

DIRTY WORDS

02

“THE
AUTHENTICITY
REPORT”

DIRTY WORDS

REDEFINING THE
MEANING OF
MEANINGLESS
WORDS

~~EXCLUSIVITY~~

 AUTHENTICITY 

COMMUNITY

SUSTAINABILITY

LOYALTY

RELEVANCE

CULTURE

CONTENT

INFLUENCE

INNOVATION

DEFINING DIRTY WORDS

We want to look at key words that stand out in the industry around products, brands and media and to unpack the disconnect in meaning between individuals and companies. We think of these as 'Dirty Words,' whose original meaning has been modified by cultural shifts.

As the concept behind a 'dirty word' proliferates, it gathers cultural baggage and becomes increasingly narrow in definition. We want to zoom out and re-focus on the words we're using. The intention is not to reach an objective definition but to explore concepts and (hopefully) build a foundation for discussion.

BUT WHAT IS THIS THO?

In Issue 2, we take on “Authenticity” — a supremely slippery concepts that almost by definition evades, well, definition.

The trick with authenticity is that it’s not a fixed thing with measurable standards: it’s a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it conflagration of practices, beliefs, attitudes, stances, and je-ne-sais-quois that is necessarily going to manifest itself differently for and to every person and brand.

And if authenticity has always been a little tricky to nail down, in our current civilizational moment, it’s damn near impossible. Everywhere you turn, there’s the sense that all of the formerly fixed assumptions that governed our world have been blown up. And honestly: they have been. Consensus has never been harder to come by, new cultural fault lines are opening up every day, and “the truth” has never been more subjective, fluid, and context-dependent, which is to say: very frequently untrue.

But it’s precisely for that reason that authenticity matters more than ever: faced with the general sense that nothing is fully stable and no one can be fully trusted, people are turning inward, checking in with their foundational principles, and searching for some fixed moral center that will help them make sense of a terrifying and sense-defying world all around.

So given all of this, we couldn’t help but wonder:

What does it even mean to be authentic any more?



So About This “AUTHENTICITY”

(tell me more!)

“Authenticity” is one of those concepts that almost everyone has some opinion about it, but almost no one can provide a clear working definition for it without lapsing into lazy, circular, self-justifying bromides. Authenticity just kind of...is. And whatever that *is* is will vary wildly depending on who you ask. Because at its core, “authenticity” is necessarily, even radically subjective: it’s a set of values, formed on a person-by-person basis, that feel somehow true, or, right, or good — to you.

The current ubiquity (and essentially uncontested wisdom) of imperatives like “live your truth” and “do you” and “feel yourself” attest to the sway that the idea of self-generated, self-validating belief systems have in the popular imagination. But in a funny way, these cliched calls to self-knowledge, self-actualization, and self-love, respectively, are actually deeply instructive...follow the logic, and what you’ll end up with is this: at the core of every person lies some comprehensive, immutable, life-defining truth that they’re duty-bound to uncover, venerate, embody, and seek out in all arenas of their life. In essence, what we’re talking about when we talk about “authenticity” is quasi-Animist-by-way-of-Prosperty-Gospel belief system that has become the singular key to a life well-lived.

But if authenticity is an entirely relative and intensely personal concept, the inverse — inauthenticity — is shockingly easy to define and reach consensus over. When something or someone isn’t authentic, you just know. Everyone knows. For all the best efforts of weight-loss tea-swilling Instagram influencers, corndog-nibbling presidential hopefuls, and suddenly-woke multi-national corporations, it just feels — to use the technical term — icky when someone is trying to convince you of something that they manifestly don’t believe in or care about themselves.

