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Managing Perceptions: An Operational Imperative

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“People don’t like to be sold, but they love to buy.” ~ Jeffrey Gitomer, Sales Guru

There is a great deal of buzz in the world about authenticity. *Authentic branding. Authentic leadership. Authentic selling. Authentic experience. Be true to yourself. Be honest and transparent. Be genuine and unique. Share your story.*

Because the days of manipulative messaging and buyer’s remorse are over. No more bait and switch. Today’s customers are savvy and we are in the Information Age. Customers hunger for something genuine and unique. Moreover, they desire an experience. They can sniff out deception and fakery, and your business will be left in the dust if it isn’t authentic.

If you have ever gone to Disneyland, you know that there is nothing authentic about it. There isn’t really a giant mouse that wears clothes and talks funny. It’s an employee in a costume (and he does not wear it home when his shift is over). You don’t really take a boat through pirate-infested waters. It’s an automated set, with special effects and lighting. Likewise, when you go to a movie, the actors onscreen are not really flying spaceships, shooting bullets at each other, or falling in love over a romantic candlelit dinner. The actors are acting within carefully designed and managed environments.

Would any business leader really pull their team together and tell them to wear what they want to work and say whatever they want to say to their co-workers and customers as long as it was "authentic"? Would a customer really want to step into a financial institution and deal with a teller in her bathrobe blabbing on about “Peaches”, the thirteenth kitten she’s adopted that month? After all, she’s just being true to herself. She’s being authentic. She’s sharing her story with you.

People purposefully buy and engage in deception on a regular basis. The difference is that they want to know what the deception is, that it has a purpose and that it enhances their experience. They want their perceptions managed, but they also want to *know* that their perceptions are being managed. And they want consistency in when, where, how and why their perceptions are being managed.

Part of what is trying to be conveyed with this talk of authenticity comes from the identity we form as a person and the desire to share that story of ourselves with others in a meaningful way, so that we are understood, accepted and most importantly, trusted. We want to be seen as our own person,

interesting to others so that we can engage and exchange. We want consistent beliefs and values, not only as a guide for the direction of our lives, but as a beacon for others to return to our shared experiences and our accepted differences. And we want people and businesses to operate within a similar framework.

We manage other peoples' perceptions all the time in the way we dress, the way we groom, what we buy, the activities that we engage in, in our mannerisms, the way we talk and the way we express our emotions. We employ filters on what we screen in and out of ourselves. We are living collections of ideas, experiences and influences that we've mashed together into something that we find identity in, something that we feel comfortable with, and something that has the appearance of varying degrees of originality or authenticity.

What people don't want is to be fooled. They don't want to think they are buying leather when they are really buying vinyl, but they *will* buy vinyl because it looks like leather. They don't want to think they are buying solid gold when they are really buying gold electroplate, but they *will* knowingly buy gold electroplate to manage perceptions. They do not want to learn that you are really not what you said you are, unless they know it is satire. If you don't like someone, you don't have to tell them so. But above all, don't lie and tell them that you do really like them.

Forget the buzzword of authenticity. Focus on sincerity of origins, attributes and commitments. Sincerity of devotion and intentions. Let the customer in on your deceptions so that they can engage in them and share the experience that you want them to have and that they want to have. Author **Anaïs Nin** once wrote: "*We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.*" The key to unlocking successful products, services and relationships is not to just treat people as you want to be treated; treat people as they want to be treated. That involves the successful management of perceptions.

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