



# Book Building Brand Authenticity

## 7 Habits of Iconic Brands

Michael Beverland  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2009  
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## Recommendation

Authenticity, by its very nature, can’t be faked – at least not for long. Consumers know intuitively when something is authentic, regardless of what marketers say. People yearn to feel enthusiastic about the products they buy. They seek brands that make them feel validated, understood and connected, and when they find them, they demonstrate their loyalty. That’s why fans display tattoos of the Harley-Davidson logo, or make pilgrimages to the Zippo Visitors Center, or even pay hundreds of dollars for Manolo Blahnik high heels. Yet these brand-devoted consumers are quick to blog, tweet or text when a product doesn’t meet their expectations for authenticity and quality. You’ll nod in recognition as branding expert Michael B. Beverland identifies “seven habits” of authentic brands, including passion for excellence, devotion to a craft, and respect for heritage, tradition and place. His use of inside-the-arena marketing war stories will intrigue any marketer and many consumers. While smoothly written, his book would benefit from a fresher graphic design, since its long, unbroken paragraphs make it challenging to read. But, if you stick with it, *BooksInShort* promises you’ll find smart, knowledgeable – and authentic – branding advice.

## Take-Aways

- The public loves authentic brands in a way that belies popular branding advice.
- Traditional marketers attempt to control the consumer’s image of a brand, yet customers always have had a say in brand image, and their influence is growing.
- Authenticity is subjective, but authentic brands do share some definitive traits.
- Authentic brands “stick to their roots,” and revere their heritage and traditions.
- People who make authentic brands are passionate about their product or service.
- Artisans who create authentic brand merchandise are devoted to their craft.
- Authentic brands generate breakthrough innovations by immersing themselves in their markets.
- Brand stories provide a shared context that links like-minded people.
- Authentic brands nurture connections to their communities, even if their products become global.
- The employees at authentic brand companies are as dedicated to the brand as are their managers and executives.

## Summary

### Lighting Up for Zippo

Why would people love a cigarette lighter so much that they’d join the Zippo Click Club? Perhaps it’s for the same reason that thousands visit the Zippo Visitors Center in Pennsylvania every year. The Zippo is a dependable lighter in any weather. If yours breaks, the company’s technicians will fix it for free and will try to

determine why it broke. Zippo lighters have been a staple for U.S. troops since World War II, and they're a familiar flicker in a soldier's hands in numerous war movies. People's devotion to Zippo springs from the sort of feelings that impel fans to collect vintage Altoids mint tins or display their Dyson vacuum cleaners in their living rooms. Zippo is an authentic brand with a loyal fan base – beloved in a way that defies popular marketing advice.

## What Is Authenticity?

Snapple, a juice drink, began as an authentic brand. Then Quaker Oats bought the line for \$1.7 billion, and applied a tried-and-true marketing approach based on “price, product, promotion and placement.” Four years later, Quaker Oats sold Snapple for \$300 million. Why did the brand's value plummet despite sharp marketing? Quaker Oats' slick marketers didn't understand that people had loved Snapple's “quirky” authenticity, its amateurish – not slick – marketing and its lack of conformity. They didn't want a mass-market drink.

“The desire for authenticity has now crossed into the brand arena as many consumers look for alternatives to mass-marketed, overly commercialized and meaningless brands.”

Authenticity is fluid and varying; it is “the manifestation of the search for what is real.” Certain brands help buyers define who they are or want to be. This communal expression reflects specific social norms. Authenticity is subjective, but authentic brands share some definitive traits. They come from companies with leaders who are passionate about their products, involved in any decisions that affect their brands, and committed to a heritage that is rooted in place and tradition.

## Traditional Marketing Versus Authenticity

The ways that people traditionally formed individual identities are shifting as society's ideas about family, culture and place evolve. Changes driven by “globalization,” “deterritorialization” (the loss of “connections to place”) and “hyperreality” (the blurring of the line between “real” and “fake”) have splintered people's shared perspective. Amid such shifts, consumers are forming identities and communities around “brands, branded spaces or activities.” Skateboarders relate to each other, as do people who drive Volkswagens or those who wear Converse shoes.

