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GIVING  
MEANING  
TO THE  
MEANING.  
LESS

a series

of dirty

words:



SO

WHAT

I

S



“AUTHENTICITY”



ANY

WAY



"To be authentic, we must cultivate the courage to be imperfect — and vulnerable. We have to believe that we are fundamentally worthy of love and acceptance, just as we are. I've learned that there is no better way to practice grace, gratitude and joy into our lives than practicing authenticity."



Authenticity requires vulnerability and transparency



What makes you vulnerable makes you beautiful. There's a word for it. ...Authenticity



Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen."

## AUTHENTICITY

IS THE DAILY PRACTICE OF LETTING GO OF WHO WE THINK WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE, AND EMBRACING WHO WE ARE

# EXACTLY (BUT ALSO SORT OF?) NOT AUTHENTICITY?

There's really no good working definition for "authenticity." It's one of those slippery words that can mean just about anything, and as a result, often ends up meaning nothing at all. Rampant overuse (and egregious misuse)

has rendered it all but meaningless, and yet...we can't quite seem to quit it. "Authenticity" as peddled by the self-help industrial complex, and politicians and (worst of all!!!) brands might solicit a collective eye roll in most quarters, but it's not because we don't care about it anymore: it's because "authenticity" as it's being defined and discussed and deployed in those quarters is actually insufficiently authentic. The word might be meaningless, but the concept still holds major sway in the popular imagination.

# authenticity

# is what it's

# N O T

NOT fake

NOT contrived

NOT rehearsed

NOT studied

NOT mannered

NOT infallible

NOT self-serving

NOT deceitful

NOT duplicitous

NOT defensive

**OK!**  
authenticity

THAT YOU'RE NOT BEING DUPED,  
CONNED, SCAMMED, LIED TO OR  
OTHERWISE MISLED;

is **Awesome** an

AND THAT WHAT YOU SEE IS  
(WITHIN REASON) WHAT YOU'RE  
GOING TO GET

assurance **GREAT**

authenticity  
**COOL**

WHEN SOMETHING IS AUTHENTIC,  
IT GENERALLY MEANS THAT IT'S  
COMPREHENSIBLE

**AMAZING**  
is a desire

AND HAS A SET OF FIXED QUALITIES  
THAT MAKE IT TO SOME EXTENT  
PREDICTABLE

for control **YAS!**

A person wearing a brown fur hat and a tan jacket is crouching on a railway track. They are holding a smartphone in their right hand, looking at the screen. The background shows a gravelly embankment and some trees in the distance.

# A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE POST- MODERN HELSCAPE

WE'RE LIVING THROUGH A SUPREMELY WEIRD AND DESTABILIZING HISTORICAL MOMENT. IT'S TEMPTING TO IMAGINE THAT THE CHAOS AND NIHILISM AND AMORALITY THAT NOW WHIRLS AROUND US IS NOTHING MORE THAN A CURIOUS ABERRATION, AND THAT ORDER WILL BE RESTORED ONCE COOLER HEADS (INEVITABLY) PREVAIL. BUT THE AWFUL TRUTH IS THAT OUR WORLD HAS BEEN — AND PARDON MY FRENCH — LE FUCKED FOR QUITE SOME TIME.

OURS IS A ERA WHERE THE CURTAIN HAS BEEN RIPPED BACK FROM THE HALLS OF POWER IN EVERY SECTOR AND WE'RE ABLE TO SEE WITH ASTONISHING CLARITY THE FALSE BILL OF GOODS WE'VE BEEN SOLD. FROM THE FOOD WE EAT, TO THE TECHNOLOGY WE DEPEND UPON, TO THE POLITICIANS WE GRUDGINGLY SOMETIMES VOTE FOR, ALL THE LIES, ABUSES, GREED, GRAFT, AND EXPLOITATION THAT WE ALWAYS SUSPECTED WAS HAPPENING HAS BEEN LAID BARE FOR US TO BEHOLD...

