

The transparent brand: The positives and pitfalls of when brands bare their souls

By [Matthew Edwards](#)

24 Nov 2015

Transparency is a concept that brands should not take lightly.



©Daniil Peshkov via [123RF](#)

As one of the most popular terms in branding at the moment, transparency is not just something brands can adopt in an attempt to be relevant and win the hearts and minds of the contemporary consumer. It is a culture that needs to live in every aspect of a brand and guide the way it conducts itself, both internally and externally.

The contemporary consumer is smarter and more informed than ever; they are not as susceptible to insincere marketing messages, they have almost complete access to information surrounding anything they care to Google and they most certainly are going to be exposed to any negative press towards the brands they use. As such, this modern consumer has very high-standards. They only want the best from their brands and this doesn't just mean high-quality products and services, it extends to the production processes, supply chains, community relationships, CSR initiatives and myriad other aspects of the brand. So if you're going to market your business as transparent, you had better make sure that you don't have any dirty little secrets waiting to be discovered.

Perhaps the best way to go about creating a transparent brand is to start at the beginning, ingraining that culture of honesty and having nothing to hide from the earliest start-up phase of your business. It's a matter of ensuring that every process you use, every supplier you deal with, every ingredient you source and every deal you make is above board and something that you would be willing to open up to public scrutiny. What it really comes down to is a question of ethics. If you care about your customers and conduct your business in an ethical manner, it should be fairly simple to translate this into brand transparency.

The benefits of creating such a brand are numerous. When consumers can see that your business has nothing to hide, it fosters an environment of brand trust and from this grows brand loyalty. Obviously if you have a good product or service that is reliable and of the highest quality, you will generate sales and turn a profit. However, sales figures and the bottom line should not be the ultimate goal for your brand. One should strive to create a brand that is loved by its consumers; a brand that adds value to peoples lives in the right way. Achieving this will not only guarantee that your customers continue purchasing your products or services; they will become brand ambassadors, generating word of mouth for your business and recommending your offering to their family, friends and anyone else in their circle of influence. That kind of brand advocacy is invaluable in the age of the enlightened consumer.

Building a transparent brand from the ground up has its challenges but it is much more difficult for an established brand to make the transition to transparency. Often large brands that have been in existence for a long time have set ways of doing things, red tape and internal bureaucracy that holds them back from adopting contemporary healthy brand practices and cultures. In addition, these internal processes are often remnants of a bygone age, in which there were less stringent laws and standards and, as such, the modern consumer considers them unacceptable. Brands trying to make the transition, though noble and to be commended, should also be very careful and thorough in the process, so as to avoid doing more harm than good.

A while back McDonald's in the US launched its own transparency campaign, called "Our Food. Your Questions", which encouraged their customers and the general public to submit questions to them through social media channels so that they could attempt to answer them as honestly as possible. The concept was previously rolled out in Canada with great success and, although well intentioned, the US iteration was somewhat hit and miss.

Through the campaign McDonald's revealed many of its production processes, ingredients and supply chains to the appreciation of their customers, however, in doing so they opened themselves up to criticism towards these revelations.

After disclosing the process and ingredients that go into making their (somewhat infamous) golden fries, McDonald's sparked vociferous online debate over the potentially dangerous substances that went into them. In addition to the potatoes, oil and seasoning that make up the core ingredients of the fries; a whole host of nasty extras are added to make them more visually enticing and appealing to the taste buds. Firstly there is Dimethylpolysiloxane, an anti-foaming, anti-caking agent that is also found in silly putty, shampoos, caulking and industrial oils: not exactly the staple of a healthy diet. Then there is sodium acid pyrophosphate, used to maintain the attractive golden colour of the fries. Finally there is tert-Butylhydroquinone or TBHQ, a preservative that is actually a form of butane, the same stuff used in lighter fluid. This efficacious chemical has many industrial applications but it is highly prized in the fast food industry for its ability to slow the rate at which oily foods becomes rancid, thereby greatly extending shelf life. It's no wonder that McDonald's food never seems to go off.