The *Official* Authenticity Checklist

IS natural

ISN'T contrived

IS relaxed

ISN'T studied

IS casual

ISN'T mannered

IS fallible

ISN'T infallible

IS generous

ISN'T selfish

IS honest

ISN'T deceitful

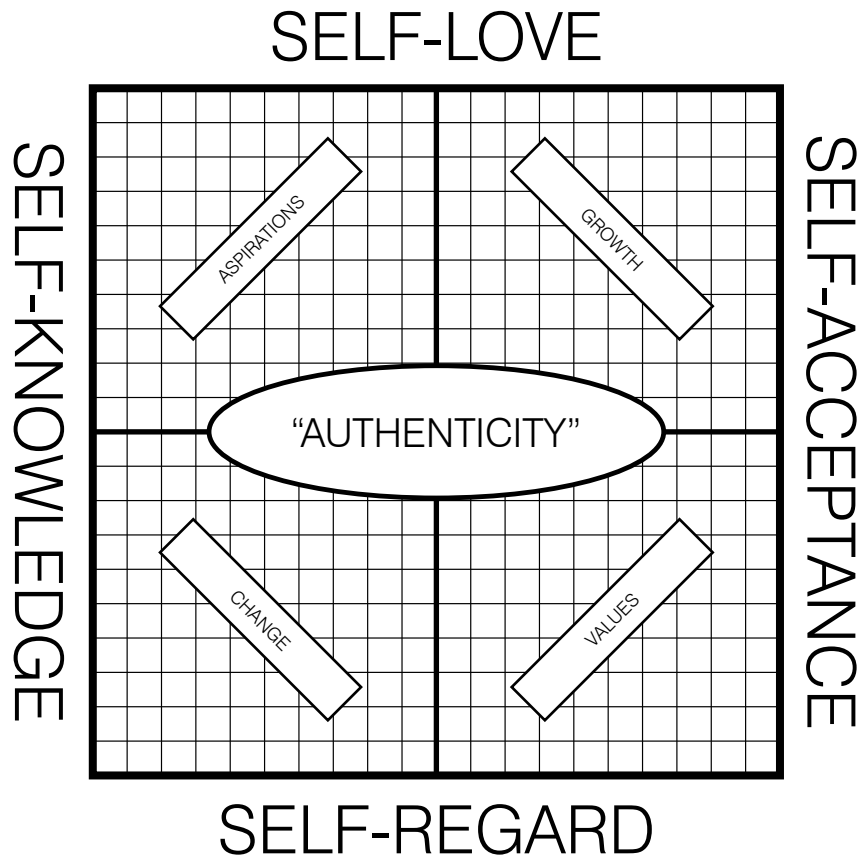
IS gracious

ISN'T defensive

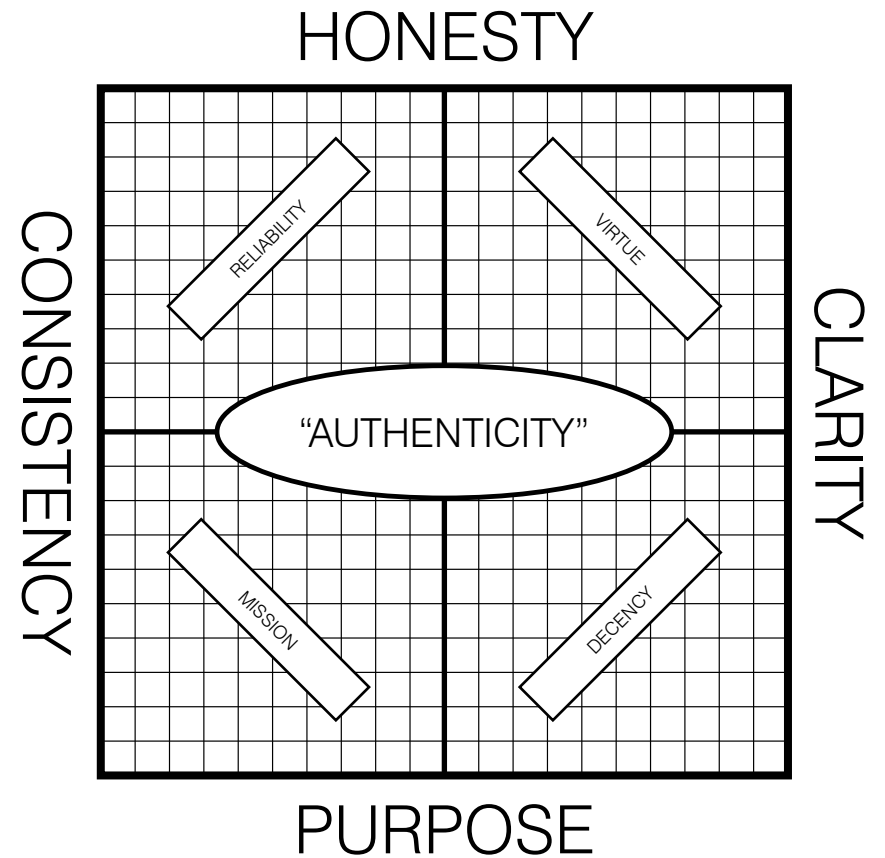
IS plainspoken

ISN'T evasive

HOW TO BE AN AUTHENTIC PERSON



HOW TO BE AN AUTHENTIC BRAND



AUTHENTICITY NOW!

A few years ago, in what now seems like an infinitely simpler time, authenticity was pretty much all about how you looked. The perfect meal, the perfect holiday, the perfect relationship, the perfect life, all captured through the gauzy lens of our very first smartphone (#nofilter!) and pumped out into the world to make every asshole you ever hated positively writhe with envy. It was all super seductive, and for a while totally believable, but eventually we got hip to the trick and the whole endeavor was uncovered for what it really was: an image. Fake. Staged. Inauthentic.

From
Appearance

And it was kind of the same trajectory for brands: they figured out what the particular aesthetic signifiers were that made something clockable as “authentic” and they aggressively pumped images and messaging into the world to give their offerings a much-desired veneer of heightened realness. And again, this tactic was in time revealed for what it really was: exquisitely art directed, expertly wordsmithed, brilliantly produced smoke and mirrors.

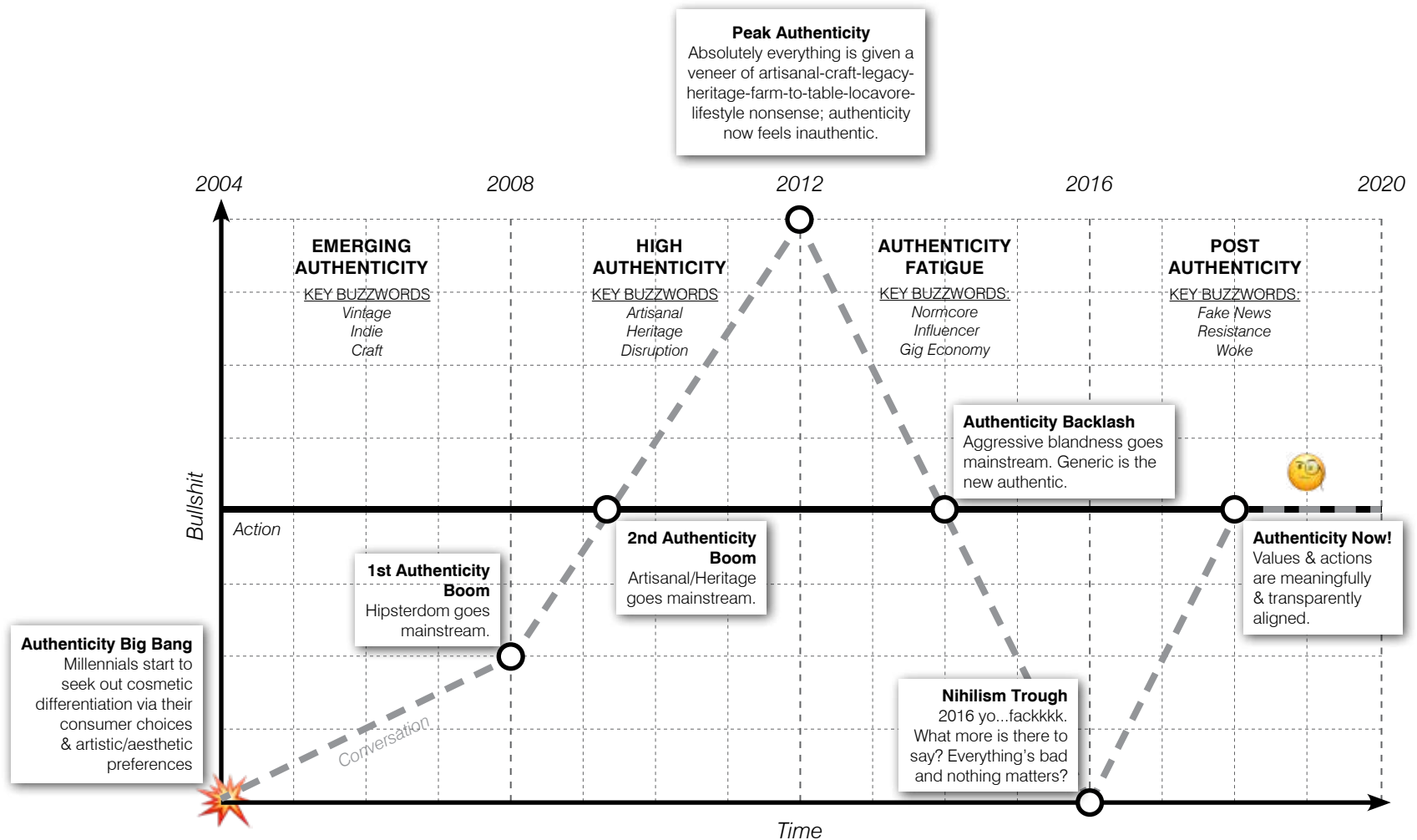
But now, the quest for authenticity at the personal level is all about values: making sure that the things you believe in are reflected in the things you do. And for better or for worse, the one thing that most of us do most of all is consume. So it stands to reason that your personal authenticity is going to be inextricably bound up in the choices you make as a consumer. Every thing you buy, every service you use, every brand you associate with says something about you. And it's not just about showing off your tastes or preferences or style any more: it's about conveying what you value, how you live, and who you are in the holistic sense, and associating with brands that meaningfully align with all of that.

Products and brands are character references now.

