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Keeping Marketing's Promises

by James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine II

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Ads that trumpet, "We're unique!" are meaningless if the stores say, "No, we're not."

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Why did the American Advertising Federation launch the campaign "Advertising. The way great brands get to be great brands." in 2001? Because advertising no longer works as well as it once did. Companies in consumer and business markets now pay more and more to reach fewer and fewer households and executive decision makers.

Advertisements appear *everywhere* — we see ads online, on movie screens, on sports uniforms, on the sides of vehicles, on mobile phones, ads nauseam. London-based agency Cunning at one point even paid people, primarily college students, to wear its clients' temporary-tattoo ads and logos on their foreheads. In an initiative dubbed "Fake Tourist," Sony Ericsson employed actors, called "leaners," to promote its picture-taking cell phones by frequenting tourist traps (e.g., the Empire State Building in New York, the Space Needle in Seattle) and asking tourists to take their pictures. The company also hired models to demonstrate video caller ID and interactive games at nightclubs. For its clients, DVC Experiential Marketing paid "commuters" to read new magazines aboard rush-hour trains; it also paid doormen to display "packages" from catalog merchants in their lobbies, as if tenants had not picked them up yet. Rob Walker, the Consumed columnist for the *New York Times Magazine*, noted that agencies "have concluded that the most powerful forum for consumer seduction is not TV ads or billboards but rather the conversations we have in our everyday lives."

The authors of *Buzz: Harness the Power of Influence and Create Demand* distinguish between spontaneously generated buzz and *buzz marketing*, which "is the scripted use of action to generate buzz. It is deliberate. One of the factors that sets buzz marketing apart from other forms of marketing is the illusion, the invisibility of the marketer. Authenticity is the key driver!" A key driver, yes, but one that so often pushes consumers away; such activity creates the perception of phoniness because it is not what it says it is.

Consider clothing retailer Gap Inc. Its advertisements over the past decade, featuring line dancers and celebrities, have had several effects. First, they put off many current customers who saw images portraying Gap as different from how these individuals saw themselves. Gap no longer conformed to (and thereby confirmed) their own self-images. With each successive ad, the *Wall Street Journal* observed, such consumers grew "tired of [the] trendiness." Second, in-store displays merely paid lip service to the advertisements — actual interactions with sales personnel fell far short of the energy and enthusiasm displayed in the ads. Third, Old Navy stores — also owned by Gap Inc. — carried essentially the same merchandise at a lower price, and without the overtrendiness. As a former Gap executive told the *New York Times*, "Being cool went to [Gap

James H. Gilmore
(jimgilmore@aol.com) and
B. Joseph Pine II
(bjp2@aol.com) are
cofounders of Strategic
Horizons LLP.

management's] heads, and they lost their focus. They began putting Old Navys in malls right next to Gaps and undermining their own sales." Finally, all Gap stores — thousands of them — look exactly alike. The process by which Gap grew revenues — adding more outlets while increasing advertising — became the process of killing the brand, as the perception of *sameness* permeated the marketplace. Gap's advertising says "Unique," but the in-store experience falls far short of what it says it is.

That is the fundamental problem with advertising: It's a phoniness-generating machine. Think of the appeal of any hamburger in any advertisement versus the reality encountered in the actual establishment. Or think of any airline, hotel, or even hospital; if you could only check into the ads, you'd have a great experience. When you check into the actual place, however, it so often falls short of what the ads represented. When it comes to the Is What It Says It Is standard of authenticity, the easiest way to be perceived as phony is to *advertise things you are not.* This practice, endemic to the industry, may have worked when advertising could promote the availability of a new offering (even if not as new nor as improved as the ads said), when it could promulgate a cost advantage (even when it was short-lived or came with a catch), or when it could detail a distinction in quality (even though no one might be able to tell the difference). Today, however, wide availability, low costs, and high quality are merely "jacks to open" when what consumers want above all is authenticity.

What companies need, therefore, is a new approach to demand creation that actually enables — make that *forces* — a company to be *what it says it is.* To borrow the phrase architect Jon Jerde made famous, that discipline is *placemaking.* Places are what provide the primary means for companies to demonstrate exactly what they are for both current and potential customers. Companies that embrace placemaking understand a fundamental dictum for contending with authenticity: The experience is the marketing. In other words, the best way to generate demand for any offering — whether a commodity, good, service, other experience, or even a transformation — is for potential (and current) customers to experience that offering in a place so engaging that they can't help but pay attention, and then pay up as a result by buying that offering. Stop *saying* what your offerings are through advertising, and start creating places — permanent or temporary, physical or virtual, fee-based or free — where people can experience what those offerings, as well as your enterprise, *actually* are. +

Resources

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