## AND YET!

WE'VE NEVER BEEN LESS ABLE TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. THE FEEL-GOOD/FEEL-BAD/FEEL-NOTHING SOCIAL MEDIA SELF-FLAGELLATION THAT ATTENDS EVERY NEW OUTRAGE WON'T CHANGE THE FACT THAT THE VAST MAJORITY OF PEOPLE HAVE PRECISELY ZERO POWER TO EFFECT MEANINGFUL SYSTEMIC CHANGE.

SO TO THE EXTENT THAT ANYONE CARES ABOUT "AUTHENTICITY" (OR ANYTHING!) ANYMORE, IT'S REALLY JUST INDICATIVE OF A DESIRE TO WREST BACK SOME TOKEN LEVEL OF CONTROL FROM THE MONSTROUS ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL MACHINATIONS RUNNING (AND RUINING) OUR WORLD. EVEN IF THAT JUST MEANS KNOWING WHERE AND HOW YOUR T-SHIRT WAS MADE.



BUT ENOUGH OF ALL  
THIS CONJECTURE,  
ABSTRACTION, AND  
SELF-INDULGENT  
NAVEL GAZING!

## Inquiring Minds Want to Know:

WHAT DOES THIS  
MEAN FOR LARGE  
CORPORATIONS  
DESPERATE TO SELL  
THEIR LARGELY  
INTERCHANGEABLE  
WARES TO A DEEPLY  
SKEPTICAL, CYNICAL,  
AND UNTRUSTING  
PUBLIC?



***ATTENTION!***

BRANDS OF THE WORLD:

## To Sell Your Products and Services:

BE:

HAVE:

authoritative

meaning

self-aware

purpose

clear

history

honest

continuity

# 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8 REASONABLY AUTHENTIC BRANDS AND HOW THEY DO IT!

## PARTICULAR STRENGTHS:



Makes products that are self-evidently better than they need to be

## LEGACY BRANDS



Always the same everywhere for everyone; genuinely embedded in daily life



Equal focus placed on performance, human stories, and good design



Inventive brand expressions that still respect and pay homage to its origins



A humorous and irreverent brand persona coupled with an emphasis on good design

## UPSTART BRANDS

**EVERLANE**

Uncommon transparency around manufacturing, distribution and pricing

**Glossier.**

Radically streamlined product range and distribution model; elevates their customer's voice



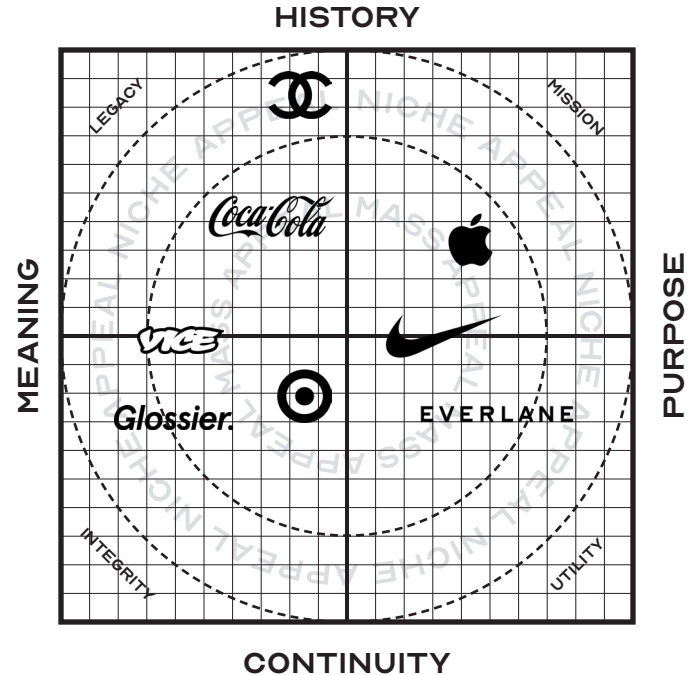
Unusual stories, combative point-of-view, high journalistic standards



