



IMAGE IS SUBSTANCE

Andy Cunningham

How do you influence people to buy things?

How do you educate the public about companies? And how do you match potential customers with a given product or service? Essentially, how do you help companies win in the market?

I began my career in trade journalism writing about truck and heavy equipment maintenance. Yes, very exciting...

I started out writing “back of the book” pieces from press releases, and went on to write dozens of features about fleet maintenance and job site management. I received calls daily from PR people trying to coerce me to include the product they represented in my articles. Those calls were the worst part of my day, and I usually felt slimed by the end of it.

Occasionally I did include a product when the company strongly favored it, but most often I did not, due to the tenuous connection between the product and my story, which inevitably hung by a thread of hype woven by a disingenuous flack. So when I was asked to interview at a global PR firm for my next job, I nearly turned down the opportunity. Why in the world would I want to do the very thing that made me shudder during my time at Fleet Maintenance & Specifying?

But the minute I stepped into the offices of BursonMarsteller in Chicago and had a couple of conversations with some of the executives there, I realized that PR was actually the business of “building and maintaining relationships with the various publics that influence the success of a product or service.” It was not actually about pitching stories to unfriendly recipients in the journalism community. That was a byproduct of bad PR.



I discovered that good PR is authenticity—exactly what I craved from manufacturers when I was writing stories about trucks. When companies promote themselves authentically, they get more customers and sell more stuff. It's as simple as that, and I built my entire career on that premise.

With that discovery, I was hooked. Being in the “image” business of PR, I developed my own take on corporate authenticity: image is based on substance. If you don't like the image, change the substance for better results. I then got into the business of helping companies adjust their substance to suit the image they wished to create, which in turn led to a discovery of what I call corporate DNA, and a new theory about positioning.

I believe that if you know your corporate DNA and align your operations to it, you will be more authentic, and more successful because of it.

Image as a reflection of substance is true in all aspects of life, and it's especially true of marketing. Before you can develop a credible marketing strategy, you must first understand the substance behind a product or service. It's all a matter of authenticity.

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I view companies the same way I do people; in fact, I treat them as if they were human. Just as people have DNA, so, too, do companies. Understanding your genetics—understanding who you are and what you're made of—enables you to be a better you. Knowing your company's DNA offers the same opportunities. Corporate DNA lies behind everything an organization does: how it is structured, how it hires people, how it measures success—even what's covered in meetings and the amenities found (or not) in company restrooms. All of this equips a company to leverage its genetics to be better.

Knowledge of DNA, which enables a company to be authentic, is critical to modern day marketing. In today's information rich environment, authenticity sits at the core of reputation and brand building. Because everything you say and do ends up on the internet, nothing escapes review. Companies and people are constantly being rated. Every restaurant, flower stand, and motorcycle repair shop is at the mercy of Yelp critiques. If someone isn't a good doctor—or is even an outright quack—more often than not bad reviews will expose the incompetence or fraud. That doesn't mean innocent people and organizations won't be fingered unfairly or caught up in revenge scenarios; people can easily use the internet to harm others if they're hellbent on wreaking havoc. But only to a point. For the most part, truth wins out and online wrongs are righted (though there's no question that big companies have an easier time drawing attention and rewriting the narrative than does little guy).

Because anything can be spread online, you have little chance of cleansing your image and keeping your reputation pure in the absence of authenticity. Fake news is a great example of this. Yes, fake news can and does cause harm, but it's been my experience that most fake news burns out quickly. Remember the adage "Where there's smoke there's fire"? That's not necessarily the case in the Digital Age. If there is indeed a fire, that fire will spread, and quickly. But if there is no ready fuel—no substance—behind that smoke, it usually dissipates quickly.

That's what happened in the aftermath of the Las Vegas mass shooting, when a person with the same last name as the gunman's girlfriend was erroneously identified as the attacker. Details of the man's personal information went viral as online sites rushed to break the "news" first. In many cases, the outlets were posting information they believed might prove valid; in others, the intent was to create disinformation. Either way, the reports were based on neither knowledge nor substance, and once law enforcement vouched for the man's authenticity by confirming that he was not a deranged killer, the story died. To paraphrase (and expand on) Justice Louis Brandeis' view of publicity, authenticity—like sunlight—is the best disinfectant.

In any case, fake news is a misnomer. A better term is propaganda, which has a long and storied history dating back thousands of years to whenever that first someone attempted to use bias or misinformation to promote a point of view. Thanks to the Internet, the wildfire of propaganda spreads much faster than pamphlets floating from the open belly of a World War II B29 bomber, but that doesn't mean it makes much headway.

