

REFLEC TIONS

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Are Too Many
Brands Too
Hooked On
Lies To
Ever Truly
Keep It Real?



Question:

Can Brands Really Keep It Real?

The Short Answer:

Maybe.

The Real Answer:

Unlikely.

Let's be honest, "authenticity" has been one of the most overused, underdelivered words in marketing for the last two decades. It's become the corporate version of "I'm a people person" on a bad résumé; technically true in a vague way, but mostly just a filler word meant to impress. You see it in brand decks, you hear it in conference keynotes, you read it on social media captions. And yet, when you dig beneath the glossy Instagram shots and the heart-warming scripts, you often find something else entirely: a deep, unshakable addiction to lies.

The kind of lies that say “Our purpose is to make the world a better place” while sourcing materials from the cheapest suppliers possible.

The kind that produces 90-second films about “human connection” to sell cloud storage. The kind that creates an entire “authentic” lifestyle brand with staged photos, paid influencers, and a brand voice that was tested, polished, and sanitized by three layers of approval before it ever saw the light of day.

The irony is, the idea of “keeping it real” is not complicated. It’s telling the truth about who you are, what you stand for, and what you actually do. But in the brand world, telling the truth is treated like a high-risk endeavor. Instead of showing the messy reality, marketers prefer a safe, aspirational version of events. They think they’re protecting the brand. In reality, they’re just protecting the myth they’ve built, and the performance metrics that keep everyone employed.

The reality is that brands are hooked on the dopamine hit of their own hype. Every quarter, they need to feed the machine with a new campaign, a new spin, a new shiny object to keep their engagement numbers up. Truth, by contrast, is stubbornly unglamorous. It doesn’t always lead to perfect photography. It doesn’t always test well in focus groups. Sometimes it’s awkward, or unpopular, or just... normal. And “normal” doesn’t always look good in a Super Bowl spot.

There's also the fact that “keeping it real” means surrendering control; and most brands crave control.

They like carefully lit studio shots, scripted testimonials, and a legal department that removes anything even slightly open to interpretation. Real life doesn't care about that. Real life is full of variables: your product breaks, your service fails, your customer has a bad day. If you actually want to tell true brand stories, you have to be willing to put those moments out there. Not as PR disasters to be buried, but as evidence that you're human. But for most brands, the idea of voluntarily exposing imperfection is like asking a magician to reveal the trick before the show.

Of course, some brands do manage to tell the truth, and they tend to have one thing in common: they're not afraid to lose a few customers. Because here's the thing; honesty polarizes. When you tell the unvarnished truth, some people will love you for it, and some will walk away. That's the trade-off. But most big brands have been trained to avoid alienating anyone. They cling to the fantasy of “universal appeal” like it's the holy grail. And so they sand down all the edges until there's nothing sharp left to hold onto.

This is why “brand storytelling” has become, in many cases, brand theatre. A staged performance designed to give the impression of truth without actually risking any. We get “authentic” founder stories that have been rewritten (and rewritten again) by copywriters, “behind the scenes” videos where every employee looks like they were chosen by a casting agency, and “raw” social content that's been filtered and retouched until it looks like any other overly manicured print piece.

The result?

Consumers don't really believe brands anymore; they believe other people.

They believe the unfiltered TikTok review from someone who bought the product themselves. They believe the Reddit thread where customers compare notes on what really works and what doesn't. They believe the friend who tells them "Honestly, it's good, but the customer service is terrible." In other words: the trust is still there, but it's been outsourced to real humans because brands couldn't hold onto it.

And here's the truth; consumers aren't even expecting perfection. They're just expecting honesty. If a brand screws up and admits it, most people will forgive them. If they overpromise and underdeliver, then pretend it didn't happen, people remember. If they make big social or environmental claims and can't back them up, people notice. But somehow, brands keep making the same mistake: they try to control the narrative instead of earning it.

There is a way out, but it requires something most companies find terrifying: letting go of the addiction to constant positivity. The endless pursuit of "good vibes only" has flattened brand stories into bland, upbeat wallpaper. Real life is not all good vibes. It's messy, complicated, funny, frustrating, joyful, disappointing, and everything in between. A brand that can live in that whole spectrum; not just the Instagrammable parts, has a much better chance of being believed.

Keeping it real means closing the gap between what you say and what you do.

If your ads tell me you care about sustainability, but your packaging is all plastic, I'm not buying it, literally or figuratively. If you claim to be “community-driven” but only show up when there's a sales opportunity, you're not fooling anyone. Consumers are fluent in brand double-speak now. They can tell when your actions don't match your words.

The brutal truth is that most brands don't fail at authenticity because they're incapable of it. They fail because telling the truth often means changing how the company actually operates, and that's harder than tweaking the marketing. It's far easier to keep painting a pretty picture than to fix the cracks in the foundation. But eventually the cracks reveal themselves. The story stops working. The bullshit catches up to you.

We live in an age where transparency isn't optional; it's inevitable.

Social has turned every customer into a potential whistleblower. Supply chain data is now easier to trace. Reviews and ratings are public. Screenshots live forever. You can't hide behind the curtain anymore, no matter how good your PR team is. If you're going to get caught out eventually, you might as well start telling the truth now, before someone else does it for you.

