, and maybe even letting the truth be a little more oddball than they're comfortable with.

Because the camera is in everyone's hands now. The stories are out there. The truth is stranger, and more compelling, than most of what ends up in a script. And until brands accept that, they'll keep getting outshined by a guy in his pajamas chasing a squirrel out of his kitchen.

If you want to make content that can stand next to reality and hold its own, you have to stop competing with what you think people want to see.

You need to start embracing the fact that life will always be wilder, funnier, sadder, and more beautiful than your storyboard.

Which means the real creative challenge isn't to make something "viral." It's to make something that feels like it could have happened when no one was looking. Something that doesn't feel like branded content at all.

Because in the age of the camera phone, the most compelling thing you can be is not a brand, not a campaign, not a piece of content, but a moment.

And moments, unlike marketing plans, don't need approval. Sometimes they just need a minute.



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.