To
Action

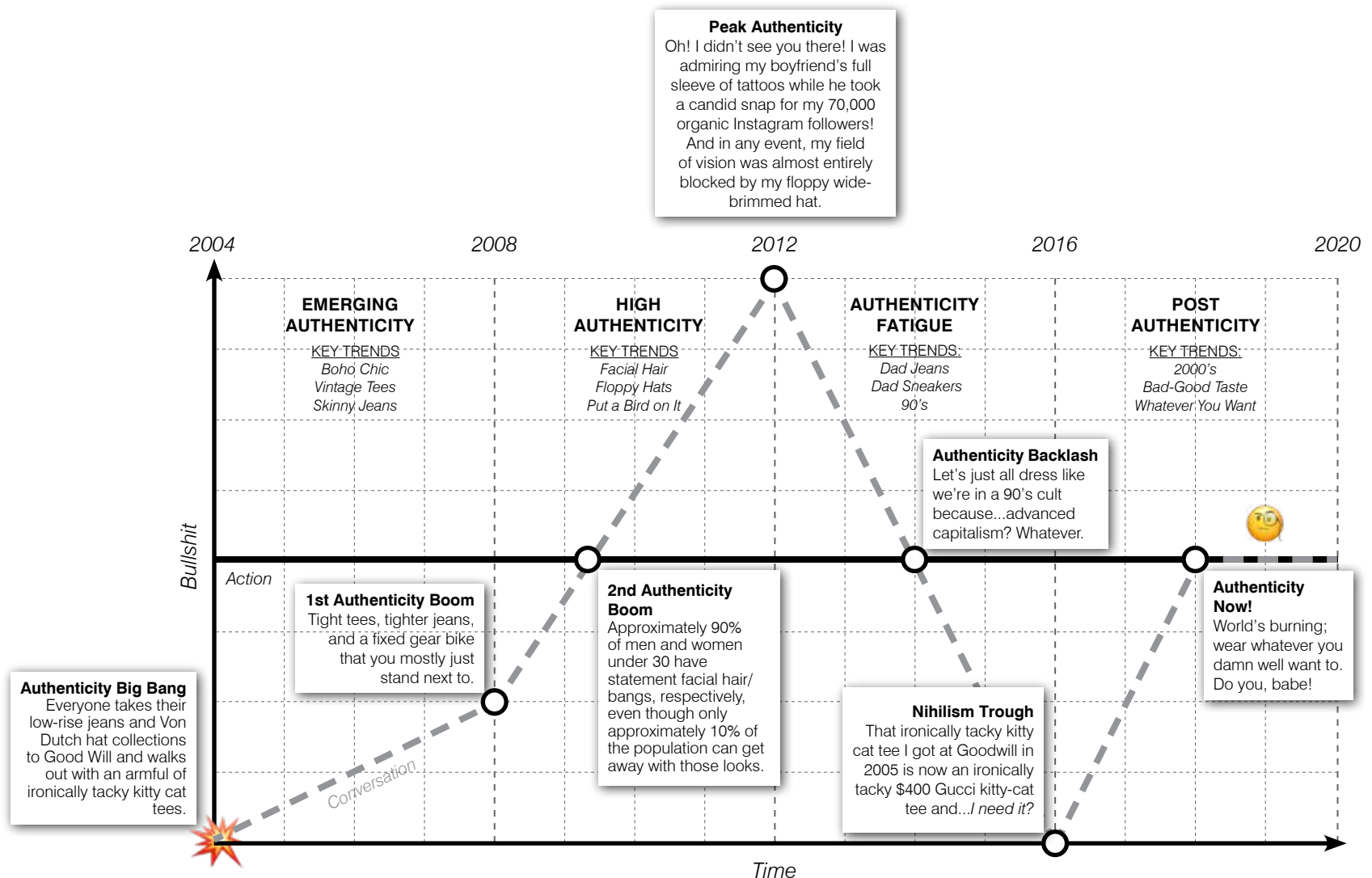
In a world of limitless consumer choice, every choice a consumer makes means something. In this climate, brands now need to show the world what they're all about so that customers can make sure that their values are aligning. And if they do indeed choose to patronize, support, or otherwise embrace a particular brand, they have to be sure that it will uphold their values, and help them to telegraph to the world where they stand, and what they stand for.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AUTHENTICITY



