

MARKETING

Connections redefined: What authenticity really means

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By **Michael Manning**

Challenging times reveal the true value systems of not only individuals, but also brands.

We are seeing a slew of brands beginning to redefine what they stand for in the face of systemic changes, new pushes for equality, and the desire to help others. Many are even taking political stances.

Before I jump on the bandwagon to support any of these companies, however, I will watch to see what happens when things return to a somewhat predictable rhythm. To me, that is what authenticity means.

Food for thought

I have followed Chobani's marketing efforts for quite some time, well before the pandemic hit.

The food company **shares a lot** about culture, celebrating success, putting people first, paying it forward, and helping those in need. It has been interesting to see the brand's value system go unchanged in the face of this year's chaos.

But now, with COVID-19 and an increasingly immersive virtual space, Chobani's voice is amplified.

Chobani had brand authority and brand trust, but now through its authenticity and purpose, it also has an ecosystem ready to listen to its amplified message, support it even further, and even champion the brand.

Other companies took notice and understood that now more than ever, their consumers wanted to have a sense of belonging and a cohesive mindset when they commit to a brand experience. This takes shape nowadays as building a community around a brand.

Most recently, I saw this development with the payment company, Fast, which **built enormous hype** and community in the days and weeks before its launch. Its potential consumers and users developed a sense of belonging.

Making authenticity real

Customers have ultimately been forgiving and understanding because of the many changes to the way we all function and work, but needs have increased during the pandemic.

Brands cannot afford to go unresponsive or let a customer down. In light of that, marketing teams need to prioritize over-communication with customers on what to expect of their experience, whether it be making a restaurant reservation or purchasing a vehicle.

Not many consumers understand how to navigate the physical purchasing process safely, and they want to feel equally safe with their purchasing decisions.

Brands and their marketing teams can meet and exceed customer expectations heading into 2021 by prioritizing authenticity and striving to achieve genuine connections via content. Here are a few places to start achieving those goals:

Become more transparent. True transparency is a continuous effort. As a value that informs all aspects of the operations and brand identity, transparency must be practiced regularly and consistently to be effective.

Brands will learn that building a brand on openness elevates their authenticity. When consumer trust and loyalty are strong, business growth and success naturally follow.

Communicate more effectively. Share with your customers what they need when they need it. As information evolves, communication needs also evolve in a crisis.

A good communication plan can inform customers how to stay safe and connect to a deeper sense of purpose and stability. Focus on keeping customers safe and healthy. Then repeat, repeat, repeat.

Find ways to stay relevant and innovative. Brands must find a way to stay ahead of today's news and what is relevant to consumers. This can be accomplished via virtual connections such as Antonelli's Cheese Shop in Austin, TX, hosting classes to offer date nights, safe gatherings, and keep its brand top of mind in the face of a potential closure and acknowledging systemic challenges that are important to customers during these challenging times, such as Google's donation to students without technology in their homes to successfully launch virtual schooling. Do not stop thinking and learning.

WE LIVE IN a fragile world where agility is the best means for brand survival and where authenticity is the best avenue for customer engagement.

Brands that embrace this new normal and go the extra mile to connect with customers in effective and meaningful ways reflect their brand promises.

As customer expectations continue to evolve, it is up to brands to meet the challenge and evolve right alongside them.

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