# BRAND

AN AUTHENTIC BRAND IS ONE THAT IS ROOTED IN SOMETHING TANGIBLE AND ENDURING: A CLEAR AGENDA; DEMONSTRABLE ACHIEVEMENTS; ACTUAL OPERATIONAL PRINCIPLES; A LEGACY OF CONSISTENTLY DOING SOMETHING RIGHT. IN SHORT, THINGS THAT CAN'T BE TACKED ON BY ONE BRILLIANT MARKETING CAMPAIGN, AND THAT CONVERSELY, CAN'T BE DIMINISHED BY ONE EGREGIOUS MISSTEP. A FAILED PRODUCT LAUNCH OR A TONE DEAF CAMPAIGN, OR THE ALL-TOO-PREDICTABLE INDISCRETIONS OF SOME C-SUITE SOCIOPATH WON'T RUIN THESE COMPANIES BECAUSE THEY HAVE FIXED QUALITIES IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION THAT AREN'T EASILY DISMANTLED.

# TRAITS

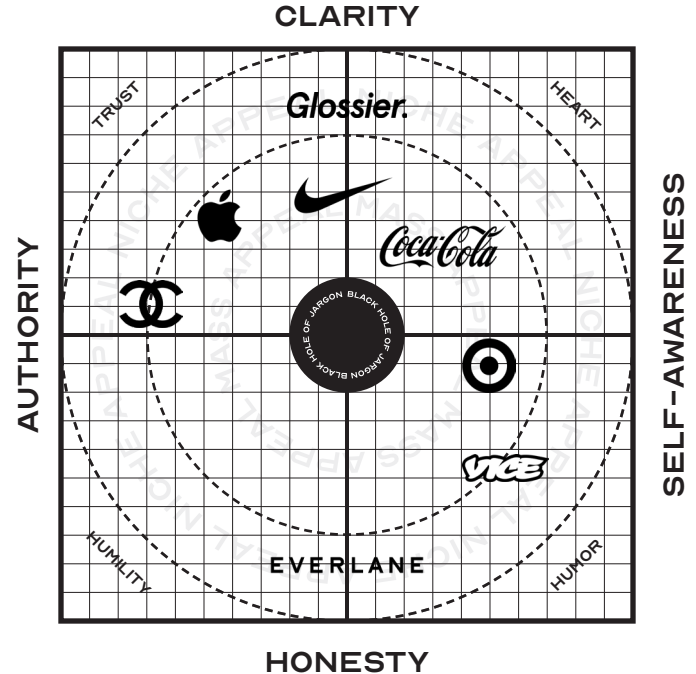


# BRAND



AN AUTHENTIC BRAND VOICE REALLY JUST COMES FROM TO SPEAKING AUTHORITATIVELY ABOUT WHAT YOU DO, BEING CLEAR ABOUT WHY YOU'RE DOING IT, BEING HONEST ABOUT HOW YOU'RE DOING IT, AND POSSESSING A MODICUM OF SELF-AWARENESS — NAMELY, AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF INHERENT LIMITATIONS (A NEW DODGE RAM ISN'T GOING TO FIX RACISM, SORRY) AND THE ABILITY TO POKE FUN AT YOURSELF. BUT BEWARE THE BLACK HOLE OF JARGON LURKING AT THE MIDDLE OF THIS HANDY GRAPH: WHEN A BRAND TRIES TO BE ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE, HOWEVER WELL-INTENTIONED THE EFFORT MIGHT BE, THEY END BEING NOTHING-IN-PARTICULAR TO NO-ONE-AT-ALL.

