



## AUTHENTICITY vs. POLISH:

*In the world of marketing, what's more important: being believable or looking good?*

### **A quick note on how the debate got started: authenticity vs polish.**

I was telling a friend of mine (who also happens to be in marketing) about a poster I pulled off the wall at the very first concert I ever attended. Because I was seeing my favorite band, I lined up early and was one of the first people through the doors. There on the walls leading into the main venue were dated posters - true keepsakes. I carefully pulled one of the posters down off the wall and clutched it in my hands all night, fighting the crowds back to keep from damaging it. At home that night as I framed the poster, I noticed that the corners were damaged with large white rips where the tape had been.

Fast forward (about 12 years) to this conversation with my friend. I was telling him how I would like to have the poster scanned and re-printed to remove the tape blemishes on the corners. He very quickly pointed out that the original poster, damaged and all, is probably a better keepsake than a good-looking reproduction. This led to a lively debate on our topic - what's more important, being real and authentic or having polish and looking good?



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**Executive Summary:** When stacking authenticity against polish, there is no right or wrong answer. And you don't have to be a purist about it, either favouring beautiful, glossy images or gritty, hard-hitting "reality". What are you looking for? Good looks with less credibility? Or are you willing to sacrifice some of that polish to lend your message more believability? Let's take a look at "looks". Good, bad or humbly delivered...

**Authentic** - eliable, trustworthy; of undisputed origin, genuine.

**Polish** - moothness or glossiness; refinement, high degree of elegance.

Oxford Dictionary

Where do we stand? We're going to be honest. There are times we use actors. We get paid to make people look good. And there's a time and place for using a highly polished image.

Think - perfect Big Mac makes you hungry. The GAP commercial dancers make you happy. An IPOD makes you cool. Think - push-up bras and lip gloss. Companies such as Revlon mount extensive advertising campaigns based on gloss. That's their market - women's lips, faces, eyes, nails, fragrance and hair colour.

## Can Authenticity be Manufactured?

In 2004, Unilever launched its Dove campaign for Real Beauty featuring real women (instead of models) in white underwear [<http://bit.ly/EinbE>]. They tweaked their polished approach (converting their 1957 "not a soap, a beauty bar" adage into a beauty brand) with a healthy dose of authenticity despite the fact that they're selling basic day-to-day staples like soap/body wash, face products, hair products, lotions and deodorant. Remember, this shift from polish to authenticity was an intentional marketing choice. Unilever manufactured authenticity while continuing to market their other divisions in a more traditional manner (by demographic).

Never the less, the market took notice to the tune of a \$3 return on every \$1 invested. [<http://bit.ly/acWfI>]. More than \$1 billion in global sales were logged in the first year of the campaign. They differentiated themselves in a "polished" sector by going beyond the superficial and were rewarded with a hefty gain in market-share across all five Dove product categories.

It's not a clear either/or choice when it comes to the debate about authenticity vs. polish. Compromise is necessary. You always want to look good, but customers and clients will respond better to the fully transparent feeling that authenticity garners (even manufactured authenticity like Dove's).

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## Brands Strive to Connect One-on-One

A shift is taking place. As of October 2009, Brigitte, Germany's most popular women's magazine banned models in favour of real women for its pages. Editor Andreas Lebert got tired of Photoshopping to "fatten up" models and wanted to battle the "Size-Zero" mentality in the fashion industry. Long story short - he wanted to be more authentic for his readership. Notice, that the drive to authenticity is grounded in improving the connection with customers therefore increasing customer identification and growing sales numbers.

Remember that black and white Sprint ad featuring CEO Dan Hesse walking down an innercity street in trench-coat? [<http://bit.ly/H9DNE>] Phrases like "if you could change the way wireless companies did things" and "here's our idea" and "without the meter running" sold a man-to-man honesty, the hallmark of Sprint's Revolution campaign - The Simply Everything Plan. The backdrop was real people on a real street with a subtle single violin overlaying the street-sounds. The spot even ended with Dan@Sprint.Com as an invitation to communicate (although only a perceived invitation). This is a stark, stripped-down example of directing communication through the authenticity filter to amp-up connection. What's your impression? Trustworthy, reliable, genuine.

