

How to keep your brand authentic

By [Giulia Iorio-Ndlovu](#)

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The role that brands play in society has changed dramatically over the decades. More recently, as digital migration, the rise of social media and the Covid-19 pandemic have affected our lives, we have also come to expect a more authentic connection with brands.



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Today's brand managers must walk a tightrope between creativity and technology, innovation and empathy. As we work to ensure our brands resonate with our consumers, there are some considerations worth bearing in mind.

1. Be humble

As your brand evolves, don't look for excuses as to why it's not performing. Be honest with yourself about where you are at any given time, and work from there.

For example, for us at PepsiCo, it was vital to understand that consumers were beginning to fall out of love with our brand.

The perception of our brand was not what it once was, and our relevance had been affected. As a result, we had been losing market share. This was painful to accept, but once we faced reality, it was liberating. We confronted the issues and their key drivers, and we found the courage to challenge the status quo, to make changes and to start invigorating our brand with a fresh perspective.

2. Be genuine

The most effective brands reach people because their messaging resonates. Simon Sinek notes that, “it starts with why”. The author and motivational speaker points out that the more successful individuals, leaders, companies and brands are those able to inspire by building trust and authenticity. On a foundation of trust, it’s possible to make the connection to the brand’s product or practical purpose.

It’s important to share with people why you believe in what you believe, and to make that the main part of your communications – instead of what a brand/product does. Being “genuine” means sharing what you believe your brand’s higher purpose is, and standing by it in everything you do.



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This is also one of the key trends we believe will shape the future of the foods-and-beverages industry over the next 10 years: trust and authenticity. At PepsiCo, we have renamed it “Mzansi Local Pride”. The idea is to be locally authentic, but it also speaks to heightened consumer concerns around the origins of products and ingredients, which fuels the demand for transparency and local sourcing.

Nando’s, as an example, with its mischievous, topical way of communicating to consumers, has long been able to make insightful points about South African society. It can do so because its messaging feels genuine, without trying too hard. The grilled-chicken brand rolls out its topical campaigns quickly and timeously, in a tone that is simultaneously light-hearted but principled, and which manages to navigate South Africa’s political landscape without offending anybody too badly.

Back to our portfolio, we believe that Simba is “the flavour that connects us”, leveraging the human truth that in a world where lifestyles are hectic and moments together are rare, our human need to make the most of the time together with friends and family has amplified.

3. Step into your consumers’ reality

Brands that continue to rely on old-fashioned, transactional relationships with people are out of touch with today’s world.

As custodians of the Simba brand, we recently embarked on a repositioning and refresh of our brand. For this, we wanted to celebrate inclusivity and update the brand for the younger market. Brand development requires an open mind, and active listening to consumers. For us, this took the form of structured research, but also informal chats with loyal lovers of our product.

During the nine-month journey, we spoke and listened to more than 1,000 people. We dived into people’s reality and living context; we gained insights into people’s relationship with the category, the brand and the human themes the brand can touch; we gathered real stories and narratives expressing the key values and brand potential.

In this way, we were able to truly co-create a new version of our brand alongside our most important stakeholders – our consumers.



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Our new, more purposeful Simba is rooted in a strong, consumer-centric “cultural human truth”... Our current reality is a world where lifestyles have changed, and moments together are scarce. Our basic human need to connect has become all the more essential, as has our desire for a sense of family and togetherness. This revelation has inspired us, and we intend to continue learning how to track and respond to shifts in consumer preferences in real time, increasing personalisation and building fresh trust.

4. Balance Art and Science

Finding the balance between which key brand elements to keep, which to discard and which to refresh, is challenging. But one can be guided by the consumers who support your brand. By making these basic human connections part of your strategy, it stays authentic.

As in all things marketing, helping your brand evolve requires a balance of science and art. Brand management can be based on strong insights and data trends, but then there is the act of joining the dots and expressing your brand creatively. This is what fires people’s imagination. You might buy our product because you can touch it, but you choose our brand because you feel it.

5. Build positivity

Dove, with its Real Beauty campaign, was able to literally improve the self-esteem of young women globally.

The activations in this campaign successfully shifted perceptions of beauty and launched conversations about unreasonable portrayals of women and beauty in the media. By reinforcing that beauty is universal and holistic and is not restricted to a single ideal, the campaign had a broader social purpose – making beauty a source of confidence, not anxiety – which garnered much well-deserved media coverage.

So deeply did the campaign resonate with women, pioneering purposeful brand positioning, that it ran for more than a decade. The campaign is still going today, having rolled out billboard activations, a series of short films and a multimedia Campaign For Real Beauty. When you do this well, it can have long-lasting impact.

It’s easy to think of purpose as just the latest brand buzzword. But we believe it is much more than that. It’s a mindset change. In this age of multiple devices, brands need to earn the right to enter people’s lives. They must contribute to the society and the communities they serve, beyond mere profits and financial targets.

Consistent, authentic brand behaviour can distinguish your brand more than any expensive, stand-alone campaign.

Referring again to our purpose statement – Simba, “the flavour that connects us” – we wanted to celebrate a sense of inclusion and make Simba the brand that champions the quality of remarkable moments together. In doing so, it lands an opportunity to energise the brand – becoming more appealing to younger consumers and those who have fallen out of love with the brand.

During the work and this period of deep self-reflection, we came to understand that purpose needn’t be serious, nor boring. Purpose can be fun, as long as it’s authentic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Giulia Iorio-Ndlovu, chief marketing officer at Simba

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