



REFLEC TIONS

Volume 01 / Issue 12

The Best
Brands Are
Built On Stories
& The Best
Stories Are
Based On Truth

**Every marketer knows the cliché:
the best brands are built on stories.
You can't sit through a brand conference,
an agency creds meeting, or even a
LinkedIn post without someone
parroting it. It's treated like scripture.**

But that's only one half of a crucial equation; the other half rarely gets a mention. And that's the idea that the best stories are based on truth. Real, lived, undeniable truth. Not "truth" as in a polished line that tested well in a focus group. Not "truth" as in a cleverly spun factoid about your origin story. I mean truth as in reality. Uncomfortable reality. Inconvenient reality. The kind of truth you can't fake, no matter how much budget you throw at it.

That's where the trouble starts. Because truth, in marketing, is rare. The kind of rare that, if it were an animal, it would be on an endangered species list with only a few spotted in the wild each year.

Most of what we call “brand stories” are just tidy narratives stitched together in hindsight.

Marketing departments reverse-engineer a purpose, agencies dress it up in creative frills, and everyone nods along as if this is the company’s true DNA. But it’s no more “true” than the glossy, retouched version of yourself in a LinkedIn headshot.

And this isn’t about whether brands lie outright, though plenty do. It’s about the fact that most brand stories aren’t even built to be true. They’re built to be appealing. To be easy. To be on-trend. Which means they’re closer to fiction than fact.

Here’s the reality: the majority of the “stories” we see in marketing are at best half-truths, and at worst pure polish, smoke and mirrors. In all cases, engineered to sell anything rather than mean something. They’re closer to air freshener than to oxygen. Something sprayed into the air to mask the smell, not something you can actually breathe in deep.

If you want to know just how rare true story brand building is, look at the work that gets awarded at the world's top shows each year.

Cannes. D&AD. The One Show. The work that genuinely makes you sit up straight, that doesn't just sell but connects; it's a very small percentage of what's out there.

And that small percentage isn't just creatively better; it's truthfully better. You can feel it. The work is grounded in something real, whether that's a lived experience, a deep cultural insight, or an enduring and fundamental brand truth. It's not the polish that makes it great. It's the fact that it's a genuine article, before it's polished.

The rest? That's where you find the marketing sludge. The campaigns built on focus-group platitudes. The pseudo-purpose statements that could be swapped from one brand to another without anyone noticing.

Juries see the difference instantly. So do consumers.. The only people who don't seem to see it are those writing the briefs.

If truth is so effective, why don't more brands use it? Because truth is hard. It's unpredictable. It's not easily controlled.

Truth means admitting what you're not, as well as what you are. It means confronting history instead of rewriting it. It means accepting that your competitors might do some things better than you. It means putting your flaws on display alongside your strengths.

And that terrifies most marketers. They've been trained to avoid vulnerability like the plague. They want clean, single-minded propositions. They want bulletproof talking points. They want a brand world so manicured that nothing messy ever pokes through.

But messy is where the magic is. Messy is what makes a story believable. A flawless story is just another fairy tale. A true story has dents, scars, and contradictions.

**One of the most overused words
in marketing is “storytelling.”
Everyone’s a storyteller now.
Every campaign is about
“telling the brand’s story.”**

But here’s the test: if you strip away the logos, the hashtags, and the art direction, could this story belong to anyone else? If the answer is yes, it’s not a story; it’s just more stuff.

A true brand story is inseparable from the brand itself. Patagonia telling you to buy less? That’s a true story. Nike supporting Colin Kaepernick? True story. Dove’s Real Beauty? At its best, true story. These things couldn’t have come from anyone else, because they were rooted in the reality of what those brands stood for long before the campaign brief was written.

Here's the other thing about truth. You can't declare "authenticity" in a single campaign. Truth is something you build over years, brick by brick, in everything you do.

That's why so many brands fail when they try to borrow it. They see a competitor have success with a purpose-driven campaign and think, "We'll do one of those too." But the truth isn't in their DNA, so the work lands like a bad cover song; technically fine, but soulless.

Consumers can smell that a mile away. They might not be able to articulate it, but they feel the gap between what a brand says and what it actually is. And once you've lost that credibility, it's almost impossible to get it back.

The sad reality is that most of what gets put into the world under the name of "brand storytelling" is just pollution. It clogs the channels. It drowns out the rare work that is rooted in truth. And it trains audiences to expect less, to disengage faster, to tune out before the second sentence.

When you flood the world with empty stories, you're not just wasting your budget, you're making it harder for the next great, true story to break through.

You're contributing to the cultural landfill of marketing noise. That's why true story brand building is a rare art. It requires more than creativity. It requires bravery. The bravery to tell the truth when it's inconvenient. The bravery to resist the pressure to over-claim. The bravery to admit that the story you're telling isn't perfect, because it's real.

And when you get it right, you create more than a campaign. You create something that lives in people's hearts long after the media plan runs dry.

The truth is, most of the industry is addicted to the illusion that as long as the story sounds good, it is good. But if brands really believed the cliché they keep repeating, that the best brands are built on stories, they'd put in the work to make those stories worth telling.

And they'd remember the missing half of the sentence. Because without truth, a story is just marketing. And the world has more than enough of that already.



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.

