

The truth behind 'the human truth' when extending brand identity

 By [Marthinus Van Loggerenberg](#)

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"We need to be understood. We want to belong. We long to feel special. We crave more control over our lives. We dream of reaching our potential." These five human truths serve as a cornerstone in Starwood Hotels & Resorts' brand-stakeholder relationship approach - most likely the reason why it is the most global high-end hotel company in the world...

Recognising a brand-relevant human truth can be invaluable to equity growth. It serves to cement a well-crafted brand essence. It should serve as a leverage point for the brand's positioning and certainly value proposition. It guides meaningful brand contact management. It is a very powerful tool if approached and managed sensibly. Furthermore, it can seamlessly drive sweet, sweet concepts in brand communication.

More established brands often breathe fresh life into their value proposition, or sometimes even bravely reposition them. This re-design is intended to prompt resonance with uncharted consumer markets. Refocused human truths ought to be approached with acumen and caution. Blunder is often looming when the intended 'human truth' or profound consumer insight merely mimics a current market trend or fad. This is often unsustainable and also runs the risk of insulting the target audience as it may come across as patronising, or even worse, desperate.

Let's illustrate by means of successful examples.

On repositioning

Careful and courageous repositioning demands a vision that inspires one to see the company in a new light through sharp and smart marketing and brand purpose-aligned quality control. By now, it is safe to say that Checkers has done a sound, considered job in repositioning to a middle- to upper- income target group, focusing on fresh produce and offering a wider choice of food items.

Checkers' strap line changed to 'better and better'. The brand exudes the human truth, very much like Avis has done with 'we try harder', of man's yearning for continuous improvement and the aspiration towards reaching one's potential. People love a sense of humility in that. However, Checkers positively delivers on their brand promise.

One can even say that Checkers consistently exceeds their brand promise. The golden rule of under-promising and over-delivering rings true. Checkers uses the very entertaining and etiquette-savvy South African cabaret artist and satirist Nataniël in a way that delights. The chain's seemingly unorthodox choice of brand ambassador surprised somewhat, but makes complete sense. He fills a somewhat aspirational space - and, quite frankly: people love him because of his quirky

nature.

It seems that gradually moving into the aimed-for repositioned space may be more sensible in order to ease value chain adjustments and to better manage stakeholder expectations. It may be a bit more painless if the brand has already earned some goodwill and holds a healthy share-of-voice and power-of-mind amongst its target audience.

However, a desperate attempt to revive for survival or even prompt a miraculous resurrection is plenty for a brand's reality. A more radical approach would then be in order: following solid market research, a thorough environmental scan and consequently a sound marketing strategy that can unequivocally deliver on the new brand promise.

On breathing fresh air into current brand communication



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Band Aid has done it beautifully through the years. The classic 1950s American housewife illustrated the functional benefit by sticking a Band Aid on an egg and then quite dramatically lifting the egg. In the 1980s they moved to a more emotional space with children singing: "I'm stuck on Band Aid because Band Aid sticks on me". Recently they moved to a highly emotional space with a little boy falling in love with a girl. When he approaches her with a cupcake and she rejects him quite overtly, he mends his broken heart by sticking a Band Aid on his arm.

The most recent Knorr Flavour of Home campaign reaches far beyond its intrinsic attributes. Knorr explains that their purpose is to bring flavour to people's lives and with food being a metaphor for meaningful moments shared and celebrated, they translated it to a space of nostalgia. Spot on. Their latest 'value added brand story' shows a real-life depiction of a daughter living far away from home and reuniting with her mother's food (and mother) in a surprising way. The premise of the campaign ought to resonate with most people as it nails the human truth of the want to belong.

It seems that new brand experience extensions can always benefit equity growth when done in alignment with market needs. Yet, doing it under a well-crafted, nerve-hitting, emotional (and even self-expressive) communication umbrella provides any purposeful movement under that umbrella to be acceptable to current and even intended target audiences.

On courting a new target market

It's like using all the wrong pick-up lines. Or the creepy feeling that your stalker is using all the right prompts to win you over. These scenarios ring true when an overt attempt is made by a brand to throw (first base) strategic insights at its intended target audience. Sometimes it is as blatant as riding a trend or fad - or even as sinful as stereotyping of some sort as result. A consumer (and even employee or shareholder) can smell desperation and cheap shots. These communication attempts usually lack imagination or the ability to pinpoint a real human truth holding sustainable value.

Old Spice is a good example of a brand that won ground by pursuing a new target market. 'The man your man could smell like'. The brand narrative could carry the sense of manliness into a new generation - a generation that generously redefines masculinity and shamelessly combines it with irreverent, sometimes absurd humour that made it instantly likeable.

Targeting women slightly disrupted the norm and beautifully (over)dramatised the notion that there is no perfect man. Men felt comfortable with the communication as they can relate in some instances... It's an oyster with two tickets to that thing you love! And made them feel good as they know that no man like that exists. One could argue that the human truth may exactly be that: man's insecurity (and women's forgiveness) as men may intermittently come across as being clumsy or sometimes clueless about wooing his woman - not even to mention woman's expectation of romantic spontaneity.

Strategists with the ability to decipher the human truth behind the trend or sprout target audience insight far beyond consumer behaviours, attitudes or motivations are the ones that drive brands forward. More importantly - a brand that can dramatise its essence and purpose in line with the overarching brand narrative, whether packaging, repackaging or extending its offering to appeal to new market segments or different target markets, usually always wins.

The 'we'

We need to be understood. We want to belong. We long to feel special. We crave more control over our lives. We dream of reaching our potential. We. That means that the identified human truth should hit a nerve for marketers and their target audience alike - there should be no disparity.

Omo has evolved to a more meaningful, appealing space to 'reward mothers' by changing their strap line to 'dirt is good'. Omo infers that the product enables mothers to empower their kids to play, to explore. You might not be a mother. However, a plausible human truth: you were a kid once. You have unequivocally experienced the luscious joy of playing and exploring. The freedom.

You have also experienced the anger and disappointment of your enthusiasm and freedom being curbed. The natural thing to feel as an adult is to allow someone else to play and explore without boundaries. It is a gift that makes the giver feel good about themselves - a little victory. The human truth. Secondary to that: mothers want the best for their kids. A universal truth.

Where to from here?

Get a psychologist in if you cannot see the wood from the trees. Invite authentic discourse with your target audience. Do a rumble with a complement of diverse creatives and strategists alike. Conduct a thorough needs analysis and pitch the human truth slightly above the obvious. Watch the game away from the ball (the sell). Experience that goose bumps moment. The moment where you go: it's actually so damn obvious! Do not rest until you get to that moment otherwise it will be a missed opportunity. And you know how we feel about missed opportunities. Another human truth.

ABOUT MARTHINUS VAN LOGGERENBERG

Marthinus van Loggerenberg is the Senior Strategic Planner at FCB Cape Town. He obtained an MBA Cum Laude at the University of Stellenbosch Business School and is in the final phase of his PhD on brand strategy. He is also a published academic and writer. Prior employers include Musica and the Vega School of Brand Leadership, among others. He specialises in brand narrative, branded entertainment, word-of-mouth marketing, trend forecasting and leadership development.

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