# VOICE



# “ACTIVISM™”

Two giant corporations read the proverbial tea leaves and realized that clapping back against systemic racism is hot-hot-hot right now. So they did the only reasonable thing: devise campaigns to conflate Black Lives Matter with their entirely unrelated wares. But while **Nike’s** “Colin Kaepernick” ad was a fawned-over, think-pieced-to-death, smash hit, **Pepsi’s** “Kendall Jenner” ad ended up a reviled disgrace. Let’s examine what went right and what went wrong!



## ENGAGED SPOKESPERSON

Colin Kaepernick has skin in the game; he’s putting his reputation on the line for something bigger than him.

## TASTEFULLY ADDRESSED THE PROBLEM

It wasn’t an overwrought call-to-arms or a false promise; just a simple, personal appeal to our better angels.

## DIGNIFIED A REAL-WORLD CAUSE

A company like Nike throwing their might behind Black Lives Matter elevated and validated the cause.

## MEANINGFUL MESSAGE

“Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything” resonates when it comes from Colin Kaepernick.



## OBVIOUS SPOKESPERSON

Kendall Jenner just did what was asked of her and cashed the check; God bless her for it, but how ‘bout nah?

## OPPORTUNISTICALLY OFFERED A ‘SOLUTION’

Who knew that a stand-off between protesters and a SWAT team could be mollified by a soft drink?

## DEBASED A REAL-WORLD CAUSE

Clompsily half-referencing Black Lives Matter and strivizing it of meaning trivialized the cause.

## MEANINGLESS MESSAGE

“Live Louder; Live for Now” could mean anything at all and so it ultimately ended up meaning nothing at all.

# “ARTISANAL-ISH”

Two coffee chains transcend their humble West Coast craft beverage beginnings and take over the world to the tune of billions. And while the most discerning coffee snobs of the world might not be impressed with **Blue Bottle** any more, it’s still widely considered to be good coffee worth seeking out, and a nice place to kill some time. **Starbucks** on the other hand is widely considered to be...well...a glorified public restroom that sells 32-ounce milkshakes to suburban teens.



## GENERALLY HIGH-QUALITY PRODUCT

The coffee tastes good and the snacks taste like they weren’t made in a factory in Ohio 6 weeks ago.

## STRONG FOCUS ON CORE OFFERING

Shockingly enough, a coffee shop that focuses on offering a wide range of coffee! It’s still what you go there for.

## EMPHASIS ON CRAFT

There’s important-looking apparatuses for brewing coffee, and knowledgeable people operating them.

## STRATEGIC ROLL-OUT

Locations are generally in major urban centers, sensitive to local context, and are few and far between.



## GENERALLY LOW-QUALITY PRODUCT

The coffee tastes — oh yeah even bother? I’ll just have a bottled water and some of those caramel balls.

## CORE OFFERING TREATED AS AFTERTHOUGHT

May we interest you in a breakfast wrap? How about this cake pop? Or this CD? Or this bruised banana?

## EMPHASIS ON EFFICIENCY

With just the press of a button, you too can have scalding milk slopped into a cup in under 45 seconds!

## INDISCRIMINATE ROLL-OUT

Anywhere, everywhere; one here, another across the street. Inescapable and not in a good way.

# “HERITAGE”

When relative unknown Alessandro Michele took the creative reins of **Gucci** in 2015, at first people were like “wait who?” but then they were like “can I please pay you \$2000 for that bejewelled Kitty Cat sweatshirt???” But when legendary designer Hedi Slimane took over **Celine** in 2018, People were like “this is the same boring trash you’ve been peddling for the last fifteen years. We want Phoebe — and the accent aigu — back.” What went wrong for poor Hedi and what went right for sweet AI?

## GUCCI

### LOVE AND RESPECT FOR HERITAGE

Even though it’s a fresh, bold, unexpected direction for the brand, it still looks like the idea we all have of Gucci.

### BOLD NEW VISION

Who knew they wanted a pussy bow blouse? Or a dress with snakes on it? But we all did; and it’s fabulous.

### GENUINE JOYFULNESS

Bright, colorful, irreverent, and a little ridiculous: Michele has conjured up a world that looks fun to be in.

