Why brand integrity and authenticity should be your core digital strategy

By Armand Mukenge

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In the digital space, the conversation about being authentic has been one-sided. Brands have had to affiliate themselves with the conversation of the day in order to maintain brand advocacy, at times for an opinion that is not in line with their core values. While understanding your consumers' needs has always been a fundamental part of an effective digital strategy, brands have lost their authenticity and integrity.

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Now more than ever, people have been spoilt for choice. Brands are no longer competing for attention on a local level. Instead, the level has been raised to competing on an international battlefield, with not only well-established brands but with people/influencers running their own YouTube channels or e-commerce platforms from their homes. As a result, millennials and Gen-Zs have been given the bargaining power to renegotiate this consumer vs brand playing field.

Global redefinition

Consumers have redefined the rules of engagement, with the rise of a deep conviction to stand against social and financial injustice - thus holding society and its leaders accountable.

The recent social media trend that "my brand doesn't align with (insert brand name)" is a representation of global redefinition when it comes to establishing a faithful relationship between brands and their consumers.

If the brand is not in line with popular beliefs or views, consumers will refuse to engage. Emilly Horsewell from the Challenger Projects explains it this way,

> " *With a flurry of new#boycotts trending every day. It doesn't matter what you sell, no brand is safe from a consumer who believes you have backed the wrong side. (Challenger Project, 2019)* "

Recently in South Africa, paid-television service provider, DSTV, put a stop to an episode of a television program because people complained that it was inappropriate considering the climate within which the episode was going to be aired. Consumers refused to engage with the scheduled content. Externally, we have an indication of where DSTV stands with regards to that particular issue. Internally, that might be a different issue altogether.

In response to the new rules of engagement, the current trend is that brands are attempting to engage this tug of war by picking sides in the face of insurmountable consumer pressure. Where once a car brand may have stayed silent on a political matter for fear of alienation by consumers, today the opposite is their reality. Brands have to stand for something. Rightfully so, because when it comes to injustice, brands must choose which side they are willing to speak from. But the problem lies with the incongruence of what they say versus what they do.

#BlackLivesMatter

With #BlackLivesMatter, it was crucial for consumers to see where their preferred brands stood. Silence merely announced support of the opposing side. However, the issue is that some brands have reacted to these times haphazardly, without sincere conviction in what they claim to support. The fight was never about picking sides to retain consumers, although capitalism has certainly favoured this approach.

The better approach is that a response should come from real conviction informed by an already established value system or a sincerity in making the changes to align with a newfound value. The fight has always been about establishing a character that would create an organic connection with those who choose to align with what you stand for. While you can stand for #BlackLivesMatter, for instance, the conundrum is that we have seen the lack of integrity with those who have been vocal about whose side they are on - in the end losing the overall brand authenticity.

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I remember while working on a project some time back, my team and I brought up the issue of systematic racism. While the brand in question was posting on their social media platforms that they stood against systemic racism, at the back end of the operation, we knew that the numbers did not match what was being preached.

The real problem was not that they didn't believe what they were saying on social media. The fundamental problem was that the response was never an integral part of their value or character as an establishment. The response was reactive, to say the least - the operations of the company itself were built on racial discrimination, whether or not the employees were aware of it.

For as long as companies fail to establish a well thought out value system for themselves as an organisation, brands will forever be reactive to the social changes we see today - thus doing away with their authenticity and integrity.

Well-established value system

Creating and standing by a well-established value system also means that you are choosing to stand firm and allowing your consumers to align with your values, thereby creating a sincere, loyal and financially healthy relationship between the brand and the consumer.

Yes, I am advocating for brands to stand for something. I ask, however, that whatever you choose to stand for must be embedded in your character/value as a brand internally as well.

Being true to what you stand for, internally and externally, will establish your authenticity - and brand authenticity is crucial to break away from the clutter. It will demand attention from those who matter to you.

> " *Authenticity must be built from a thoroughly analysed value system built on integrity and compassion.* "

This value system must be a character that your consumers are able to choose to partner with, so much so, that should you be out of character, your consumers are able to rightfully and graciously call you out (we must normalise being called out by consumers who chooses to align with our value system).

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Analyse value system

Brands must analyse their value system to avoid being reactive to things that were never part of their core values. This is a call to establish your values in 2020 and beyond. Consider that your consumers are human beings with feelings, and integrity and authenticity are the elements that they respond to.

This new relationship doesn't have to be a "brands vs. consumers" situation, but rather about brands establishing their values in a way that leads to them being chosen by consumers who relate to such values. This is key in a world where authenticity is a demand in order to sit at the table of attention.

Let this be your new digital marketing strategy: be authentic and let consumers choose to align with you because what you stand for is embedded in the ins and out of your operations, thus your brand begins to exude integrity. Stop choosing to please everyone by preaching one thing and doing the opposite - it hurts your brand!

ABOUT ARMAND MUKENGE

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