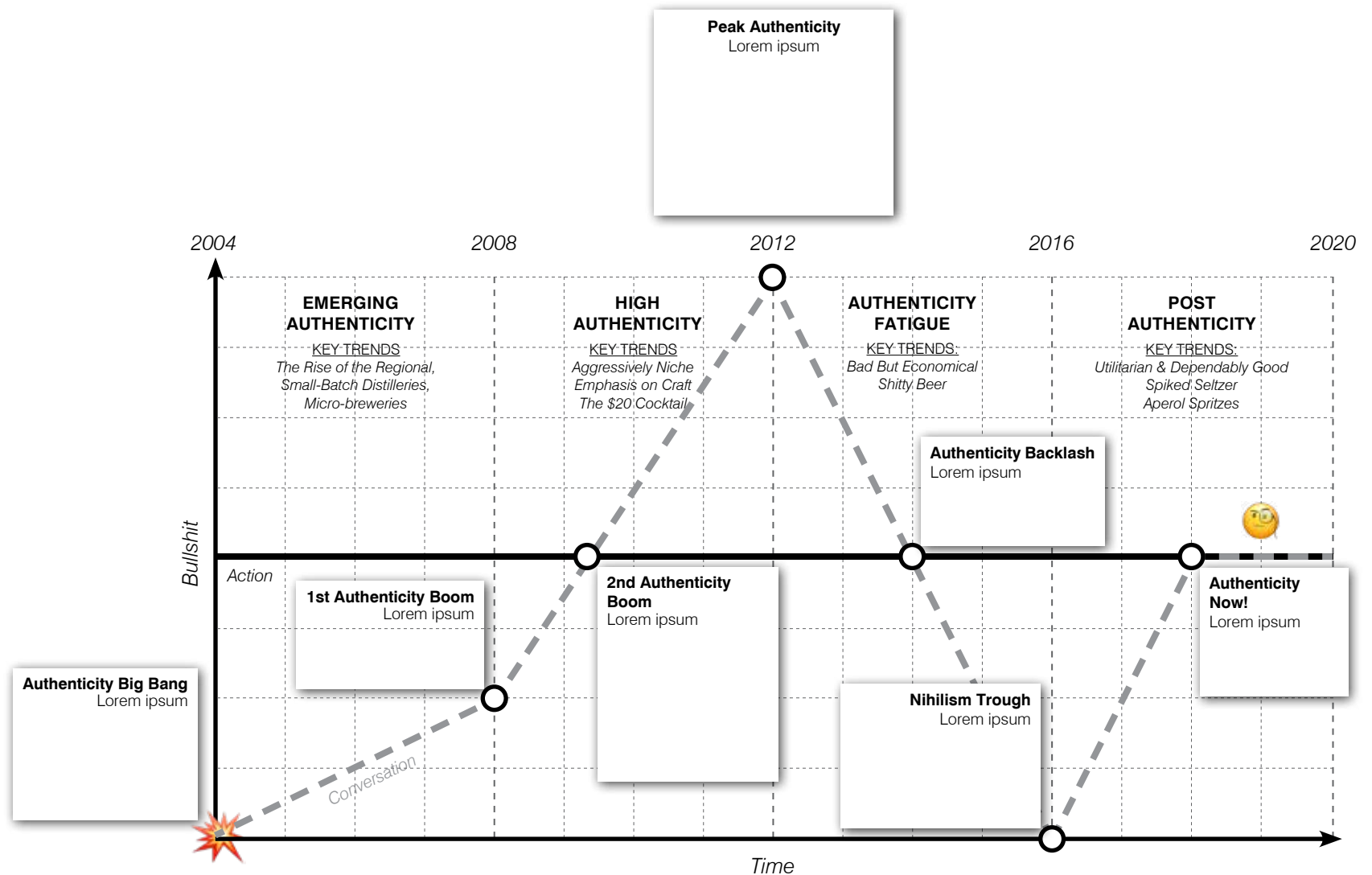
A BRIEF HISTORY OF AUTHENTICITY

Fashion



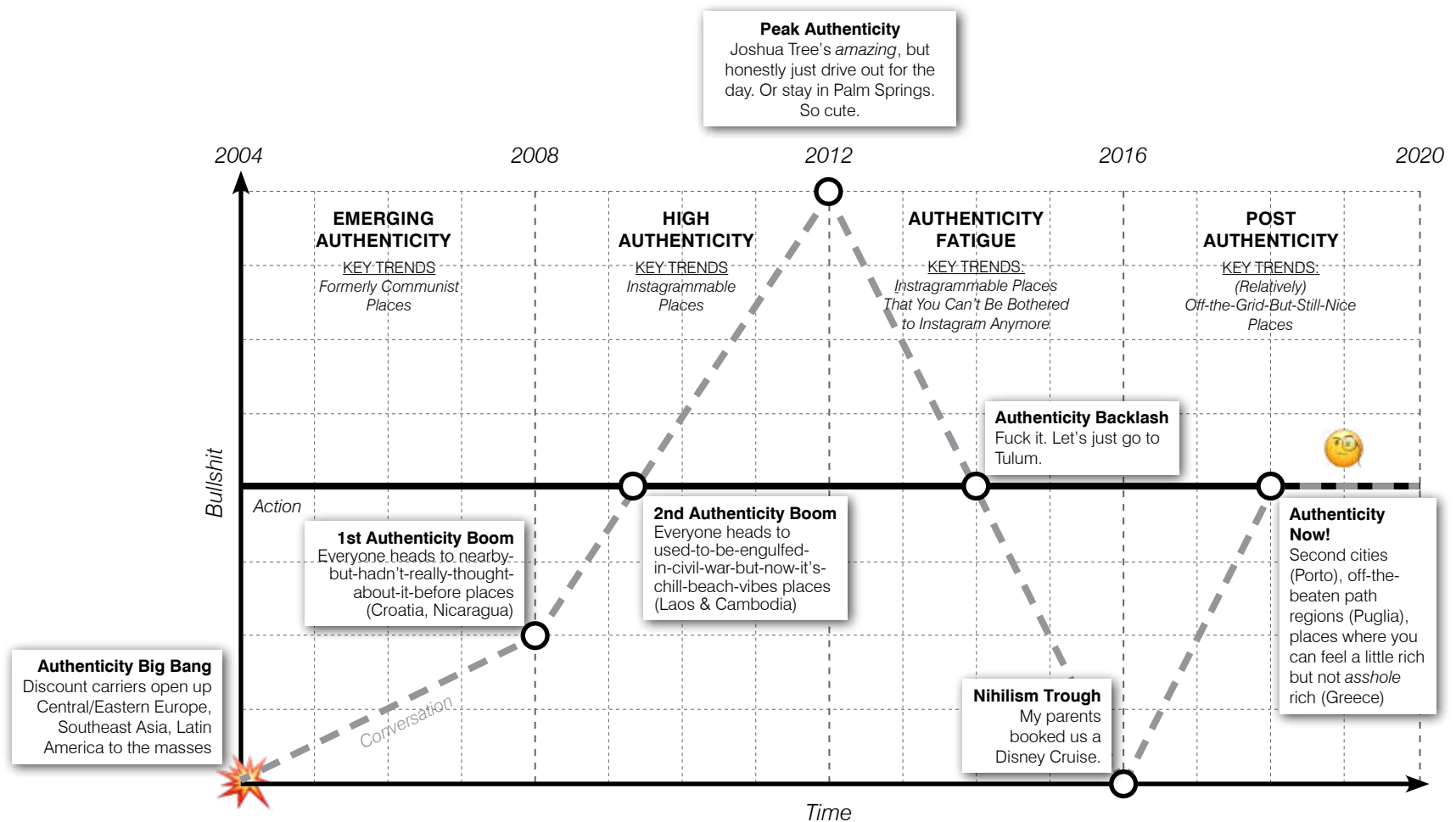
A BRIEF HISTORY OF AUTHENTICITY

Alcohol



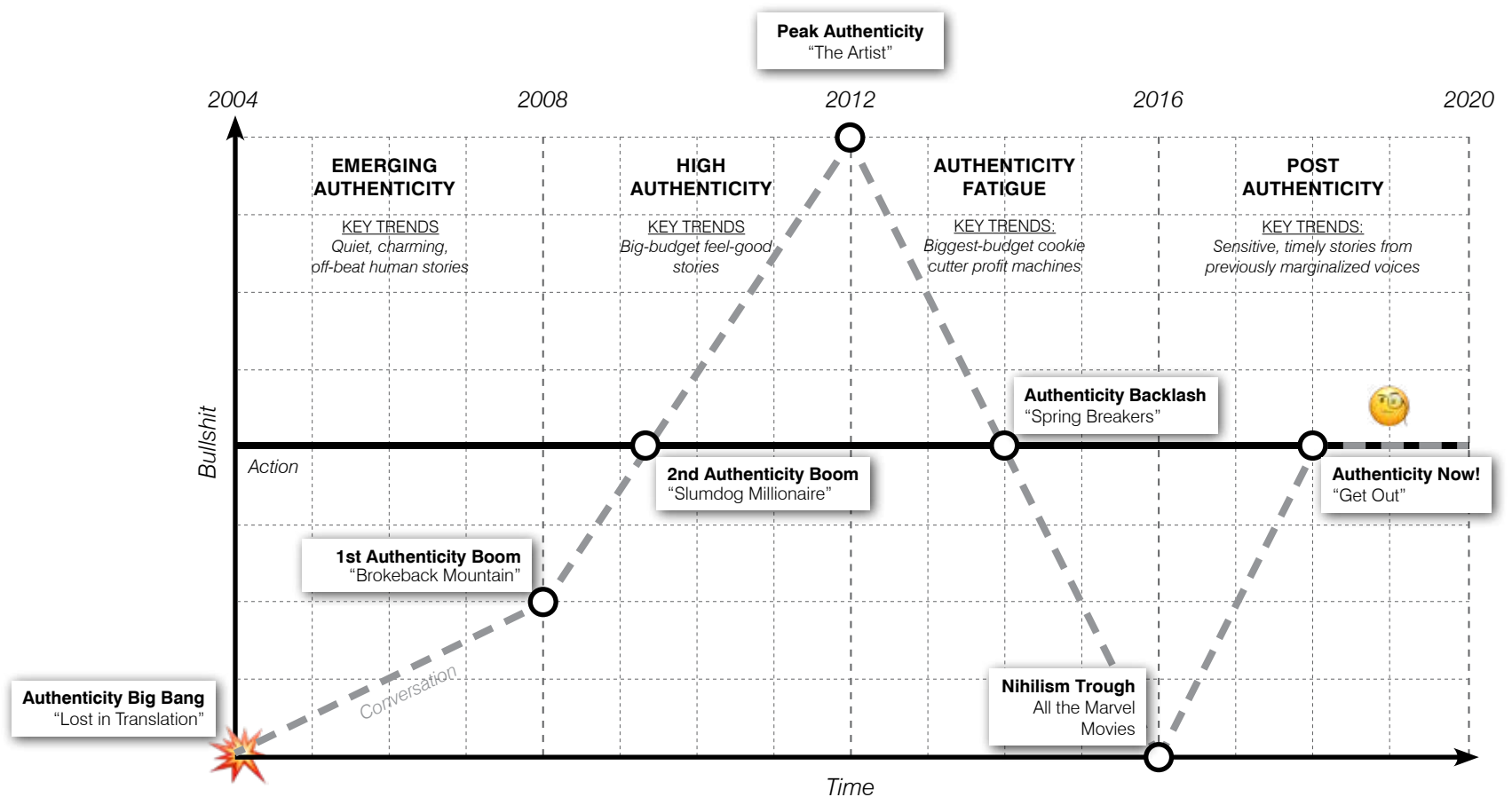
A BRIEF HISTORY OF AUTHENTICITY

Travel



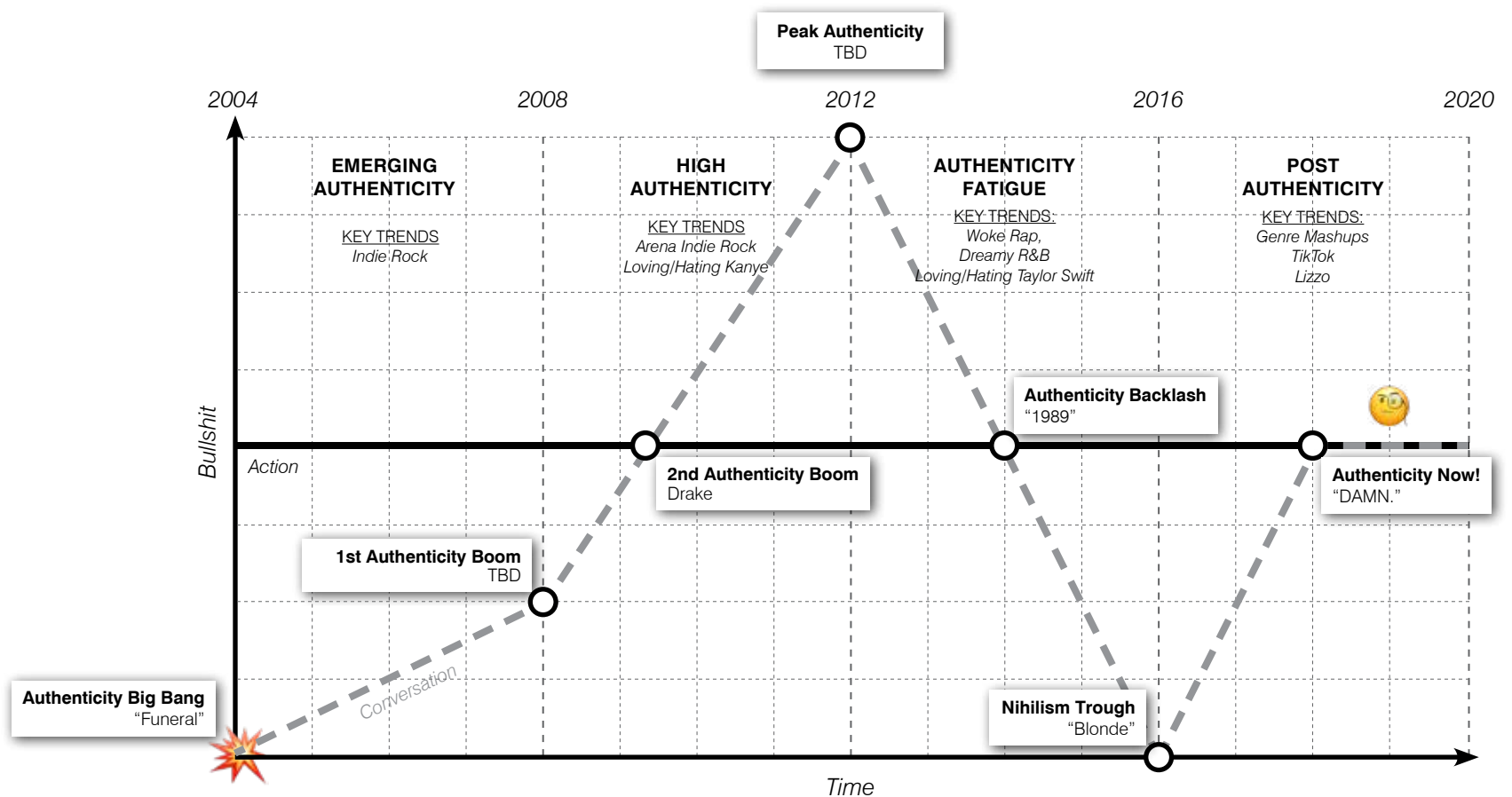
A BRIEF HISTORY OF AUTHENTICITY

Film



A BRIEF HISTORY OF AUTHENTICITY

Music



TOWARDS A POST- AUTHENTICITY WORLD

When we say “Post-Authenticity” we don’t mean that authenticity doesn’t matter anymore, or that’s it’s all like, uncool, or that there’s some sexy new buzzword that we should all flock to instead: *authenticity matters more than ever precisely because demonstrating a reasonable degree of authenticity (ie. one’s actions and one’s claims about oneself meaningfully syncing up) is the new baseline expectation against which every brand, institution, entity, and individual is now judged.*

If you’re hearing less of the word itself these days, it’s only because we’ve gotten to a point where just saying you’re authentic or that you value authenticity is itself a little, well, inauthentic. If you need to say it, you probably aren’t doing it — the lady doth protest too much, *amiright?*

Because in the Post-Authenticity landscape, authenticity isn’t something that needs to be tooted and touted and shouted from the rooftops: it’s a practice, rooted in principles, and when it’s done well, and sincerely, you don’t need to say a thing about it: it just is. A successful post-authentic brand (or institution, or entity, or individual) is one who walks the walk. If you aren’t practicing authenticity at a marrow-deep level, you won’t even make it out of the gate.

DRIVERS OF CHANGE

RESIDUAL FATIGUE

