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Marketing Thought Leaders

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Be Honest: Truthfulness is Your Most Powerful Marketing Tool

By [Nancy Pekala](#)

Mom always said to tell the truth. As we got older, we heard that “Honesty is the best policy” and that “The truth will set you free.”

Yet, in the world of business and marketing, truthfulness isn’t always easy to come by. But brand truth can be a powerful marketing tool and competitive advantage in today’s environment where social channels abound allowing customers to openly discuss how they feel about brands, their products and service.

In an exclusive interview with [Marketing Thought Leaders](#), Jonathan Salem Baskin, author of the new book, [Tell The Truth: Honesty Is Your Most Powerful Marketing Tool](#), and president of [Baskin Brand Associates, Inc.](#), shares his insights on why he believes brands would do well to think about truthfulness when they develop and deliver on marketing content for their customers. Following is an excerpt of the [interview](#).



Marketing Thought Leaders. When it comes to business, especially the business of marketing, why is honesty the best policy?

Jonathan Salem Baskin: The short answer is because you can’t avoid it. It’s much easier to be honest than lie or ignore the truth and then try to remember how you did it or try to keep getting away with it. We read and talk so much about the social media revolution and I’m willing to say the revolution is actually over and social media won. That means that everybody is online in some way, shape or form and what they’re looking for is actually the truth about things, not necessarily just to be entertained or to have their time idly passed. The question of honesty really isn’t the question. The question is how can businesses address it while differentiating their brands and establishing unique relationships with their customers.

MTL: How would you rate the honesty quotient of brands today? Why is it so hard for them to be truthful?

Baskin: First, the opposite of truthfulness isn’t falsehood; it’s simply the lack of truth. It’s empty calories of content so a lot of the marketing and branding we get in this day and age of 2012 is sort of like a truth-free zone. It’s not dishonest. It’s just not truthful. In the book, we define truth in terms

of being supportable, relevant, sustainable, and meaningful. It's not that marketing and branding is false; it's simply that we don't use occasions that we truthfully pay for to necessarily communicate with our customers about things that they really need and rely upon.

Second, the reason we do this is because we're operating under a whole bunch of rules that were developed in the 20th century. There is a lot of marketing and brand identity today that is still based on very old ideas about our ability to attach things to the ideas of brands and that through the power of brands' market delivery, make those attachments concrete. Making those attachments is a lot harder than it used to be and a lot less sustainable. It's not that we're lying in the marketing world. We're just missing the opportunities to tell the truth.

MTL: *In your last book, **Histories of Social Media**, you addressed the many do's and don'ts of working with today's social channels. Does the pervasive use of social media make it easier or more difficult for brands to be honest with their customers?*

Baskin: We're talking about two very different experiences about the same phenomenon. From the consumer perspective, the peer-to-peer revolution is immense. It's the

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ability for us as communities of people to share, vet and rate information over time. From a brand perspective, we're still thinking like we're in the 20th century and that social tools are really distribution platforms for our branded content. I think the challenge for business and their brands is to realize that consumers don't want relationships with brands online. The idea that I'm going to go online to have a relationship directly with my toothpaste or my underarm deodorant is goofy. Instead, I am more likely to go online to vet and share and rate information about one of those products or services.

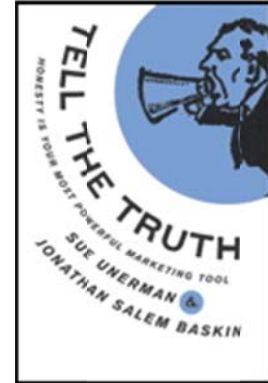
Every truth is honest but honest doesn't necessarily mean always telling the truth. The punch line is to figure out how to communicate truths that are relevant to your customers via social tools versus giving them those empty calories. Brands need to understand that honesty is something you have to deliver consistently. The challenge is to get it through our heads that we're allowed to sell stuff and the key to selling stuff is telling people the truth about what it could be and what it could do.

MTL: ***Brands are not always known for being transparent and honest, yet you suggest that truthfulness can be a competitive advantage. Can you expand on this and provide an example of a brand today which effectively uses honesty to its advantage?***

Baskin: One of the problems we have in marketing is we're always trying to market meaning. If you think about it, it's not truthful. It's 'I'm going to buy my way into your heart and soul because I can't convince you to do something so I'm going to fib and claim that I'm making the world a better place.' What is the competitive advantage? It's not to buy meaning, or an idea or an angle. It's to achieve a truthful relationship with your customer which means they understand what you're about and what you're doing and can rely on it.

