



Keep It

Real

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We are not the suckers we always have been.

We used to hear: “There’s a sucker born every minute.” Now, with every passing minute, there’s a sucker out there wising up. You had better be ready. It’s a sucker revolution, and it’s about time.

The reason for this sucker revolution is simple:

In the old days, communicating with each other (in mass amounts, or at a distance) was expensive, if not impossible. But now we can do it effortlessly and we leave our evidence everywhere. Karma is now taking a distinctly physical presence in our communities and mindspace. We know not only that we don't like a company, but also why we don't like it...or if we don't know why, finding out is just a few keystrokes away.

It used to be enough to have a catchy slogan, fast talk, and good looks. Now, we are catching on faster than ever. With every inch of our mindspace being crowded by things vying for our attention, our capacity for bullshit is shrinking exponentially. Marketing techniques that used to be sure-fire are now left to choke in the dusty ditch of obsolescence. We are learning to ignore you.

These days, we are looking for things that truly make a difference. We invite things that solidly make us feel that we are becoming the people we want to be, long after the pretty packaging has been cast to the ground. It's time for your organization to pick a side: Are you trying to confuse us, or are you being authentic?

ARE YOU KEEPING IT REAL?

Like Martin Luther's *95 Theses*, this manifesto attempts to nail the hypocrisy of the hype machine on the door of the town church for everyone to see. It works on the principle that whatever happens comes back to you and there's no such thing as "getting away with it." As individuals, we already know this. As businesses, we have yet to admit that the spectre of deceit is even in the room.

If you're a business owner, and you're worried, that's because you probably should be. You're probably smart and you're realizing that your customers are catching up with you. There is a generation growing up out there that is larger and faster than you.

Are you really worried? People who worry are people who have something to hide. And in this age, secrets emerge real fast. We're bigger, we're faster, and we have 5,000 Myspace friends ready to desert you the second you try to pull one over on us.

Mission = Practices = Marketing

So give up on hiding the secrets. Transparency will save you.

You better have an immaculate closet—
we'll be looking for skeletons.

We throw around the word “real” a lot in the hip-hop world.

Whether this or that rapper is “real,” whether what the music they make is “real” hip-hop or not is the subject of a great deal of debate. For our purposes, being “real” is having the human touch. It helps if your words aren’t being generated by a marketing department. In our case, if your company is doing great, but all the customers in your industry or niche hate you, it’s time to get “real.”

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Authenticity is about aligning your actions with your thought. It’s simple stuff. If you’re cheating on your spouse, do you really believe they’re not going to find out? The concept with authenticity is the same. Be fake if you want—just know that the public is catching up with you.

Here’s a great example: In June of 2006, the Black Eyed Peas, a pop-rap group, teamed up with the Mars Corporation in order to create Instant Def, an original web-based mini-series. Based on a fictitious rap group that attains superhero status during an accident at a Snickers plant, the site also invites us to experience “real hip-hop” and its “playas,” “boo-t,” “grime,” “rides,” “beats,” and “freshness.”

The reaction among the online hip-hop world was immediate and intense. “I’m not going to call them ‘sellouts,’ but I’m pretty sure there isn’t a brand out there that the Black Eyed Peas haven’t sold out to,” said [one blog](#). [Another](#): “This is the new gold standard of fakeness.”

Meanwhile, even a monkey could tell that this is the brainchild of a 50-year-old marketing “guru” who thought this would be really “hot” and “viral” with the “kids.” In an attempt to further transmit their plague, they encourage us to send it to our “homies.”

Good for them. I hope they get a raise. Meanwhile, here’s some stuff to get you through.

1. KNOW THE INSIDE GAME

Get rid of the “scare quotes.”

Fact: Your children’s “cool” and “hip” language is not a fad to them—it is their chosen method of communication. Misappropriating their language and shooting it back at them only proves how out of touch you are. If you have done this, you’re a fake. Find a copywriter that can speak the language—fluently. If neither you nor your copywriter can speak the language of the people you’re trying to talk to, one of you is the wrong person for the project.

Here in Québec, where two official languages dominate the island-city of Montreal, there is no greater crime than displaying your lack of knowledge of the language you’re advertising in. Try to take a hint from this. View your project in the same way: if you’re not fluent, you’re going to need someone that is. Trust no one else’s opinion, save its native speakers. If you skimp on this aspect, I assure you: it will be noticed.

A good marketer is like a good anthropologist.