Authenticity Burnout is real. A few years ago, it seemed like every brand was touting the practically mythical origins, and the ultra-rare provenance, and the outrageously specialized formulation...of a \$2.99 stick of drugstore deodorant. The excess of unverifiable and irrelevant information coupled with the clumsy attempts at surface-level differentiation was annoying and exhausting, so people just started to tune out. But the thing of it is: consumers still care — a lot — about what they're consuming. What they're demanding is a streamlining of information: ditch the buzzwords and cosmetic signifiers and give them the real deal, straight up. Sometimes a rose is just a rose, if that metaphorical rose is an economical and effective \$2.99 stick of drugstore deodorant, well, that's just great.

THE SEARCH FOR DEEPER MEANING

When we talk about authenticity, it's impossible not to note that interest in the concept not-at-all coincidentally aligns with the post-recession fallout. Looking at the world around us, we see precarity even in a historically good economy, scarcity in a time of unprecedented abundance, and even those people who have done relatively well by this system are left with the sense that they've been sold a false bill of goods.

AGAINST THE CAPITALIST SAMESCAPE

One of the unintended side effects of the unchecked, rapacious brand of global capitalism that dominates our world is a pervasive, eerie sameness. Wherever you go, there the same types of stores/brands/products/institutions/individuals are. But it's not just that these stores/brands/products/institutions/individuals have been stripped of their uniqueness, it's that they've been stripped of their ability to make meaning. Given the velocity with which goods can be distributed, and the ease with which ideas can be shared, a certain degree of superficial sameness is now inevitable, but the remedy for that is not to retreat into ever more niche expressions of individuality, it's to make sure that deeper values are being acknowledged, supported and propagated. When everything does (or will eventually) look the same, it's the meaning that matters.

