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Truth and Transparency.

Forget picture-perfect advertising, today's sceptical consumers want marketing messages that reflect the real world.

In a climate of fake news and social posts that have been planted for political gain, consumers are naturally becoming distrustful of the information they see distributed online and are increasingly questioning the trustworthiness of the content and communication that they receive.

Clearly conveying this sense of insecurity, last year's Edelman Trust Barometer found that two-thirds of the countries surveyed are now 'distrusters' (having less than 50% trust in the mainstream institutions of business, government, media and NGOs to do what is right), up from just over half in 2016¹.

With brands experiencing a crisis of consumer confidence, being authentic has never been more important.



Almost a quarter (24%) of respondents to our 2018 Global Marketing survey said that the possibility of their online adverts appearing on sites that encourage hate speech or fake news was a major concern for the year ahead.

Companies perceived to be authentic, build brand loyalty and tend to be more profitable, and for a company to be considered authentic, it needs to be perceived as trustworthy, respectful and real.

To reach an increasingly suspicious audience and establish credibility, some brands are demonstrating their authenticity in three key ways: harnessing the power of user-generated content (UGC); telling real-life stories; and demonstrating positive values through their employees.



Consumers as Communicators.

Consumers trust other consumers. Their opinions add a human element to a product or service, and it's this realisation that has resulted in a proliferation of peer-to-peer recommendation sites. Our survey revealed 20% of marketing decision-makers are currently using some independent customer reviews (from sites such as Trustpilot, Feefo, Bazaarvoice, TripAdvisor, Checktrade) on their company website, and an additional 20% will be exploring how to use these platforms in 2018.

Today's sharing economy has only enhanced the importance of consumer feedback. From **Airbnb** and **Uber** to dog-walking platform **BorrowMyDoggy**, we now use our phones to rank a range of services. Add social media platforms into the mix and the opportunities for brands to leverage UGC explodes, which is especially good news when you consider the fact that the majority of today's consumers (85%) find visual UGC more influential than brand photos or videos.

Video marketer Eleanor Sims from video strategy agency StoryMe comments: "User-generated content is about users promoting a brand rather than the brand itself. Maybe the user does it to build a connection, win something, or share their experience, but either way it works for several reasons."

- It is more transparent and builds trust
- It gives the brand a genuine face
- It puts customers front and centre
- It is cost-efficient since marketers don't have to empty their pockets on campaigns
- It's proven to be more effective for some type of campaigns

"Your user-generated content should be in line with your brand values. If you're a young, hip, fresh brand, your content should be too."

85%

the majority of today's consumers find visual user-generated content more influential than brand photos or videos²

Consumers frequently share their overseas adventures on social networks – perhaps with the aim of creating a sense of FOMO (fear of missing out). It seems to have the desired effect as almost half of all Instagram users (48%) refer to the app when choosing a travel destination³. By asking customers to use a unique hashtag when posting, the visual-first platform can serve as a free marketing channel. There are thousands of posts with **Virgin's** #SeizeTheHoliday tag, and this builds a visual brochure comprising real-life experiences for potential customers to browse and for the brand to share.



48%

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Another brand turning social media sharing into a product portfolio is **Made.com**, who reposts images of its furniture in real homes. Not only do the pictures showcase their satisfied customers, the company is generating content for free.

Lobster, a London-based start-up, seeks to monetise this transaction by licensing photos, compensating their contributors and ensuring they are credited accurately. This gives brands a more cost-effective way of sourcing fresh imagery compared to organising a professional shoot or purchasing the rights from online images galleries.

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... Adverts based around UGC garner four times the amount of click-through rates compared with regular marketing campaigns.”

Olga Egorshева, Lobster’s CEO and co-founder, told us the platform grew out of the recognition that consumer behaviour towards content is changing. “We want to feel an affiliation with brands. One of the ways this is happening is through user-generated content. Adverts based around UGC garner four times the amount of click-through rates compared with regular marketing campaigns⁴.”

“The usage of our platform is two-fold. On one side there are ‘content creators’ who use social media on a daily basis to share images with family and friends, and who have monetised their activity. On the other side, there are brands, creative professionals and advertisers – we refer to them as ‘content users’ – who are tapping into the attention these content creators are receiving.”

² <http://www.adweek.com/digital/why-consumers-share-user-generated-content-infographic/>

³ <http://www.adweek.com/digital/mistravel-instagram-travel-survey/>

⁴ <https://www.shopify.com/blog/68976197-4-tactics-to-drive-traffic-and-sales-with-user-generated-content>



Got to be Real.

It's not just products and services that are up for scrutiny, brand stories sink or swim depending on their ability to demonstrate support for a diverse workforce, champion local causes and advocate for social change. In short, consumers want to interact with brands they perceive to be a force for good.

Authentic brands are rooted in real life. Magazine covers, TV screens and social media feeds are populated with images of airbrushed perfection and we are constantly hearing reports of how this picture-perfect portrayal can damage people's self-esteem, cause anxiety and exacerbate depression.

Brands that don't flinch from the facts are winning consumer approval. Our survey revealed 23% of businesses plan to use or are already using more realistic imagery in their 2018 marketing campaigns. Several big brands are currently leading the way, such as online fashion retailer **ASOS**, who made headlines around the world when it refused to photoshop images of their swimwear models.

For more on boosting brand perception, refer to **Leading by Example** on page 4.



Fitbit Stories

Offering an authentic experience is at the heart of **Airbnb's** philosophy. While other hotel and travel brands focus on luxury or loyalty point systems, Airbnb wants customers to feel like they have truly experienced a place. Their 'Experiences' feature allows guests to be guided by locals and enjoy activities that are particular to the area or their hosts' fields of interest. Similarly, instead of using athletes to talk about their fitness products, wearables company **Fitbit** recently followed real people around the world as they embarked on exercise routines aimed at improving their mental and physical wellbeing. The result? A series of emotive and relatable online stories.

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Empowering Internal Advocates.

And it's not just about communicating brand values to the public. Just as consumers respect a company that leads with its conscience, employees want to work for a company that is having a demonstrably positive impact on the world.

When employees believe in a brand, they become the voice of that brand. They promote company culture to their colleagues, which can be more authentic than management directives or an internal communications memo, and they promote the brand to the world.

It's simply another form of the peer-to-peer recommendation model – content shared by employees receives eight times more engagement than content shared by brand channels, while brand messages have 561% further reach when shared by employees⁵.

⁵ <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/employee-advocate-mobilize-your-team-share-your-brand-content>

CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY REQUIRES MORE THAN TRANSLATION.

Being authentic means dropping the one-size-fits-all approach. Marketing messages that resonate in one region won't necessarily have the same impact on the other side of the world. That's why our localised content is the result of extensive cultural analysis. We consider whether an original concept will work or not, and explore alternative ideas, by placing full production adaptation front and centre.

By harnessing the unique insights of local influencers and real customers in market to form an in-depth understanding of current trends and consequences, Freedman is able to produce content your target audience can relate to and form a connection with. The result is marketing that is truly global.

