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On Authenticity

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What do we mean by authenticity, and why is it so important to us now?

While in Las Vegas for the first time a number of years ago, we had occasion to visit the Las Vegas Hilton where "Star Trek: The Experience" was operating. The immersive "themed attraction" spilled over into a cafe (Quark's Bar and Restaurant) and shopping area both modeled after "Star Trek: Deep Space 9." This led to slightly dissonant sights, such as an Andorian sitting at a table hawking credit card offers, where the free gift was a plastic sports bottle topped with an Andorian head. As we strolled through the Deep Space 9 Promenade, we came upon two Klingons. Of course, it was two actors portraying Klingons, but let's set that important difference aside for a moment. They were chatting with tourists and posing for pictures. Eagerly waiting for his moment was a young boy with Down's Syndrome, wearing a James T. Kirk T-shirt. (Some quick backstory: In the lore of "Star Trek," Kirk and the Klingons were enemies.) As these two Klingons

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chatted with the boy and posed for a picture with him, the actors delivered a magical experience as they maintained character and gruffly acknowledged (just gruffly enough) the boy's T-shirt and what it represented to them. They found a way to be kind to a vulnerable person while not destroying what he was there to appreciate: the essence of their Klingon-ness, their "Star Trek"-ness. Given that we were in Vegas, where a veneer of grandiosity often stands in for authenticity, this was a touching and impressive moment.

What do we mean by authenticity, and why is it so important to us now?

Calling something "authentic" may connote original, traditional, indigenous, old, rare, the real thing, or in some crucial way a better example of its category. We use the term today as a messy amalgam of its twin roots: the art historian's validation of an object and the philosopher's valuing of the true self. While the concept of authenticity is employed in vague and subjective ways, we want to believe that an item's authenticity is an absolutely determinable quality, an expectation that (as you'll see) is not wholly realistic.

As for "Why authenticity now?" a likely reason is our unprecedented awareness that the identity of products, objects, and brands has never before been more subject to the forces of marketing and spin. This awareness drives us

to identify sources that are "truly authentic" (a sort of arms race of terminology, while implying the modified adjective here is itself becoming devalued).

Pine and Gilmore (in their book *Authenticity*) explore the prevalence of the opposite: fakery and inauthenticity. But they also shy away from a tight definition of the term, instead framing it as a quality of product that we consume because of our own self-image (rather than an intrinsic quality of the item itself). Spooner (an anthropologist who studied "Oriental" carpets) also emphasizes the act of projection in seeking and consuming authenticity:

"Authenticity is a form of cultural discrimination projected onto objects. But it does not in fact inhere in the object but derives from our concern with it. In seeking authenticity people are able to use commodities to express themselves." [1]

But it gets more complex if you consider that authenticity is not a binary attribute. There is space between the truly authentic and the brutally inauthentic. Let's look at the area in the middle of that continuum, something

1. Spooner, B. "Weavers and Dealers: The authenticity of an Oriental Carpet." In The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective, edited by Arjun Appadurai. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

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we're calling "fake authenticity." Consider the molded plastic lawn and garden products that serve as storage containers and poolside speakers, or the cell towers designed to resemble trees. While in the past we might have easily classified these as inauthentic, we submit that they've become sufficiently prevalent that they are identifiable by their own aesthetic. They aren't inauthentic rocks and trees; they are authentic fake rocks and trees. The plastic food in the window of a Japanese restaurant isn't inauthentic; a visit to Tokyo's Kappabashi district, where stores are fully stocked with examples reveals, the authenticity of plastic food. Kitsch is another flavor of fake authenticity, a celebration of not just trash, but specifically trashy versions of traditionally quality forms. Of course, as art and post-modernity march on, we find ourselves with high-value authentic versions of kitsch (from premium Hostess-style cupcakes at neighborhood bakeries to Philippe Starck gnomes).

There are efforts to define and own authenticity from the producer's side. A consortium of Italian pig farmers from Parma once sued a British supermarket because even though the prosciutto ham they were selling derived from Parma pigs, raised in the region's landscape, on the requisite diet of curds, it had been sliced in England, and not Parma! The British consumer would have probably accepted it as "real"

prosciutto, even if the pigs had been fed in Yorkshire. But if the ham had not been sliced thinly enough, not almost see-through and pink with a gummy texture and mouth feel, then consumers may have failed to credit it as true prosciutto.

If you are aiming at a micro-niche (i.e., connoisseurs) you may need to cater to this purist sense of authenticity. Manga publishers outside Japan originally "flopped" layouts to provide left-to-right reading, but *otaku* (obsessive fans) demanded the original Japanese right-to-left layout, now the standard. Whether Parma ham or *Porco Rosso*, the point is that the criteria that ensure authenticity are not a priori; they cannot be reduced to a few fundamental principles that are treated like a checklist. Establishing authenticity is a social and cultural process, one that is negotiated. The elements that carry authenticity shift and change, and where people locate the essence of what they value in a product or service experience evolves over time.

It's not just the label or branding that is under consideration; there are many components or holistic aspects of the designed experience that can contribute to or detract from its authenticity. When visiting the Portofino Bay Hotel in Orlando (meant to evoke a resort on the Italian Riviera, but felt more like a move-studio lot), we noted Vespa-like scooters

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parked (installed, actually) around the grounds, and weathered-looking pebbles embedded as stair treads. But the architects took it further, building blank functionless facades to suggest a townscape. And as you might find in old Europe, passageways were narrow and hindered navigation. It felt like a rendered videogame background before the branding, characters, and gameplay were added. Ultimately, we wanted the hotel's precious Portofino-ness to get out of the way so we could perform basic way-finding tasks.