## Can a Single Brand Live in Both Worlds?

Now, think Ford.

Mustang, Shelby, Focus, Fusion and Taurus are vehicles sold with polish. The glossy paint finishes and shiny chrome are evidence. Ford's truck market, on the other hand, operates on the authenticity model replete with hard-hats, farm-hands, heavy industrial equipment, chain link fencing and lots of mud!

A series of web videos hosted by "Mike" in blue-collar uniform display Ford's 2011 super Duty Pick-Up [<http://bit.ly/MzidY>] as "more than just a vehicle - it's your office; your headquarters - if something goes wrong, you're not just out a set of wheels, you're outta work..." He uses words like "durability, dependability, reliability" saying "they're not just words..." and tells viewers (think - prospective buyers) that Ford "gives it [the truck] to guys to test drive - guys who work for Haliburton and Florida Power and Light..."

So, one company in a broad market can utilize either polish or authenticity (or a blend of the two) to reach its customers and clients in the most effective manner. And it's important to note that Ford just posted a nearly \$1 billion third-quarter profit at the beginning of November 2009 [<http://bit.ly/2gyz99>]. During the same period, GM lost \$1.2 billion and Chrysler continued to slide [<http://bit.ly/1Kk95S>].

## The Debate at a Local Level? What SMEs Are Doing.

As a creative agency in an unusual market, Happy Worker [[www.happyworker.com](http://www.happyworker.com)] started life as a toy retailer during the rise of the reality (or what Mr. Happy Worker himself, Kris Schantz calls the reality)

movement. The prospect of striking a balance between authenticity and polish is ever-present in his business. Here's their process in a nutshell.

"We ask ourselves - how authentic do you want to go," says Kris. If a client wants more reality and less polish, the Happy Workers need to be mindful of not creating too "crafty/handmade" an item. "After all, we're telling their story," explains Kris. "We're representing brands and upholding images. It's important to stay true to that." Products can't look as though they've been created in someone's basement. It's all about balance.

He elaborates by describing a project designed for the Canadian SnowBirds - an imaginative take on a winter toque that was simply not "do-able". Realities of production meant it couldn't be produced (cost, production location and distribution models considered).

And yet an unvarnished reality is "not always interesting," says Kris. Polish adds romance - an idealized glow. Authenticity adds humour, roughness or truth - what Kris chooses to label "pithiness".

Now shifting from the creative to the refined - in WSI's Business Profile Series, they chose to take a purely authentic approach. The challenge they faced as a franchise system was - how does a franchisee, say in England capitalize on a business "win" in, say California?

The collection of 2 to 3 minute videos [\[http://bit.ly/6lg809\]](http://bit.ly/6lg809) featured business people sharing their own experiences in order to connect and be relate-able. For example, the third generation garden suppliers appeared in work fatigues against a backdrop of sand, gravel, rocks and mulch - "we're not just a big box store." Authentic. The old-fashioned, direct-speaking roofing contractor with onsite visuals such as steaming hot tar and hard-hats communicated authenticity, right?

The success of this campaign hinged on the fact that everyone profiled came across as believable. "If there was even a hint of spin or push in any of these profiles, it would have killed the credibility of the entire campaign," explains Ron McArthur, President of WSI. "We used real people in their natural environment to ensure we created fact based communications."

## No Final Verdict

We are not touting one over the other. Polish works very well. Authenticity adds another layer. Decisions must be based on your product, distribution, message, target, goals, purchasers' motivation and dollars available to spend. It's important to compromise and prioritize. Ask yourself - what worked in the past? What were the lessons learned? What's the best approach this time? And if you don't have the answers to these questions, don't spend a dime. ●●●

**Phanta Media** is a Markham, Ontario based Video Production Firm that specializes in helping organizations communicate through video. The secret to our success (and the success of our clients), is we focus on business objectives such as lead generation, lead conversion, video marketing and sales tools and overcoming common management challenges such as employee engagement or training.