The mixed reception to this and other big reveals left the McDonald's transparency campaign looking like a classic case of one step forward and two steps back. Though customers appreciated their honesty in revealing many of their production processes and ingredients, the initiative served to confirm many people's fears that their McDonald's meals were filled with toxins and unhealthy substances. Ultimately it's no surprise that this has not stemmed the tide of dwindling sales and customer desertion and the brand has not solved the deeper problems they are faced with.

So what did McDonald's do wrong?

Though their efforts to become transparent and honest with their consumers were noble, McDonald's fatal flaw lies in the way they went about their transparency campaign. Rather than just being transparent for transparency's sake and revealing

the inner workings of the restaurant chain, McDonald's should have looked internally to transform themselves into a transparent brand. They should have reworked their processes and ingredients, bringing them in line with the healthy standards that customers were looking for. If they had simply admitted that their food is not as healthy as it should or could be, they could have started a conversation with their consumers and determined ways in which they could become better and more attractive to them.

The modern consumer appreciates vulnerability in their brands. They want to see a human side to the nameless, faceless corporation and they want it to be absolutely sincere.

I think that local favourite, Woolworths, got this right last year. Amid a storm of controversy and pressure on the company to terminate its trade relations with Israeli suppliers, Woolworths was hit with more scandal when a customer found a whole dead frog in their salad. Not even a week later another customer came forward claiming to have found a large, cockroach-like insect in their noodles.

Many brands would have gone on the defensive, playing the blame game, perhaps even accusing the customer of placing the offensive objects in the food or trying to divert public attention away from the issue. Woolworths, however, took a bold step and absorbed the blame. They apologised publicly and issued the following statement: *"We do use pesticides sparingly, to ensure that our fresh produce is grown in a healthy environment, that also preserves biodiversity"*.

Adding *"A healthy farm attracts insects, frogs, birds... and it may well be that the frog or insect slipped through our extensive quality checks undetected"*.

Although the public was rightly shocked by the incidents, many appreciated the honesty and vulnerability that Woolworths displayed. They talked openly and honestly about their approach to organic farming and acceptance of local wildlife on their farms and they admitted that they weren't perfect, that mistakes happen and sometimes things slip through even the strictest of quality tests.

Ultimately customers may have been weary of Woolworths for a time, but they returned and perhaps found a strengthened affinity for the brand that was open with them and showed their human side.

There is no doubt that transparency can be a powerful tool for brands that wish to engage their customers on a personal level and foster trust and loyalty, but when it is not taken seriously and integrated into the brand's DNA, it can backfire spectacularly.

Although there is no hard-and-fast rule to creating a transparent brand, as long as your business is not doing anything underhanded or unethical, you're on the right track. Learn to create a relationship of mutual trust and honesty with your customers. Communicate with them and learn what they want and the things that they value and incorporate this into your culture, allow it to influence the way you do things.

Transparency is about having nothing to hide and being proud of the way you conduct your business, build your brand on these values and you will find the rest comes quite naturally.

Sources:

- NaturalNews, (2014). TBHQ - Why this preservative should be avoided. [online] Available at: [NaturalNews](#) [Accessed 20 Nov. 2014].
- Pikoli, P. (2014). Customer discovers insect in Woolworths noodles. [online] Ewn.co.za. Available at: [EWN](#) [Accessed 20 Nov. 2014].
- Rotherham, S. (2014). Oh Dear - Someone Found A Dead Frog In A Woolies Salad [Image] | 2oceansvibe.com. [online] 2oceansvibe.com. Available at: [2oceansvibe](#) [Accessed 20 Nov. 2014].
- True Activist, (2014). McDonald's Transparency Campaign Backfires. Prepare To Be Shocked!. [online] Available

at: [True Activist](#) [Accessed 20 Nov. 2014].

ABOUT MATTHEW EDWARDS

I'm a freelance strategic and creative copywriter specialising in digital content creation.

- Stockholm syndrome: A cautionary tale of desperate consumers and despicable brands - 26 Nov 2015
- The transparent brand: The positives and pitfalls of when brands bare their souls - 24 Nov 2015

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>