

Get real about authenticity

Issued by [Dentsu](#)

5 Dec 2023

Authentic brand storytelling... *Authentic* content...

'Authenticity' is easily the most overly traded concept in marketing. It's used with frustrating frequency in influencer marketing. And now, to entrench things that much further, 'authentic' also Merriam-Webster's word of the year!

Consider a creator receiving a brief from a brand and being encouraged to produce content that remains true to their niche, aesthetic and personality, without losing the essence of the brand. The tension is obvious: What is authenticity if the influencer cannot be sincere, honest and true to their experience instead of a brand-imposed version of it?

As Alice Sherwood describes in her book *Authenticity: Reclaiming Reality in a Counterfeit World*, authenticity is best explored by looking at opposites and what is not considered authentic. She discusses how authenticity is congruent with the truth and illustrates, through several examples, that human beings are pretty good at spotting inauthenticity (most of the time). Moreover, she points out that authenticity is entwined with consumer culture: consider the premium you would pay for an Italian wine, an Andy Warhol piece of art or a pair of Jimmy Choos. The 'real deal' carries a hefty price tag.

But, as you might expect, the argument is far more nuanced. As Alice explains, many people consciously purchase Jimmy Choo knockoffs and Andy Warhol famously distributed rubber stamps of his signature to his friends. Similarly, we follow and engage with influencers knowing that much of their content is paid for by brands – their reviews are made to fit the commission. We are complicit in their inauthenticity.

Further, there is debate within agency walls about the impact of, for example, requiring the creator (or influencer) to dress their set in the brand's blue and green hues when their own aesthetic is burnt oranges and beige. Colour palette may be trivial to some, but there is a continuum of authenticity, and creating content sits between two poles: that which is authentic and true to the brand, and that which best represents the influencer's style. Every piece of content on this continuum plays an important and different role in influencer strategy. But what is authenticity then if it is the supposed 'secret sauce' of influencer marketing?

Balanced

The influencer's content provides a subjective, nuanced and often personal review, testimonial or overview of the product or service.

Customised

Authentic influence gives the creator freedom to produce copy and visuals that are true to their personal brand, but within the paying brand's guardrails. On the other hand, standard marketing speak can raise flags that the creator is not credible or knows little about the endorsed product.

Believable

Sincerity and honesty underpin successful, authentic influencer marketing. There should be no doubt that the influencer would purchase the produce themselves. The product should be aligned to the influencer's values, beliefs and lifestyle.

Studies show that brands need to allow some degree of creativity – and likewise creative inconsistency – across influencers, to prevent perceptions of tenuous relationships that may jeopardise the influencer (and therefore the brand's) effectiveness.

In practice, the influencer is not exploiting brand collabs, but is instead being transparent in sharing #sponsored content that is also helpful or entertaining. To create content with a degree of creative freedom, and more trust from the brand, signals the fine line that runs between what is seen as 'fake' or 'sus', and what is deemed credible and authentic.



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