

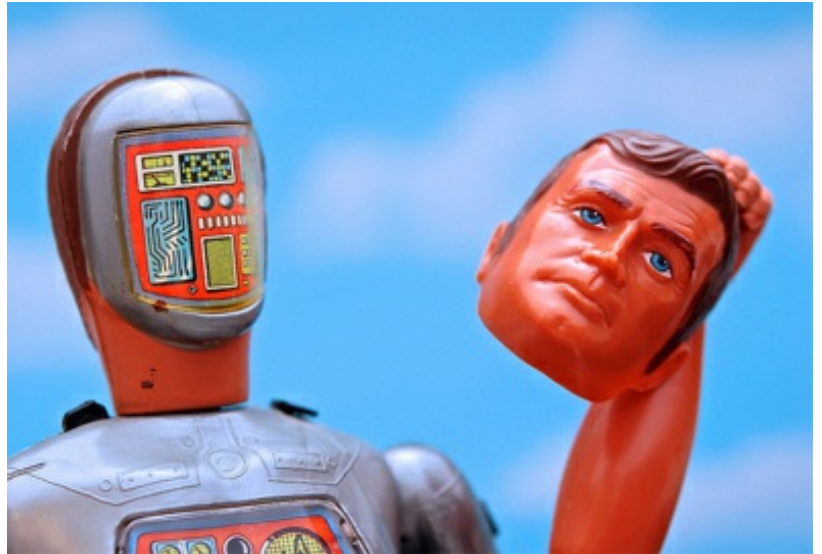
You Can't Claim You've Got An Authentic Brand, You Must Be Authentic

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Brand authenticity has become a topic of many business conversations because customers are now equipped with the tools and information to discern whether a brand is in fact what it says it is—and they place their brand loyalties and make their purchase decisions accordingly. In the past two weeks I've been in three separate client meetings in which someone expressed the desire for their brand to be known as authentic. One executive wanted to include authenticity in its core brand essence statement and another chose the descriptor in a brand personality attribute exercise. The president of the third company wanted to claim authenticity as a key brand differentiator. Each brand is authentic in some way, but I found myself repeatedly explaining that authenticity is something you *do*, not something you *claim*. People will think your brand is authentic if you actually behave in authentic ways.



Here are three Uncommon Sense ways to encourage your brand to be authentic:

Deliver on your promises.

Keeping promises is the number one way brands demonstrate authenticity. Many brands make promises by setting high expectations in their advertising and promotions, but they disappoint people by not delivering on those expectations in their customer experiences. Fast food chains are notorious for using beautiful images of food that look nothing like the real product; airlines depict their attendants as shiny, happy people despite most of them being overworked and underappreciated; technology firms make bold claims about product superiority or capabilities that are only achieved with perfect user-conditions. These types of disconnects will discredit any brand claim of authenticity. Before you set expectations, be sure you can deliver on them. Your brand can't just be a promise; it must be a promise delivered.

Don't try to be something you're not.

The temptation to imitate the successful practices of other brands or the fear of missing out on the latest trend often causes brands to stray from their core positioning and identity. When you do something off-brand, for example create a partnership with a brand that doesn't share your values, use channels or pricing that puts your brand out of reach of its fanbase, or offer a product that's geared towards customers outside your usual target, you confuse, and potentially alienate, people. But when you use the core of your brand as a filter to decide what to do and what not to do, you are acting like an authentic brand. Brands that are clear about what they stand for and stay committed to their original vision earn people's trust.

Execute consistently in every way, every day.

Authentic brands know that everything they do creates a brand impression. Every interaction matters and every touchpoint communicates. They ensure that they execute on their brand values and express their brand personality in everything they do. If you want to exhibit authenticity, everyone who works on your brand—from senior executives to line employees—must appropriately interpret and reinforce it. Brand authenticity doesn't function like a battery that still operates when it's half full of power—it's like a light switch that's either on or off. You'll build perceptions of authenticity by executing consistently 100% of the time, not swinging for the fences and batting 100.

Authenticity, and similar brand descriptors like integrity and trustworthy, often land on the pages of brand strategy decks because they're worthy aspirations. But it's more appropriate to bake them into operational plans and processes, and cultivate them within culture and values. Just like "cool" and "fun", if a brand wants to be authentic, it must *be* it, not say it.

Blending a fresh perspective, twenty-five years of experience working with world-class brands including Sony and Frito-Lay, and a talent for inspiring audiences, Denise Lee Yohn is a leading authority on building and positioning exceptional brands. Denise is the author of the bestselling book [What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest](#) (Jossey-Bass). Read more by Denise at <http://deniseleeyohn.com>.