What Happens When You Fake Authenticity

Dissecting that infamous Peloton ad — how and why it happened.

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We've all probably seen now-infamous Peloton ad. Maybe you also saw some of the wild parody videos bouncing around the internet. At this point, almost everyone has an opinion on what it says about society, not to mention the future of marketing.

Clearly the luxury fitness brand was looking for some attention heading into the recent holidays. But not this kind. If we can put aside for a moment debating whether the message of this particular spot was tone-deaf or not, or what it says about social and sexual politics, what seems clear is why this happened.

Given the timeliness of this topic, we brought together some of the marketing industry's leading minds for a special edition of our podcast, *Authentic Influence*. Andrew Essex, Former CEO of Droga5, Peter Horst, former CMO at Capital One and Hershey, and Mike Shields, a journalist for Business Insider and WSJ, joined to speak with us about "faking authentic." The focus of our conversation: Peloton's 2019 holiday ad. Click here to listen in.

Peloton, like so many big marketers, was striving for authenticity, which is increasingly viewed as vital in breaking through to younger, more skeptical generations. What

they got instead was “fake authenticity,” which is perhaps the ideal way to alienate these young, skeptical consumers. The Peloton ad was designed to look as though a real person was chronicling her Peloton “journey” through the use of her smartphone. Like so many marketers, the brand and its trusted agency tried to script an authentic moment.

What happened to Peloton, according to Mike Shields, should come as no surprise. “If you’re trying to figure out how to be authentic, and find a way to make sure you come across like you’re real to consumers, you probably shouldn’t do it, because you’re probably going to end up with fake authenticity.” What’s so striking, however, is what a lost opportunity this represents. If there was ever a brand whose users scream out their genuine brand passion (literally) every day, it’s Peloton.

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“The insight that peer-to-peer validation is more compelling than commercial validation is like saying the sun will come up in the east and go down in the west, comments Essex. “I think the professional response to that is: ‘duh … ’”

Peter Horst echoes this sentiment, “Anytime you can use real people telling their stories in an authentic way … that’s incredibly powerful.”

Yet so few brands are willing to take that leap and partner with customers as their top marketers.

Just imagine if Peloton executives had found a way to tap into their customers’ love for the exercise machine by actually showing real people using it. You can envision an inspiring series of real – maybe rough, but definitely authentic – selfies and videos tracking people’s lives being changed through workouts and distributed to those people’s peers.

Brands crave direct relationships with consumers. What if this

relationship could extend beyond simply selling *to them*, to having them market *with you*, as your partner? Yes, there's no doubt this sounds a bit scary. Brands are used to controlling their own stories and hiring third-party "experts" to help them do so (and to deflect blame when things go wrong). Handing over some control to "regular people" can feel risky. But Peloton seemingly had control over their messaging, and look how that turned out.

The brands that will win in the future are those daring enough to partner with their customers and smart enough to leverage robust technologies to ensure brand safety at the same time … those who crack the code on partnering with customers as marketers at scale, predictably and in a way that can be brand-safe, measured and optimized over time.

Related: The Actor in Peloton's Cringey Holiday Ad Says His Few Seconds of Airtime Led to 'Malicious Feedback That Is All Associated With My Face'

After all, wouldn't every brand rather spend 80 cents to acquire a new customer, rather than one dollar, and have 70 of those 80 cents spent go as value to their best existing customers instead of to third-party media companies (with perhaps now only ten cents going to the technology solution powering it all)?

As so much of the digital ad world struggles to compete with Facebook and Google, the future of advertising will evolve into helping marketers channel the power of their customers and, in turn, shift more and more of the money traditionally spent on third-party advertising platforms into value for the customers who are partnering with your brand as marketers.

This vision is a much more effective and powerful marketing ecosystem – one where customers and "real authenticity" rule (not third-party platforms).

So instead of seeing the Peloton ad as a great mishap, perhaps

it’s the perfect teachable moment, as we head into the next decade, regarding the far more customer-led future of advertising.

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