Take an example like Southwest Airlines which really goes to great lengths to communicate what it does as well as what it doesn't do. Generally, the Southwest customer has a relationship with Southwest that is based on the truthfulness of what that brand delivers so they're willing to cut them some slack when they fall short and they know what they can rely on. Truthfulness is the basis of that competitive advantage for Southwest. It's not that they made a great promise of have a great image or they claim to be something or not. It's a truthful thing they sustain.

The corollary to the Southwest example is the case of the viral United Breaks Guitar video on YouTube a couple of years ago. It was a big deal. The guy's guitar gets smashed on United and he makes a video saying United smashes guitars. It was proof about the power of social media to share truth. In fact, United reported its best performance in profits that quarter. It's because we already knew the truth about United. When you think about it, truth is the only competitive advantage because anything else could be copied or you'd have to spend money to perpetuate it whereas truth just kind of "is" so it's very powerful.



MTL: *Are today's brands' C-suite and marketing structures prepared to be brutally honest with customers? What does a brand need to do to become an honesty-centric organization?*

Baskin: It's time to stop talking about truth as a philosophical good. Admit the business you're in and be honest with yourselves. We've defined truth as having 8 actionable qualities, four of which have to do with developing your content and the other four have to do with how you deliver it. The key to being more truthful and more honest is just start doing more truthful and honest things. Truth has qualities. It acknowledges the realities we already know. We already knew baggage claim was horrible or that Chevron and other oil companies suck gunk out of the ground that pollutes, so why not just acknowledge the 800-pound gorilla and figure out how to be creatively and inspirationally meaningful based on that instead of trying to ignore it or obfuscate it. Another quality of truthfulness is to simply have a third party join you in whatever declaration or statement you're making. Why would any business or brand in this day and age announce something and then wait for the market to react? Why is anything ever announced in a vacuum?

In terms of context, it's important that truthful things have immediate utility. We found the longer consumers have to wait to figure out if something is true or not, the less likely they're going to believe it even if it is. So things that are going to be true are true immediately or as soon as possible. They are also relevant as soon as possible. If a business or brand is trying to deliver truth to a customer who isn't necessarily looking for that, they're probably talking to the wrong person at the wrong time. If you think through how you develop your content and where and how you deliver it, you can approach things more truthfully.

MTL: *In your book, you took at length about truth in advertising. What needs to change in the industry for consumers to believe there is truth in advertising?*

Baskin: Just like nobody wakes up in the morning wanting to have an intimate relationship with their toothpaste, nobody wakes up thinking, 'I don't like magazine ads or I don't like television broadcast commercials.' There's never been anything wrong with the medium insomuch there's not

necessarily anything right about it either. What always determined right or wrong, or good or bad, or truthful or not, was what we chose to put into it. The billions of dollars that are spent every year to put content into advertising that lacks truthfulness befuddles me. It's not that the advertising is false, it's just irrelevant. It's on brand, wildly entertaining, sexy, funny or part of an integrated marketing campaign but there is no "they" there and that's why people reject advertising. It's not that the idea of being advertised to is bad, it's just that brands do it badly.

There is an immense opportunity for those dollars to be used more effectively.

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To do that requires a different conversation not only in the marketing department, but at the agencies and the board room. As marketers and business people, we have to start thinking and talking about brands differently. Rarely does the word 'truth' ever come out of anybody's mouth in any conversation about marketing content. It's not that we're lying; we just aren't using that lens about defining and delivering content truthfully, and it's the only lens our consumers are using.

MTL: *What advice do you have for brands that are struggling with the issue of truthfulness?*

Baskin: One of the greatest litmus tests of truthfulness is utility. Whether you're looking at the campaign level or the tactical level of a particular buy or activity, if you didn't do it, would your customers miss it? If the answer to that question is no, you probably have a hint that there's probably some truth missing or some opportunity to communicate truth that you're not using. If what you do as a marketer isn't unavoidably necessary or useful to your consuming public, you're probably not dealing in the world of truth. More likely, you're dealing in the world of brand image, transparency, brand awareness and all of those mushy words. If it's truthful, your customer would want more of it, not less of it. If people need it, want more of it, it's probably truthful. If they are enduring it, or you are going to great lengths to make it palatable to them, it's probably missing some truth. Ultimately, it's not a question of being held up as being truthful; it's doing truthful things so you have a committed, repeat customer base that relies on your business.

[Nancy Pekala](#) is the AMA's Senior Director of Online Content and Editor of [Marketing Thought Leaders](#). Join the conversation about brand truth in the Marketing Strategy group of [AMACONnect](#), the AMA's online community. Follow us on Twitter [@marketing_power](#).