Traditional brand marketers want to show or tell consumers how to feel about a brand. They use such techniques as “reinforcement,” “positioning” and “core messaging” to build positive brand images. A marketer using this “top-down” approach hopes to manage consumers' image of the brand. Yet customers always have had a say in brand image, and their voices are louder than ever. Fast communication platforms, from cellphones to online outlets such as blogs, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, give people new forums for finding and discussing brands. If they think a brand has a disingenuous message, they will shun the product, and they'll tell their friends why. Brands gain meaning from marketing that evokes sociological influences. Harley-Davidson fans imbue its bikes with the idea of freedom. Harley marketers reinforce this concept with ads, sponsorships and promotions. The brand's meaning also emerges from its fans' subcultures. Think of the movie image of Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper on their Harleys in *Easy Rider*.

**“Seven habits” define authentic brands. They are:**

### 1. “The Authenticity of Stories”

Brand stories provide a shared context that unites like-minded people. For example, Mac computer users who refer to themselves as “Apple people” credit the brand with being creative, innovative and unconventional. Traditional marketers tell simple stories – “Ajax drives away germs” – with little emotional meaning. Authentic brands tell layered stories or even myths created by the company, consumers, fans, critics and the media. The 10 most common types of brand stories are:

1. **“Founding”** – A company's beginning and early challenges.
2. **“Family”** – The role of the founding family.
3. **“Conflict and struggle”** – The challenges the brand overcame on the way to success.
4. **“Triumph and tragedy”** – The ups and downs of the firm and its people.
5. **“Creation”** – How the brand came to be, including innovative problem solving and a passion for its products.
6. **“History”** – The role the brand and its founders played in the past.
7. **“Community”** – The brand's influence on its community.
8. **“Place”** – The link between the brand and its physical location.
9. **“Consumers”** – Stories that originate with the brand user.
10. **“Product” and “service”** – The saga of the merchandise or service itself.

### 2. “Appearing as Artisanal Amateurs”

Why would Manolo Blahnik and Ralph Lauren boast that they have no formal training? Rather than following the usual path, authentic brand creators present themselves as zealous artisans devoted to their craft. They project the image that they started with little or no money, and stumbled onto success with a superior product that evolved from their passion. Even when an authentic brand becomes an industry front-runner, its marketers continue to downplay any mainstream image. Instead, they promote the brand's commitment to its craft. For example, ads for Champagne Krug always talk about hands-on production and the skill of the vintner. While its bottles are no longer turned by hand, the company would like you to feel as if they were.

“The desire for authenticity has always been a reaction to ‘progress’.”

Authentic brand marketers seem to eschew the idea of marketing (though that's what they do). They want their products to speak for themselves. Brand owners will admit that they've been lucky and survived failure, and these human experiences ring true with their customers. The manufacturers of authentic brands let you know they love what they do and have fun with it. That's why Quiksilver staffers leave work when the waves get high enough for great surfing.

### 3. “Sticking to Your Roots”

Authentic brand marketers walk a fine line. Their products must “stick to their roots,” that is, uphold the tenets that made them popular, while evolving with the times. They maintain their basic style and attributes even as they innovate. That’s why you can tell Hermes luggage from its competition and detect echoes of the original Beetle in the latest Volkswagen. Authentic brands revere traditions. In-N-Out Burger retains its ’50s style even when it updates its menu. Authentic brands operate in their founders’ spirit, staying playful and not sacrificing quality for economy.

### 4. “Love the Doing”

The makers of authentic brands are passionate about their products or services in a way that communicates their commitment and sincerity. They are in business because of their unwavering enthusiasm for their products. They love what they do. Being totally product-centered defies traditional marketing axioms about being entirely consumer-centered, but people seem entranced by companies that appear more interested in their products than in their consumers’ whims.

“Authentic brands collect stories the way a hurricane draws energy as it moves over water.”