Alcohol companies and (infamously) Sony Ericcson are not shy about using stealth marketing—sending good-looking actors into bars to chat up unsuspecting patrons and extol the virtues of whatever product they are paid to represent. While much of the controversy over Facebook's Beacon was focused on privacy, there is an aspect of personal authenticity, as it has the potential to post items to a user's page without their intent or awareness, in essence representing them. This goes even further in Magpie, an advertising service that works with Twitter, where people can be paid for having ads embedded in their tweets.

When dining out, the service plays a crucial role in making the experience great. A great waiter will be your host: guide you, encourage you, joke with you, and generally connect with you. When you walk out the door, you feel

good about the interaction you've had with someone who gets paid based on how well they induce that feeling of connection. Is that an inauthentic relationship?

There's a moment early in the Maysles' documentary "Gimme Shelter," where after showing us the 1969 audience's view of Mick Jagger singing, dancing, and giving his all to the performance, the camera moves to the back of the stage and we see Mick looking back at the band and rolling his eyes, breaking character as he expresses frustration, disdain, or bemusement. From the other side of the filmic proscenium we wouldn't have even known there was a character for him to break, assuming that emoting singer was who Mick Jagger really was. Does that make his performance inauthentic? By calling it a performance, don't we assume that it must be built, and therefore not authentic to the individual? As with the waiter, if someone does a good job when they are onstage, and they create a positive response, but that is not who they are when they are offstage, are we surprised or disappointed?

Consider the VW Beetle and its evolving story. We marveled at the 1998 reintroduction of the VW Beetle, which went from its 60s-era meaning of aspirations for hippie-like freedom to a mature reflection on that past (as the drivers of Beetles in 2009 are often the same people who drove them in 1971). Yet this pales to the shift away from the original meaning: Hitler's "car of

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the people." Thomas Frank quotes one of the creatives at DDB (Volkswagen's legendary U.S. ad agency) as saying, "The cute Volkswagen in 1959 reminded lots of people about the ovens."

To reinvent the Beetle, DDB launched an unprecedented decade-long anti-advertising campaign that mocked the culture of conspicuous consumption associated with other American cars, differentiating itself by its frugality and mocking other car models' planned obsolescence by, for example, running a print ad proclaiming over a single photo: "The '51 '52 '53 '54 '55 '56 '57 '58 '59 '60 '61 Volkswagen."

Over the years this positioning found fruit and built its constituency. Those who wanted to shift away from the values of American consumer culture (or simply save money) bought the product. It became the car of choice for the counterculture, intellectuals, the young and free-spirited, ultimately symbolizing values in 1960s America diametrically opposed to its start in 1930s National Socialist Germany.

Time and generation-to-generation shifts in meaning provide an inexorable if less overt force for recontextualization. Concert T-shirts, once tokens of an experience, are now sold to those who were not born when the band was together. In "Shirt-Worthy" by David Giffels,

which appeared in the October 28, 2007, edition of *The New York Times Magazine*, (http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/28/magazine/28lives-t.html) the author, having grown up with the Ramones T-shirt as a totem only available through the ultimate rock 'n' roll experience of a concert, must come to grips with his nine-year-old son's request for the same shirt, now $20 at Hot Topic. Elsewhere, concert shirts have been reformulated into "onesies" so that infants can passively yet semi-ironically proclaim their parents' passion for Black Sabbath. The users who adopt a product or brand can strongly shape its authenticity, but if you pin it a priori to a fixed variable (like its earliest origin or moment of invention), you will overlook what can be—which is the very point of innovation.

This opens up a very important role for design research. Unlike top-down or market-led approaches (based on past category assumptions and orthodoxies), it can intimately identify where users locate the authenticity—and therefore where to focus experience design efforts on delivering it. This approach would also include how to design: the parameters for innovation, what can change (or improve) while preserving the sense of authenticity, and what cannot be changed without risking it (or even to what extent these essential elements can be tweaked or playfully manipulated).

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If authenticity is a matter (in Schopenhauer's terms) of "will and representation"—of groups of people's desire to believe something and to portray it that way to themselves and others—this doesn't mean where it lands will be random. It will follow a historical process, and design research is crucial to delineate the pattern and guide where and how to design for it.

Even if authenticity is hard to define, this is not true for its opposite. If authenticity is subtle, inauthenticity is flagrant. It's easy (and effective) to channel Supreme Court Justice Brennan with "I know it when I [don't] see it." We're certainly able to determine when something is not authentic (and there's probably an evolutionary biologist out there who can tie that pattern-matching skill to some fight-or-flight reflex). If we, as makers of something, strive to be authentic in the thing that we are making, is that really authentic? And yet if we fail to strive for authenticity, are we likely to fail?

Some advise that the best way to deliver authenticity is to be authentic (either in the art historian's sense or the philosopher's sense, though each requires a different set of corporate actions). Perhaps in our goal to deliver authenticity we should strive instead to avoid inauthenticity. Perhaps the straightest path to inauthenticity is to fail to investigate the meaning of what you are delivering, asking not only yourselves, but also your customers, who will ultimately define your authenticity.

Steve Portigal is the founder of Portigal Consulting, a boutique agency that helps companies discover and act on new insights about their customers and themselves.

Steve has been studying customer behavior and corporate culture for more than a decade and has advised dozens of clients on the creation of new products, services, and innovation processes.

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