### HUMOROUS AND SELF-AWARE

It’s all a big joke! A ruse! A sham! Fashion is ridiculous, so the least we can do is have a little fun with it.

## CELINE

### DISDAIN AND DISREGARD FOR HERITAGE

Slimane trashed Celine’s (beloved) vibe completely. Not even a wink and a nod to it; just into the bin it all went.

### TIRED, RE-CYCLED (LACK OF) VISION

Literally the same thing he did at Saint Laurent, and Dior before that. It was tired then, and it’s O-V-E-R now.

### GENUINE JOYLESSNESS

I don’t know where that anemic 17 year-old in a \$3000 baby doll dress is going, but I won’t be joining.

### MOROSE AND SELF-SERIOUS

10/10 people agreed that wearing black leather pants in LA will make you a miserable person.

# “SISTER, SISTER”

It’s a tale as old as time: your sister Kim is one of the most famous humans on the planet, and she’s figured out how to monetize every ounce of that attention. You find yourself similarly well-positioned to cash in, so you just pick...something; anything, really...and turn it into a brand. But **Kylie Cosmetics** by Kylie Jenner is a billion-dollar baby, while **Poosh** by Kourtney Kardashian is a lifestyle brand?...ermm...a digital publishing startup?...uhh...an e-commerce platform?...wait...what is it again?

## KYLIE

### STREAMLINED OFFERINGS

Kylie Cosmetics sells mid-range lipstick, eyeshadow, concealer, and skin care products. That’s it.

### CONSISTENT POINT-OF-VIEW

Kylie is rich and has a hot body and owns dozens of luxury cars, and you can too if you buy her lipstick!

### SIMPLE CALLS-TO-ACTION

Kylie announces the availability of a new product on social media, provides a link to buy it, and you do.

### UNIMPEACHABLE QUALIFICATIONS

Kylie might not know much, but goddamnit, she knows how to beat a face for the Gods, henny!

## POOSH

### CONVOLUTED OFFERINGS

Poosh sells collagen supplements and \$1000 heels and linen napkins and sports bras...obviously!

### MUDDLED POINT-OF-VIEW

Kourtney’s a nutritionist, no wait! a sexpert, no wait! an environmental activist, no wait! a yogi no wait...

### CONFUSING CALLS-TO-ACTION

Kourtney tells you to ‘swipe up’ on a nude photo of her and it links to an 1200-word essay on menstrual cups.

### QUESTIONABLE QUALIFICATIONS

Other than being rich enough to afford Jeanneret chairs, it’s unclear what qualifies Kourtney to be a lifestyle guru.



1

### **TELL THE TRUTH**

Or at least a super compelling version of it. The public will forgive a lot, but not being lied to.

2

### **STAY IN YOUR LANE**

If you're trying to sell \$3 deodorant, you're probably not also going to solve systemic racism, and that's ok.

3

### **UNDER-PROMISE**

People love to feel like they're discovering something great; if their expectations are low, so much the better.

4

### **OVER-DELIVER**

People also love to feel like they're getting something for nothing. Even the smallest "extra" can change the game.

5

### **BE CONSISTENT**

The way you look, talk, act, and show up should be consistent. Or be consistently inconsistent. Commit to it.

6

### **BE CHILL**

Seriously. Cool it with the hard sell: no one like a thirsty multinational corporation.

7

### **LIGHTEN UP**

It's not so serious! We're all going to be engulfed by the sun eventually, so have a few lolz at your own expense!

8

### **OWN YOUR FLAWS**

If there's one thing the public loves more than dragging an offender to hell, it's a redemption narrative arc.

9

### **JUST DON'T**

Co-opting racism, sexism, LGBTQ+ issues, #metoo et al to sell shit is a no-no. Really: just don't.

10

### **JUST DO YOU, BABE**

Acknowledge what your deal is and be the very best version of that. Simple. Easy. Good.





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