Authentic brands are transparent or even boastful about their production processes. Many, including Krispy Kreme Doughnuts and In-N-Out Burger, welcome customers behind the scenes. Schwimm Bicycles pioneered this approach by letting customers watch bikes being fixed. The executives at firms with authentic brands stay involved in production, in contrast to sales- or finance-oriented CEOs. Moreover, authentic brand manufacturers love the creative process and continue to make improvements. Georg Riedel and his Riedel glassware researchers continually try to make better wine glasses. They embody the authentic brands’ typical quest for great design.

### 5. “Market Immersion”

Market research led to New Coke and to Ford’s Edsel model, both disasters for their brands. Authentic brands rely on market immersion, not market research, to drive new products. They interact with their fans. They develop knowledge and intuition about their core markets, so they can create breakthrough innovations people will want. They even employ their fans. Nike hires sports buffs; Morgan Motor Company enlists car enthusiasts. Leica’s photographer-employees helped it achieve cutting-edge status. When your employees resemble your customers, they can relate to your buyers’ lives and habits. This helps authentic brands identify new trends and stay relevant. These brands find multiple ways to connect to their fans. For example, Peter Jackson, the director of the *Lord of the Rings*, uses a blog to inform fans about his latest films.

“Authenticity takes time to build, but can be lost in an instant.”

Some companies, such as Google, encourage employees to take time from the workday to test fresh ideas, or “dabble.” This encourages designers and other insiders to create fresh products and services that might have otherwise stayed in the box. Market research is not useful with startlingly new ideas. Since consumers had no frame of reference for the iPod – and couldn’t have explained what they wanted it to do before it came out – the breakthrough device might not have come to fruition if Apple’s knowledge of its customers hadn’t transcended market research.

### 6. “Be at One with the Community”

Authentic brands promote their community ties, even after they become global. Starbucks has its roots in coffee-crazed Seattle, but it was just another coffeehouse in Australia. Stripped of its geographical and cultural context, it failed to thrive there. Authentic brands embed themselves physically in their native geography, and in their original culture and subcultures. Thousands of subcultures are watchdogs of authenticity. The gay community is devoted to Levi’s and Absolut because of their commitment to the gay movement. Skateboarders loved Vans shoes, but when Vans expanded into other markets, that subculture turned away and Vans went bankrupt.

“You cannot tell consumers that your brand is authentic – you have to show them.”

A brand can reaffirm community ties. Authentic brands value their heritage. The Morgan Motor Company, firmly rooted in Malvern Link, England, epitomizes the British sports car tradition in its styling and its involvement in racing. Like Morgan, many authentic brands emphasize their home country. Audi, BMW and Mercedes-Benz are highlighting their nationality when they urge buyers to see their cars as models of “German engineering.” Brands also promote regional roots. Burt’s Bees and L.L. Bean always evoke outdoorsy, no-nonsense Maine. Authentic brands are proud of their part in shaping and changing their industries. Imagine the computer industry without Apple, fashion without Chanel or car manufacturing without Mercedes.

### 7. “Indoctrinate Staff into the Brand Cult”

The employees at authentic brand organizations tend to be as devoted to their products as if they were CEOs. And their companies generally make a determined effort to recruit the best, most suitable people. A Virgin Airlines job interviewer might ask a prospective hire to dance or sing, because the airline seeks people who can step out of their comfort zones. Once such firms hire good people, they take care of them. The Body Shop offers in-house childcare, and Google provides massages, gyms and on-site medical clinics.

“When brand managers and marketers talk of engaging in an authentic brand strategy they miss the point.”

Why would anyone work for Gordon Ramsay? The “rock star” chef has made a career of being obnoxious and temperamental. Yet, despite his tantrums, he’s had an 80% staff retention rate over the past 10 years. Perhaps his staffers stay because he’s passionate about his work, encourages their best efforts and gets rid of people who don’t perform. Like Ramsay, authentic brand managers don’t let poor performers linger and hurt the team. They encourage creativity and give public and private credit to employees who make significant contributions. Lastly, staff members who work for authentic brands get to know their top executives. These leaders stay involved with daily challenges and take pride in their hands-on approach. They know authentic leaders show up.

# About the Author

**Michael B. Beverland**, a professor of marketing at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia, is a brand marketing researcher, writer and speaker.

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