HEIGHTENED EXPECTATIONS

Rising tides raise all ships, and a decade-plus of breathless appeals to the provenance/craft/heritage definition of authenticity has demonstrably improved people's palates, grown their awareness, and raised their baseline expectations of most products and services. But it's deeper than just demanding higher quality wares (though consumers certainly are) — it's about peering behind the curtain and taking a more critical, expansive, discerning view of how everything's made and comes to market. From corporate governance to supply chain to marketing and everything in between, more consumers are more conscious than ever before about how the proverbial sausage is made. More refined palates demand better products, but heightened critical faculties demand better processes to produce those better products.

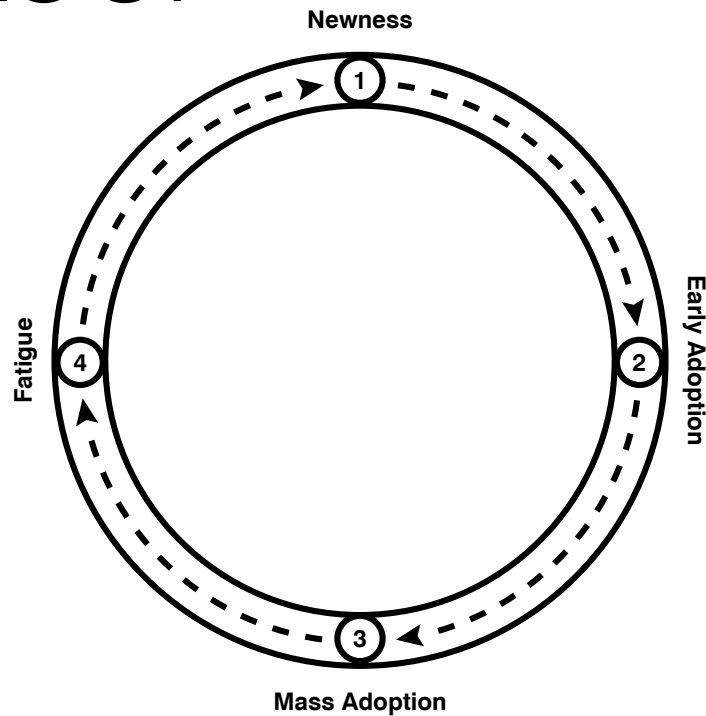
PROACTIVE OPTIMISM

In these polarizing times, there's one thing that everyone, everywhere can agree on: that the world is metaphorically (and literally!) on fire, and we can't carry on the way we have been. But if you listen really hard, in the midst of all this entirely justified and not nearly hysterical enough doomsday prophesizing, what you'll hear are unmistakable notes of optimism...as bad as things are currently, or have been in the past, or may still yet become, a lot of people are taking the time to rethink everything we've been doing, and what they're finding in most cases is an abundance of opportunity. And that's actually exciting. And it's also a cause for *GASP* dare we say it...hope? But it's not the naive, gauzy, slightly lazy, holding-out-for-a-hero version of Hope and Change that still seemed viable ten years ago; the Hope and Change that people are tapping into now is radically clear-eyed, purpose-driven, and goal-oriented. It might get worse before it gets better, but more people than ever before believe in and are fighting for that better future.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ALL

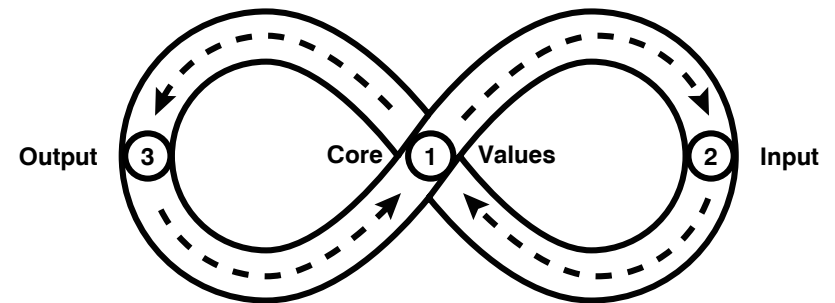
You just can't get away with the things that you used to be able to get away with...moans the Chorus of the Privileged who assumed for years that "getting away with it" was the same thing as being right. Bad actors are being ferreted out on the daily, and despite the occasional cri-de-witchhunt, the actual (and really, really positive) result of this invigorated cultural moment is that everyone's being forced to take a long hard look at the systems that they're upholding and/or participating in and have some brutally honest conversations about the good, the bad, and the completely unconscionable things that directly result from the choices they make. And it's not just about corporations and power players being put on blast: individuals are being held (and holding themselves) to a higher standard, and a big part of personal accountability in people's daily lives is seeking out brands that (hopefully) align with those standards, or at the very least, don't actively counteract them.

THE OLD AUTHENTICITY LOOP



Authenticity used to be something that was relentlessly chased after. Some new trendy, buzzy, impossible-to-resist *thing* would arrive on the scene (1), early adopters would get tons of credit for their boldness/vision/uniqueness in taking up the *thing* (2), which would then lead to mass adoption of the *thing* (3), which would then lead to fatigue with the *thing* (4), which then created the need to seek out some *newer, trendier, buzzier, even-more-impossible-to-resist thing*. Repeat ad nauseum.

THE NEW AUTHENTICITY CONTINUUM



Authenticity now is something that is constantly reaffirmed, reinforced and 're-upped.' Core values (1) guide conversations with the world at large (2), then learnings from those conversations are filtered back through your core values (1), which then in turn informs any new ventures/attitudes/approaches (3), which are then checked against your core values (1) to ensure that what you're doing now is consistent with what you've done before. There's no real beginning or end to this process: every pass through this cycle helps to clarify and strengthen what you're all about, and when you really know what you're all about, you're bound to be more authentic.

EXPRESSIONS OF AUTHENTICITY

When we talk about “authentic” brands, what we’re really talking about are brands that exhibit a reasonable degree of consistency between *what* they profess to be all about and *how* they actually act.

And while the actual calculus of authenticity is infinitely nuanced and context-dependent, fundamentally there are six core modes — what we’re calling expressions — through which brand authenticity is established, disseminated, and reinforced.

No one brand is ever going to hit all of these categories perfectly and completely, but having an awareness of where you shine and where you need some help is half the battle.

TANGIBLE EXPRESSIONS

1. MESSAGING

How you talk, look, and act is (or should be) the most important way that authenticity is constructed and received. Plain-spoken, candid, self-aware and (lightly) self-effacing speech clocks as authentic. Pretentious, evasive, self-aggrandizing speech does not. Consistency also matters. A lot.

2. PRODUCT

The performance of your wares needs to match up with the promises you’re making about them. And your products — whether they be physical or virtual or even conceptual — need to actually function...ideally better than expected.

3. EXPERIENCE

When a customer encounters your brand out in the wild — whether that be on-line, in-person, or somewhere in between — that experience needs to jive with the values and prerogatives that underpin your brand, and give them some positive intangibles to walk away with.

4. CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

Values matter. And not just “values” that are espoused in press releases or laid out in glossy reports that no one reads: actual values that are embodied by those at the top. If your CEO’s hobbies include hosting panel discussions with autocrats, founding Super PACs, and reaching out-of-court settlements with former employees, that *will* be a problem, *authenticity-wise* (not to mention *basic morality-wise*).

5. SUPPLY CHAIN

Speaking of values, inquiring minds want to know: how’s the proverbial sausage made? Exploitation, abuse, and negligence — at any level — just isn’t a good look, and there’s simply no excuse for it any more. The way in which your product comes to market now matters just as much as the product itself.

6. COMMUNITY

Standing for something — anything! — greater than yourself is *so hot right now*. It doesn’t need to be some high-minded save-the-world kind of undertaking, but offering your customers a little something-something that they can participate in and feel a kinship for and share with others goes a long way.

INTANGIBLE EXPRESSIONS



PRINCIPLES ARE PRINCIPAL*

*(walk the damn walk!)

A brand's corporate governance and internal operations have to jive with their external brand expressions.

If your employees live in a state of terror, or your entire operation is being bankrolled by sleazy VC Suits, or your C-Suite is full of people who don't even remotely look, think, or act like the customers you're trying to appeal to, that's going to undo whatever good work you're doing (or trying to do) elsewhere.

People *will* find out, they *will* be pissed, and they're not going to care about your deeply held regrets, or your exciting mandates for change if nothing has actually changed and bad actors are continuing to influence or profit from your brand.

You're going to want to get ahead of that narrative, bruh.



INVEST IN WHAT MATTERS TO YOU*

It doesn't matter what you say you're going to do, or what you say your priorities are, or what you say you really and truly believe in most of all:

Unless you're investing cold hard cash into enacting your priorities at all levels of your brand, it isn't real.

And if it isn't real, it isn't authentic, babe.
Simple as that.

*(like, actual dollars and cents)



RESPONSIBILITY IS OPPORTUNITY

You heard it here first:

Maximum profit extraction for the benefit of your shareholders is *OUT* and doing things that will tangibly improve the health and wellbeing of your customers, employees, suppliers, and communities is *IN*.

A.k.a. having a purpose and contributing something to society. Fun! The biggest corporations in America have even agreed to this in principle*

And if

AO Smith Corporation, Abbott, Accenture, ADP, AECOM, The AES Corporation, AFLAC, AK Steel Corporation, Allergan PLC, Alliant Energy, Altec, Inc., Amazon, American Airlines, American Electric Power, American Express, American Tower Corporation, Ameriprise Financial, Anthem, Inc., Aon, Apple, Aramark, Assurant, AT&T INC., Ball Corporation, Bank of America, Baxter International Inc., Bayer USA, Bechtel Group, Inc., Best Buy Co., Inc., Blackrock, Inc., The Boeing Company, Borgwarner Inc., Boston Consulting Group, BP PLC, Bristol-Myers Squibb, C.V. Starr & Co., Inc., The Carlyle Group, Caterpillar, Inc. CBRE Group, Inc., CF Industries, Chevron Corporation, Chubb, Cigna, Cisco System, Inc., Citigroup, Inc., CNH Industrial, The Coca-Cola Company, Cognizant, Comcast Corporation, Conocophillips Company, Corning Incorporated, Cummins Inc., CVS Health, Day & Zimmerman, Del Technologies, Deloitte, Dow, Duke Energy, DXC Technology, Eastman Chemical Company, Eaton, Edison International, Exxon Mobil Corporation, EY, FedEx Corporation, FIS, Flex, Fluor Corporation, Ford Motor Company, Fox Corporation, Freeport-McMoran Inc., General Dynamics Corporation, General Motors Company, The Goldman Sachs Group, Grant Thornton LLP, Guardian Life Insurance Company of America, Hanesbrands Inc., Harman International, Hearst Corporation, The Home Depot, Honeywell, Huntington Ingalls Industries, IBM Corporation, Infor, International Paper Co., Interpublic Group, ITC Holdings Corp., Jacobs, John Deere, Johnson & Johnson, Johnson Controls, JPMorgan Chase & Co., Keycorp, Kiewit Corporation, KPMG LLP, LZHarris Technologies, Inc., Land O'Lakes, Inc., Leidos, Lennar Corporation, Lockheed Martin Corporation, Lyondellbasell Industries, Macy's, Inc., Mallinckrodt Pharmaceuticals, Marathon Oil Corporation, Marathon Petroleum Corporation, Marriot International, Inc., Massmutual, Mastercard, McCormick And Company, Inc., McKesson Corporation, McKinsey & Company, Medtronic PLC, MetLife, Micron Technology, Moelis & Company, Morgan Stanley, Motorola Solutions, NASDAQ, National Gypsum Company, New York Life Insurance Co., Noble Energy, Inc., Northrop Grumman Corporation, Novelis, NRG Energy, Inc., Oracle, Owens Corning, PepsiCo, Pfizer Inc., Phillips 66, Pitney Bowes, Principal, The Proctor & Gamble Company, Progressive Corporation, PWC, Qualcomm Incorporated, Quanta Services, Raytheon Company, Rockwell Automation, S&P Global, Salesforce, SAP, SAS Institute, Schnitzer Steel Industries, Inc., Sempra Energy, Siemens Corporation USA, Silver Lake, Southern Company, Stanley Black & Decker, Steelcase Inc., Stryker, Suffolk, Target, TC Energy, Telephone & Data Systems, Inc., Texas Instruments, Tishman Speyer, The Travelers Companies, Inc., TSYS, Turner Construction Co., Union Pacific, United Airlines, United Technologies Corporation, UPS, USAA, Vanguard, Verisk Analytics, Visa Inc., Vista Equity Partners, Vistra Energy, Walgreens Boots Alliance, Walmart, Inc., Wells Fargo, Wesco International, Inc., Western & Southern Financial Group, Western Union, Whirlpool Corporation, Wipro Limited, World Fuel Services Corporation, World Wide Technology, Xerox Corporation, Xylem Inc., Zebra Technologies Corporation, & 3M

can do it, you can too!

The greater your potential reach, the greater your responsibility to do good (or at least not actively bad things). Treat this as an opportunity to differentiate yourself rather than a burden to be endured.



BAD THINGS CAN BE AUTHENTIC

It's very possible to be authentically bad or fake or even actively malignant and still be rewarded for that.

It's a testament to people's heightened aversion to bullshit that we've gotten to the point where bad actors are being rewarded for being transparently awful *because at least we know what they're all about*, and well-intentioned actors with ever-so-slightly imperfect records are being hung out to dry *because I just don't trust them somehow?!*

So in this climate, a sneering, ironic, over-it brand voice can absolutely gain some short-term traction — it's absolutely a viable path. But ultimately, people are looking for something a little deeper; something they can actually feel good about.

Which leads us to an important caveat: it's not enough to just be "authentic"; you need to be authentically *something positive: decent, principled, kind, passionate*....you get the idea.

Authenticity can absolutely be weaponized by negative, destructive forces, but at its best and most potent, it should be a force for good.



OVER-DOING IT UN-DOES IT

The downfall of a lot of brands is that they try to tack on a relatable, noble, humanizing set of qualities to a product that just isn't that.

If your brand or your product isn't particularly high-minded, don't try and make it that. Lean into whatever it is that you do well; poke fun at your perceived or real shortcomings; make realistic and actionable promises given where you're at right now.

A can of soda probably isn't going to solve race relations in America, but it can still make people feel good and bring them a small moment of joy, and hey: that's something! Do that!