Not in the face of authenticity, at least. Honesty and accuracy offer a surprisingly robust firewall. Take Wikipedia, for example. The site works because truth prevails. People continuously edit and add to it, with the vast majority of the material showing up online grounded in fact. And when somebody does post something false, it's edited out fairly soon after, usually within days. Wikipedia succeeds because its entries are based on a solid foundation of truth, one that is difficult to dismantle.

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If, however, you attempt to portray an image of your company that isn't based in reality, sooner or later the product or service won't be able to keep up, and no matter how painstakingly constructed, your house of cards will fall. Several years ago, I signed on to do the marketing for a provider of online consumer and business oriented commerce services. When I arrived, however, I quickly realized that the product was nothing like what the company claimed. The CEO was a great salesman, but he was also a Grade A scam artist. He'd raised millions of dollars for something he couldn't offer, money that he used to embellish his personal life. This had been going on for more than 10 years but, finally, he was found out and the board fired him.

Another example of a company based on all image and no substance is Theranos, the now disgraced Silicon Valley biotech startup. The subject of numerous breathless articles a few years ago, Theranos' bloodtesting technology was hailed as the Next Big Thing in health care. Elizabeth Holmes, the company's famously secretive CEO, raised hundreds of millions of dollars in support of a revolutionary technology that was anything but, along the way breaking both regulations and the most basic rules of science. In the end, Theranos' claim of being able to run 30 lab tests on just one drop of blood turned out to be as valid as the results of a contaminated needle stick, and federal regulators shuttered its labs last summer. Soon after, however, Holmes told CNN that she was keeping her company open and was planning a comeback. "It's really painful to see some of the things that have been written," she said. "But you have two choices, I think, when you go through something like that. Either you let it tear you down, or you use it to become better." To that end, Holmes said she was implementing leadership changes and working to recruit a new board. If she's smart, she'll add substance to the mix as well.

It may take a while—as it did with Theranos, as it did with my shortlived marketing job, and as it did in the case of Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme—but sooner or later a person's or an organization's genetic core is revealed for all to see (Harvey Weinstein, anyone?).

It's like going to the hairdresser every three weeks to have your dark hair colored and then, one day, missing your appointment. You can tell the world you're a blonde until you're blue in the face, but eventually your roots will show, exposing your true DNA.

Before the Internet, images were easy to create and disseminate, particularly back when a coterie of *Mad Men* called the shots: buy ad space in a magazine or some other form of marketing real estate (TV, radio, billboards), and viola! The magic of advertising was infectious and it became the heart of marketing. Anything you wanted to say about yourself, you said, and people believed you. A carefully curated image was the main form of broadcast, and while there was certainly some degree of press coverage, the scrutiny was nothing like today, where everything you do and say is immediately parsed for accuracy—for authenticity. As a result, desire was relatively easy to manufacture, even for mundane items like dishwashing soap and toilet paper (a product made infinitely more desirable when branded as “bathroom tissue”).

Desire was even easier to manufacture for less mundane items. As *Ad Age* noted nearly 20 years ago, “Before the DeBeers mining syndicate informed us ‘A Diamond is Forever,’ associating itself with eternal romance, the diamond solitaire as the standard token of betrothal did not exist.” Soon enough, however, “thanks to the simple audacity of the advertising proposition, the diamond engagement ring is de rigueur virtually worldwide, and the diamond by far the precious gemstone of choice.”

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Creating desire is no longer so simple. Today, word of mouth trumps corporate messaging and evidence of malfeasance topples even the most carefully built reputation. In the Digital Age, where a viral link reveals unfiltered pictures of organizations for the world to see with the swipe of a screen, authenticity is crucial for both brand building and brand maintenance. Even the “eternal romance” of the “de rigueur” diamond has required a rewritten script as consumers exposed to the decidedly unromantic reality of “blood diamonds” increasingly seek out “conflict free” alternatives—and demand proof of those substitutes’ authenticity.

Authenticity is particularly critical in the event of a public relations crisis, a lesson Volkswagen learned the hard way when it engineered a diesel engine doctored to appear compliant with U.S. pollution laws when it wasn’t. When stories of “defeat devices” embedded in software and designed to foil U.S. emissions tests began to surface in 2015, Volkswagen doubled down on its claims of innocence, insisting the problems were no more than technical glitches. Eventually, when confronted with irrefutable evidence of its cheating, the company paid more than \$20 billion to settle criminal and civil charges, several employees were indicted, and an executive who pleaded guilty to fraud and conspiracy currently awaits sentencing.

