



MARKETING

Wanda Kenton Smith

<< INSIGHT

Keeping your message real in an era of intentional fakery

I'm a marketing junkie, striving to stay up to date on the latest marketing developments and news. I dabble in new technology, though I'm terribly embarrassed to admit I'm having an awful time trying to make my fingers do the Blackberry jig with all those itty-bitty keys and teeny-tiny scroll ball.

I bought my husband one of those nifty, all-in-one universal remotes for the TV, and my family bought me an iPod for Christmas.

Obviously, the list of groovy marketing gadgets and high-tech wonders are endless.

But my hottest new find for the year is a good, old-fashioned ...

book. Yes, you know the bound, page-turning variety that you buy at Barnes & Noble or *amazon.com*.

I predict this new book, "Authenticity — What Consumers Really Want" is destined to follow the same best-selling route of its predecessor, "The Experience Economy," by Jim Gilmore and Joseph Pine II.

The authors, in their new book, opine that companies who truly desire to be relevant to their customers and who want to add value to their customer experience must deliver the real thing — and no, I'm not talking about Coke.

While availability, cost and quality remain key factors, Gilmore and Pine say today's savvy buyer also yearns for what is authentic.

In an interview, Gilmore said the core concept of the book is a "reaction to a world that becomes more and more mediated, staged, intentionally sensory and overly sensational — an increasingly unreal world. People now thirst for the real deal. You call a company's 800 number and hope to reach a real person. Our ancestors would never have qualified the noun 'person' with the adjective 'real.'"

Pine piped up about how many businesses seem to get this overall concept, evidenced by their selection of words like authentic and real in advertisements, packaging and point of sale as a means to differentiate their brand offering. However, such descriptors more often than not come off as fake and turn off the prospective customer.

"Imagine if I were to introduce myself to you this way: 'Hi, I'm Joe Pine, and I want to let you know how very authentic I am.' You'd find some way to get away from me as soon as possible."

That key premise caught my attention and I found my head rocking and rolling like a bobber doll. The authors identified three axioms of authenticity and five genres of authenticity, which serve as the foundation for the book.

One chapter begins with a slice of real life in the day of an imaginary family who embarks on a shopping expedition. By the time the chapter ends, you get a clear picture of what's real or unreal, from the "Real, Comfortable, Jeans" of Wrangler to the "Real Photo People" at Ritz Camera, to HBO's Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel, the book highlights countless examples of companies grappling with a real identity crisis.

In addition, the authors note, "With all this talk of real comes an increased infusion of the intentionally fake, reflecting the unreal reality all about us."

Some examples include the infamous fake Nigerian diplomat's plea for funds to save his family and the lists of staged

9/11 donations found on the Internet. The authors even point out how fake TV news and media grab an admirable audience share these days à la The Onion or Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show." Let's not forget the fake IDs, fake drugs, the 10 million fantasy football players, fake ads and blog entries, fake sales (i.e. going out of business sales), egads! — even the advent of fake thermostats and fixtures I read about. Fakery is so commonplace that we long for authenticity.

It's time for businesses to get real and determine how they can be perceived as authentic. While we may intuitively understand that customers seek authenticity, we must not forget that authenticity may not ring true with all the brand messages. Such vernacular may suggest or communicate fakery, or at the least, provoke doubts or suspicion of insincerity among a highly skeptical public.

And that brings us to the crux of the book and the moral of the story, captured in one very simple yet highly complex question that serves as a chapter subhead: So what's a

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business to do?

"Axiom 1: If you are authentic, then you don't have to say you're authentic. Axiom 2: If you say you're authentic, then you'd better be authentic. Axiom 3: It's easier to be authentic if you don't say you're authentic."

So, if you only have time to work in one juicy, stimulating and thought-provoking business read this year, this is the real deal and a must-read for marketers. When it comes to teaching you how to "capture your customers' hearts, minds and dollars" in a way that really matters, "Authenticity — What Consumers Really Want" truly tells it like it is.

Wanda Kenton Smith has 25 years' marine industry marketing experience. She is president of Kenton Smith Advertising & Public Relations, a full-service agency in Orlando, Fla., and Marine Marketing to Women Inc., an educational/training/seminar firm.