

Creating Authenticity in an Increasingly Distrustful World

Jill Morin

"Today you are you! That is truer than true. There is no one alive who is you-er than you."

—Dr. Seuss

In recent years, after a long run of prosperity that encouraged exuberance and imagination in both business and government, we are seeing a rash of headlines detailing the broken trust between organizations and their constituents. Across the board, consumers, shareholders, and citizens are asking, "Who can we trust?"

At the same time, visionary business leaders, recognizing the plight of the populace, are asking themselves, "How can we earn consumers' trust?" The simple and perhaps only enduring answer to offer them is "be yourself."

In 2008, *Time* magazine's cover highlighted an article titled, "10 Ideas That Are Changing the World." The seventh idea in this feature focused on "synthetic authenticity." At first glance, this sounds like an oxymoron in that synthetic is often confused with fake—which, with very few exceptions, is typically presumed as inauthentic; however, synthetic can also describe the "combination of parts or elements so as to create a whole."

Interestingly, this definition of synthetic accurately describes an essential responsibility of every CEO and leader of organizations, communities, even families. Under the guidance of visionary leaders, an organization can blossom and achieve its potential through true authenticity—being true to itself.

As you take on the challenge of intentionally determining what is true to your organization, you join a growing movement of product and service providers striving to stand above the crowd. The idea is to attain market differentiation based on the unique characteristics of your values, people, product, services, and even your place.

While pursuing authenticity may help you gain a better understanding about what makes your enterprise truly unique, real differentiation takes effort from the entire organization. True

differentiation happens only after all the elements of a total experience, or those interactions that stakeholders have with your organization are identified and put into action. Finally, when you achieve this level of differentiation through an integrated, intentional design of all *total experience* ingredients—the playing field truly belongs to you. At this point you won't compete based on price—but rather on a shared ideal of what can be real and wonderful.

In this regard, authenticity emerges after you and your key stakeholders agree on and create a shared vision and a plan for authentically and then experience that vision in the form of real-life interaction and behaviors for everyone associated with the organization. Here are some key questions to consider in this process:

- What are your organization's values? How are they expressed through the decisions, choices, and behaviors of your people?
- What can your clients and customers reliably expect as a result of doing business with your organization?
- What emotional experience can the clients and customers count on while associating with your organization?
- Who are the clients and customers your organization aspires to serve and what are their specific characteristics and needs?
- What is the nonnegotiable level of quality that your customers can expect from your organization's products and services?

The answers to these and other questions drive an authentic experience, which, in turn, elevates your enterprise above the competitive playing field.

Of course, authentic experience in this context doesn't just happen. It takes vision, a plan, and mindful synthesis to bring all the selected elements of your organization together to create that whole. When you attain this goal, you will discover that your work is more rewarding, clients more aligned

with your vision and values, and business conversations more inspiring for everyone concerned.

The organizations and the brands that stand the test of time truly understand and celebrate who they are and don't try to be or offer what they're not. They connect with all of their stakeholders on this basis, and thus become organizations their stakeholders can trust. When your authentic offerings are made on an emotional, multi-sensory, even aspirational level, then these experiences will be embraced as an invitation to belong, rather than simply as an opportunity to make a sale. This is when customers become loyal beyond reason—when they connect with your organization on an emotional and even spiritual level.

In an era of dissembling and marginalizing the truth, it's quite possible that a simple, straightforward business plan based on the single premise of determining what is authentic about your organization is the key to success. Making your authenticity manifest in everything you do will help elevate your organization above the crowd and keep it there, far into the future. In some industries, just the reputation of living your authenticity by keeping your promises places you miles ahead of the competition.

Your organization's authentic essence, for good or for bad, is real, and comes across in ways large and small, planned and spontaneous. Authenticity, or the lack thereof, is manifest in everything your organization says and does and includes:

- Its perception and image in the marketplace.
- The products it makes and/or the services it offers.
- The people who make the products and/or deliver the services.
- Its place—the physical presence, which should clearly represent your organization's personality and values in all details—the location, interior design, workflows, etc.