So, can brands keep it real?

Technically, yes.

Will they?

Only if they're willing to break their addiction to lies.

That means being okay with imperfection. That means telling stories that aren't always flattering. That means giving people the truth even when it's inconvenient. And that means making sure the story you tell lines up with the reality you deliver.

Because here's the paradox: the more brands try to look perfect, the less believable they are. The more they admit they're human, the more trust they earn. And in the long run, trust is the only brand equity that really matters. Everything else - the hype, the hashtags, the "brand love" metrics - is just noise.

Keeping it real is possible. It's just not comfortable. And that's why most brands will keep telling us how authentic they are, instead of actually being it. After all, performance is safer than delivery. And as long as the metrics look good and the bullshit is selling, why would they stop?

Until, of course, they have no choice.



Gordon Gerard McLean

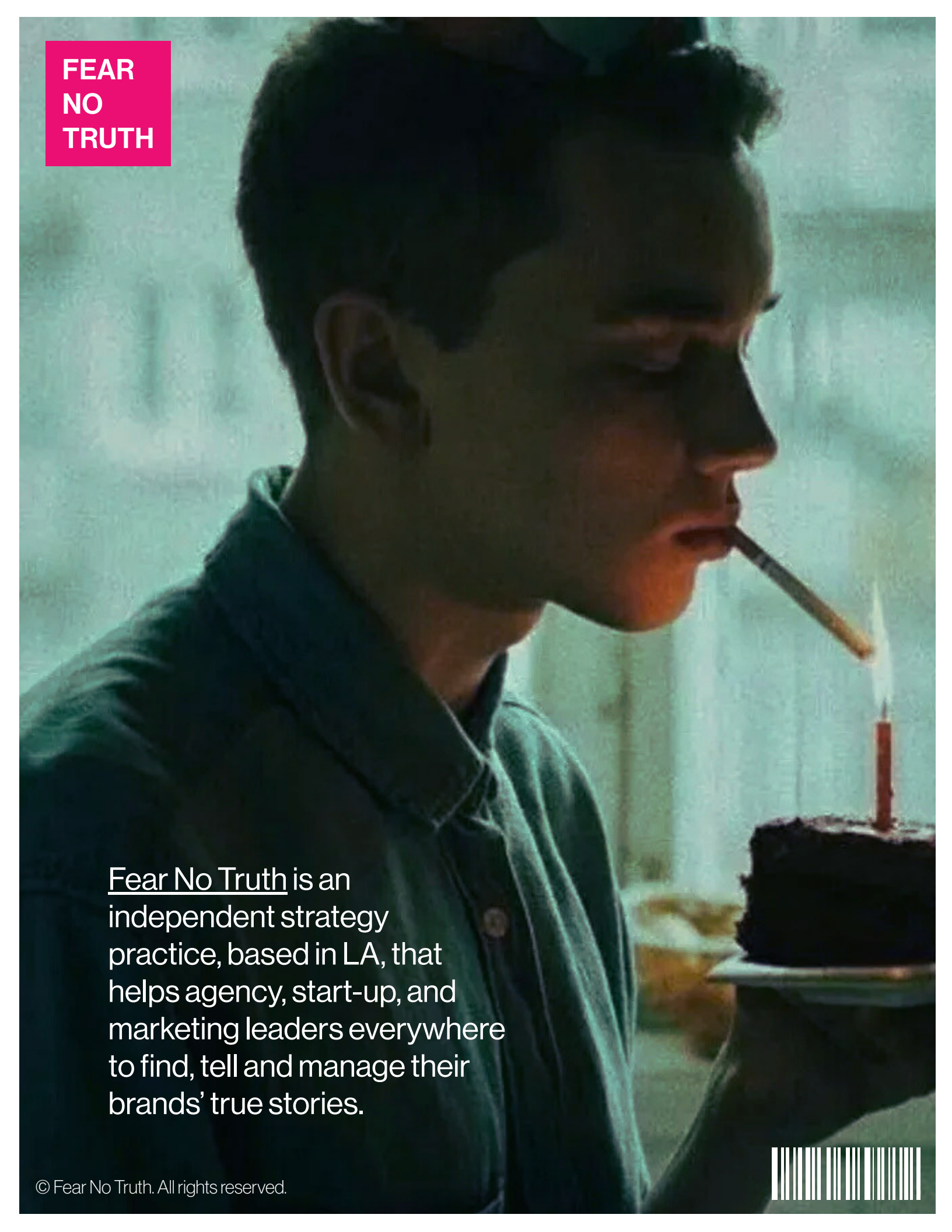
So I'm the one behind the mystery moniker. Here's a bit about me. Originally from Dublin, I've spent 20+ years as a brand strategist in a variety of creative companies; from Sheffield to London, Istanbul, New York, and Cupertino, CA.

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.

A man in profile, looking down, holding a lit cigarette. In the background, a birthday cake with a single lit candle is visible. The scene is dimly lit, with a soft glow from the candle and cigarette.

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.