Volkswagen isn’t likely to go out of business anytime soon as a result of the scandal, but its bottom line has taken a hit—as has its credibility with the public—and it remains to be seen whether the carmaker will be able to regain its former relevance. As Volkswagen brand head Herbert Diess acknowledged to reporters following a management meeting at its US plant in Tennessee in August, the company’s “dreadful history” over the previous two years has seriously stained what he described as Volkswagen’s “beautiful heritage.”

Contrast Volkswagen’s response to that of Johnson & Johnson’s in 1982, when an unknown perpetrator sneaked cyanide laced ExtraStrength Tylenol capsules onto store shelves, resulting in the deaths of seven people. Though the poisonings appeared limited to the Chicago area, Johnson & Johnson quickly moved to recall all Tylenol products nationwide, a move that cost

the company millions of dollars but won it wide public acclaim. Tylenol eventually recovered all market share lost during the crisis and has for the last 35 years served as a poster child for effective crisis management—a reflection of an authentic corporate culture that valued alleviating customer fears over chasing corporate profit.

One of the most important lessons of crisis management is that authenticity goes a long way toward rehabilitating a company's reputation in the event of negative publicity (whether or not the organization is to blame). People are a lot more forgiving and memories a lot shorter in the face of authenticity. During a crisis, all a company has to fall back on is its reputation, and if that reputation isn't built on substance, the road to redemption (assuming there is one) is much longer.

As Jay Halfond, a professor at Boston University who writes frequently about ethics, notes in an article for Fortune, Volkswagen “would have been far better off recognizing a hero who had the courage and foresight to address the larger implications of this fraud before this became public. To preempt scandal and crisis, loyal dissent needs to be hardwired in the ethical climate of major corporations.” In short, loyal dissent needs to be part of a company's DNA. If nothing else—if scandal and crisis can't be avoided—showcasing that DNA would have done much more to polish Volkswagen's tarnished image than its desperate and futile attempts at a coverup.

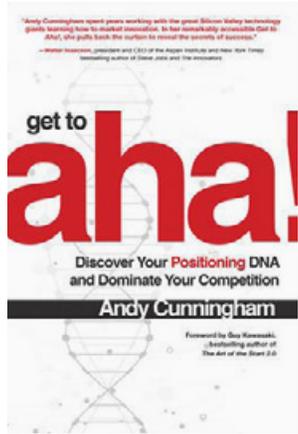
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Ultimately, authenticity prevails because people appreciate it. We like to see people as they are, and prefer that our TV newscasters, radio and online personalities, CEOs, and any politicians we might like to have a beer with be genuine rather than overly polished. Authenticity is also why so many of us prefer Lyft, which I liken to “your friend with a car,” over Uber, the take no prisoners bad boy of the ridesharing industry (although that preference has yet to enable Lyft to lift above Uber in sales). It’s even why, despite doomsday warnings about the dangers of technology companies accruing too much concentrated power and influence, we like Google, Amazon, and Facebook so much. Although they have distinctly different personalities, each comes across as who it is—and in a good way. Technology can always be used for evil—that’s just human nature; certain people will manipulate whatever tools they can to advance their agendas—but such usage was never the goal for Google, Amazon, or even Facebook. The ability to control technology for personal gain is an inadvertent byproduct of advancements that have grown faster than our ability to anticipate the challenges.

Much about a company’s substance, its DNA, can be revealed from its mission statement. Google seeks “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.” Amazon now desires “to be earth’s most customer-centric company; to build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online.” And Facebook has recently revealed a new mission statement: “To give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.” These mission statements resulted from very serious consideration, with every word chosen carefully to reflect the substance of the company that holds it. They are powerful statements from companies that have toiled to ensure their image is a reflection of their substance. Say what you will about their power over consumers; at least we have their authenticity. 📌



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About the author

Andy Cunningham played a key role in the launch of the original Macintosh. Since then, she has been an entrepreneur at the forefront of marketing, branding, positioning, and communicating “The Next Big Thing.” The founder and president of Cunningham Collective, a marketing and communication strategy firm, she has helped introduce a number of new categories, including video games, personal computers, desktop publishing, digital imaging, RISC microprocessors, software as a service, very light jets, and clean tech investing.

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