One of the things you learn as an anthropologist is that it’s impossible to make judgments on a culture while on the outside of it. This is because a number of the rituals, the religion, and the language do make a great deal of sense from the inside, but from the outside, they can be pure nonsense. The trick to figuring it all out is precisely that: being on the inside.

That said, a good marketer is like a good anthropologist: they study people like it's a science and always work with an intent to better understand and appreciate whom they are communicating with.

In other words: You don't have to know three chords to market to punks, but you do have to know what three chords mean to them.

2. THE LEFT HAND MUST KNOW WHAT THE RIGHT HAND IS DOING.

Quick! Name five companies that care about "people" and yet take advantage of third-world labour practices.

How difficult was that? Not at all, I'm betting.

The companies you thought of won't always be the same from year to year—last year's Gap is this year's Apple, but there will always be companies like this—doing the dirty work with the left hand, while shaking hands with the right. Sure, your marketing department is selling your CEO's idealism to your customers, but it's a whole other branch of the organization making the decisions that people are finding out about on the web.

Wikipedia, Google, Blogger: Three of the world's best ways to spread truth. Information continues to want to be free, because people like to complain and share secrets. Are you still running away? It's time for you to turn around and face it.

Keep this in mind: When your marketing strategy shows it cares about people, those are the customers you'll attract, too: the ones that care. People that care are trusted more and they like sharing the things they love. And with all of the skeletons in your closet eventually being revealed to the public, you'd better consider what those people are finding out about you (and how to put out the fire and not play with matches again).

3. WHAT WORKS

Marc Ecko, a prominent urban clothing designer, orchestrates an elaborate stunt to impress the urban market. A video shows Ecko and a co-conspirator jumping over fences, evading security guards, and finding themselves at the President's airplane, Air Force One. He tags it: "Still Free" in huge, stylized lettering. They both vanish.

Ecko later revealed that the entire stunt had been a hoax. It was elaborately planned, complete with a rented 747 which they worked on covertly in a hangar. "Still Free" represents how the people of America (particularly the youth) remain free despite the various shackles that have been put on them. Good message.

Did it work?

If any talk is good talk, it's clear that both Marc Ecko and the Black Eyed Peas use the polarized opinions of their fans and nay-sayers against each other. If done properly, it can fuel the fires of both sides enough to continue the discussion far beyond the campaign's natural half-life. However, in this case as well, much of the reaction from the community itself (graffiti artists mostly) was negative. Many complained that Ecko is far from a graffiti artist; he had never himself "gotten up," and that the stunt was only to garner attention for his graffiti-based video game, "Getting Up".

How does one catch the attention of an increasingly cynical generation whose attention is divided as far as their keyboards and mice allow? The answer may lie in a German Adidas campaign also based in graffiti art: Adicolor.

The Adicolor case. Perhaps the closest that a company has come in recent memory to connecting with its target market of rebellious, urban youth has been the Berlin-based Adicolor campaign. In a move that impressed a number of online influencers within street culture, Adicolor used nearly white billboards to encourage graffiti writers to tag their boards with whatever they pleased. Later, Adidas returned with a new set of billboards.

The new billboards contain the graffiti incorporated into Adidas shoes in a number of creative ways. The result: All over Germany, you saw real graffiti, made by real members of the culture (graffiti writers), being given an important place in the campaign.

The message Adidas was sending was clear: They wanted the public to be involved in the conversation. Unlike Ecko, Adidas was not telling us what we wanted: they were asking.

Don't presume to know what we want. With the democratization of media, through blogs, podcasts, and the web, the consumer is getting his power back.

Show that you understand this. The difference will be remarkable.

GET IN LINE OR DIE.

We are currently at a time of transition, where the old world still has much of its original power of deceit. That means you have time to deal with the upcoming changes.

The era we are entering into values authenticity and increasing access to information means your sloppy paint job will be seen by all. Embrace these values to keep your edge in the competitive marketplace. The solution is simple:

Decide what you stand for, then stand for it. Anything less and the only sucker left will be you.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julien is a 27 year old podcaster, writer, and speaker from Montréal. He is the host of In Over Your Head, the longest running podcast in Canada. It focuses on biting social commentary, as well as underground music and culture, and is rebroadcast on Sirius Satellite Radio every Friday. To listen to his podcast, go to <http://feeds.feedburner.com/InOverYourHead>.

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BORN ON DATE

This document was created on February 6, 2007 and is based on the best information available at that time. To check for updates, please visit <http://changethis.com/31.03.KeepItReal>.

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