Trying too hard backfires these days because, for better or for worse, in our jaded, skeptical cultural moment, people are just DONE with all the empty promises and hot air.



ANTI-AUTHENTICITY IS KINDA AUTHENTIC?

Though we're decidedly in an era that is overwhelmingly urgent, pro-active, and uncynical, there will always be room for a few contrarians among us. Selectively *not-caring* is absolutely its own form of virtue these days, so long as that *not-caring* is directed squarely at things that deserve to be *not-cared about*, and it's not just being used as a cover for apathy — or worse.

In the very best instances, the anti-authentic stance can actually be a means to achieve even greater authenticity: that is, owning what it is that you're about, warts and all, and presenting that to the world (with a modicum of humility, mind you)

Rejecting something, opting out, or clarifying the things that you're emphatically not about can actually be an incredibly useful tool to help *positively define* your values. Just make sure you have some clear-cut, worthwhile values to begin with; no one like a nihilist.

COMMUNITY DEFINITIONS...

SO WHO CARES?*

*About authenticity, that is. A very brief rundown of the various breeds of authenticity enthusiasts and what makes them tick. Let's call them The Post-Authentic Tribes.

1. THE FUNCTIONALIST

Focused on performance

PROBABLY LIKES: Japanese office supplies
PROBABLY DISLIKES: Coffee pod systems
PROBABLY LIKES BUT WON'T ADMIT IT:
HOW TO TALK TO THEM: Direct, pragmatic, unemotional

2. THE SPECIALIST

Focused on connoisseurship

PROBABLY LIKES: Apéritifs
PROBABLY DISLIKES: Viral food trends
PROBABLY LIKES BUT WON'T ADMIT IT:
HOW TO TALK TO THEM: Precise, technical, esoteric

3. THE OMNIVORE

Focused on novelty

PROBABLY LIKES: Anything from the early 2000s
PROBABLY DISLIKES: Slick start-up brands that are explicitly marketed to upmarket millennials
PROBABLY LIKES BUT WON'T ADMIT IT:
HOW TO TALK TO THEM: Irony, non-sequitur, self-effacing

4. THE UTOPIAN

Focused on ideals

PROBABLY LIKES: Ethically-produced clothing
PROBABLY DISLIKES: Bottled water
PROBABLY LIKES BUT WON'T ADMIT IT: Bottled water
HOW TO TALK TO THEM: Earnest, honest, self-aware

5. THE SENTIMENTALIST

Focused on narrative

PROBABLY LIKES: Wellness apps
PROBABLY DISLIKES: Ugly sneakers
PROBABLY LIKES BUT WON'T ADMIT IT: Nothing; they "own" their guilty pleasures
HOW TO TALK TO THEM: Emotional, florid, soothing

6. THE IRONIST

Focused on differentiation

PROBABLY LIKES: Hilariously botched/shoddy knockoff designer good they got in Seoul
PROBABLY DISLIKES: "Streetwear" (they'll make the dismissive air quotes when saying it)
PROBABLY LIKES BUT WON'T ADMIT IT: Kanye
HOW TO TALK TO THEM: Erudite, puckish, subversive

MODES OF AUTHENTICITY

1. PERFORMANCE-BASED

Authenticity is derived from how well a product/service/experience actually functions. In this mode, authenticity is (largely) quantifiable: if it does what it's supposed to do, and does it objectively well, it's authentic.

2. CONNOISSEURSHIP-BASED

Authenticity is derived from how niche a product/service/experience is. In this mode, authenticity is dependent on avoiding a certain level/scale of commercialization: if too many people start to enjoy it, or it becomes too widely available, its authenticity will be compromised.

3. NOVELTY-BASED

Authenticity is derived from a product/service/experience that embodies newness, whimsy, and originality. In this mode, authenticity is all about the shock of the unexpected; it's necessarily fickle, and it won't last long, but if making a big splash is the goal, this is the way to go.

4. IDEALS-BASED

Authenticity is derived from how well a product/service/experience lives up to defined ideals that exist outside of the thing itself. In this mode, authenticity is measured against the amount of good that something does, and the amount of bad that it avoids.

5. NARRATIVE-BASED

Authenticity is derived from how well a product/service/experience tells a compelling story. In this mode, authenticity is often enhanced by highlighting uncontested brand features, like a long history, or uncommon modes of production.

6. DIFFERENTIATION-BASED

Authenticity is derived from how challenging it is to comprehend or enjoy a product/service/experience. In this mode, authenticity is very often rooted in intense self-referentiality: you have to "get" a complex set of signs, symbols, and that sense of insider knowledge is what *feels* authentic.

TEN EASY TAKEAWAYS:

1. Understand Your Purpose

Be very clear on why it is your brand exists. It sounds laughably simple (and a little bit like a teenage existential crisis), but you need to have a clear, concise, and compelling answer to the question why am I here?

2. Practice Follows Principles

Everything you do needs to be informed by a coherent set of principles. Even the most minor detail of how you show up in the world needs to track with your defined mission and reflect your clearly articulated standards of conduct.

3. Acknowledge Your Limitations

No one can do everything perfectly, but brands get into serious trouble when they try and deny their shortcomings. Be honest and transparent, accept responsibility, and lay out clear, actionable plans of what and how you're going to improve.

4. Highlight Your Strengths

Most brands have one thing in particular that they do really, really well: lean into that. Talk about the things about your brand that aren't up for debate, and always be on the lookout for ways to do that thing with even more brilliance and finesse.

5. Be Consistent

Being knowable, reliable, and predictable (in the sense of having fixed standards of conduct, not in the sense of being boring) is an absolute prerequisite for any brand these days. The way you show up — namely how you look, talk, and act — needs to form a coherent picture day by day, month by month, year by year.

6. Be Open

Embrace things beyond your control, including the way that your customers interface with your brand. Engaging with people who want to engage with you is always a good idea; trying to exert dictatorial control over every mention of your brand on social media is wildly counterproductive, not to mention functionally impossible.

7. Be Humble

If your brand does something really right, graciously accept the plaudits and get back to work. If your brand does something really wrong, accept responsibility, make a proactive plan to ensure that it never happens again, and hold accountable the individuals (or systems) that were responsible for making the mess in the first place.

8. Be Self-Aware

Brand self-awareness isn't just about having a clear-eyed sense of who you are and what you're all about, it's about anticipating how people are going to respond to you; in other words practicing basic empathy. The more mindful you are of how you're coming off, the easier it is to establish meaningful connections with new customers and cement loyalty among your existing ones.

9. Check Yourself

An important corollary of self-awareness is having the ability to take a sober (and sobering) at the things that you're not doing well, and the willingness to formulate a plan to fix them. And don't treat this as a one-off response to a crisis: always be anticipating the worst thing someone could say about your brand and working to get ahead of it.

10. Tell the Truth

This one should be fairly self explanatory and yet...brands (and people!) seem to have a really, really hard time doing it consistently. There's nowhere to run and nowhere to hide anymore, so make no mistake about it: one way or another, eventually you WILL be put on blast for all of your hollow promises and shady dealings. So just be honest and upfront from the jump, K?

IN
CONVERSATION
WITH...

DIRTY WORDS

EXCLUSIVITY

AUTHENTICITY

COMMUNITY

SUSTAINABILITY

LOYALTY

RELEVANCE

CULTURE

CONTENT

INFLUENCE

INNOVATION