Learn to recognize the essential value in revealing your organizational vision in everything you do, and on a consistent basis, day in and day out. Look for ways to turn a vision into experiences that can be operationalized, executed, felt, owned, and, ultimately, valued by your clients, employees, and communities—all of your stakeholders. When that experience is authentic to the DNA that makes up your unique organization, marketplace

differentiation is created and sustained for the long haul. In this way, your enterprise rises above the clutter and noise of price competition, the time- and resource-wasting distraction of chasing the wrong customers, and losing focus on what is really important to the business.

With that authentic core in place, *you* are your own category, so *you* can name your terms. The next step is discovering exactly how that authenticity shows up in the experiences of all your stakeholders.

What Is Authenticity, Anyway?

Philosophers, writers, and artists have struggled with the subject of authenticity for years. Even Plato with his cave kept himself awake wondering if what he perceived was really real or just an illusion filtered through his personal layers of perception.

For this article, leave behind the philosophical and metaphysical discussions about what authenticity is or isn't. Instead focus on organizational authenticity—the values, purpose, and passions that are at the heart of why any business, institution, or organization exists in the first place, and which drive what your organization is trying to achieve, as well as how it goes about doing it.

In his book *Whoosh: Business in the Fast Lane*, consultant Tom McGehee highlights Wal-Mart as an example of organizational authenticity when he writes, "Think of Wal-Mart's 'every day low prices.' Ever been to their corporate headquarters? Their plastic chairs and linoleum-floored offices may not be comfortable, but they sure are consistent with their message to customers. When their corporate teams travel, they fly cheap, stay at standard hotels, and often sleep two to a room... Their purpose is consistent with the way they work, how they act, what they value."¹

Wal-Mart is about frugality. It shows in everything they do. If you work at Wal-Mart, you know what is expected of you. And if you shop at Wal-Mart, you know what to expect.

Although all businesses exist, arguably, to make a profit, a business like Google, at its core, exists not only to make a buck, but also to create technological innovations. Everything it does, from the people it hires to the operational procedures it has in place, to the products it makes, all are created and executed around this critical tenet.

Better Make It Real: Creating Authenticity in an Increasingly Fake World

Author: Jill J. Morin

Abstract: Entrepreneurs as well as business and organizational leaders know that having a differentiated and competitive edge is their key to success. Some compete by being the cheapest. Others compete by being the best. When you're the best, you attract customers who *get* you and who want to work with you and only you. If you want to compete by being the best, this book is for you.

The goal of being the best demands that you start with authenticity. Committing your company to offering products and services based on who you are and what you believe in, rather than how cheap you can be, isn't easy. Happily, there's a road-map to achieving the authenticity that will secure your success. *Better Make It Real: Creating Authenticity in an Increasingly Fake World* outlines the process for transforming your business or organization into the successful enterprise of your dreams.

In this book, you'll discover the following:

- How companies such as Google, Monster.com, and Robert Redford's Sundance Cinemas moved their vision forward by incorporating the 4Ps of *total experience design*.
- How to seamlessly integrate all aspects of your business to deliver authentic customer experiences that will lift you far above your competitors.
- A five-step process for identifying the kind of authentic organization you want your enterprise to be, the kinds of customers you want to serve, and designing how to deliver your best to them.
- The importance of engaging all your stakeholders in the process of transforming your enterprise into one that will thrive well into the future.

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Think about authenticity as an agreement between an enterprise and its stakeholders about what experiences will be expected and delivered. Authenticity doesn't mean much if it isn't apparent in the everyday experiences of your organization. If what you say you are doesn't hold up to how you behave, you're a fake.

How this authenticity is made manifest should not be left to chance, but rather you can and should intentionally design it down to the last detail. When you're demonstrating your organizational authenticity, you need to commit yourself wholeheartedly to it. And then you will find stakeholders who are eager to be your partners in the delivery of what you have to offer.

Reference

1. Tom McGehee, *Whoosh: Business in the Fast Lane*, Basic Books, 2001, p.176.



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Jill J. Morin serves as a member of the three-person leadership team that makes up the office of the chief executives for Kahler Slater, a Wisconsin-based experience design and planning firm with clients around the world. In addition to her duties as a chief executive officer, Morin oversees marketing, business development, client retention, brand identity, and strategic planning for the organization. Morin was named to The Business Journal's "40 under 40" list, the Next Generation of Business and Community leaders list, and was honored as a "Peak Performer" by the Wisconsin Business Hall of Fame and Junior Achievement of Wisconsin. Contact Morin via e-mail at jmorin@kahlerslater.com.