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WHAT DOES "AUTHENTICITY" REALLY MEAN? INSIGHTS FROM MILLENNIAL 20/20

Brands strive for "authenticity" to reach young consumers, but what does that really mean? We learned how the buzzword plays out in real actions for three brands at Millennial 20/20…

When trying to reach a Millennial audience, "authenticity" is a much sought after, rarely achieved goal for brands. Just search "Millennials" and "Marketing" and you'll find thousands of articles about creating an "authentic voice" in your messaging. But what does "authentic" really mean? This month, we're sharing some of the insights we learned at Millennial 20/20 in New York, where we saw brands from varying industries share their journeys to achieve "authenticity" and resonate with their notoriously fickle audiences. We've boiled down their approaches into three routes to being authentic today:

1. Lead with Your Actions

Ecommerce site Boxed is said to be "Costco for the Millennial Generation." But while their value proposition is similar to other bulk retailers, Boxed sets itself apart with what it does behind the scenes—because actions speak louder than words. In 2015, the CEO Chieh Huang made news by announcing that he would pay full college tuition for the children of any of the company's 60 full-time employees. A Millennial himself, Huang knows the struggle of affording a college education firsthand, so he decided to do something about it. The next year, Boxed made news again by launching their #RethinkPink movement against the Pink Tax, a term used to describe the phenomenon wherein products marketed to women are more expensive than the analogous men's product. In some states, the Pink Tax is literal, because feminine hygiene products are considered "luxury products" and taxed at a higher rate. In order to right this wrong, Boxed offers discounts and refunds taxes on women's items to make them equal to men's. By taking on causes that reflect the struggles of its Millennial consumers, Boxed is ingratiating itself as a member of the generation—and their young audience is taking note and sharing their appreciation.

2. Design with a Specific Consumer in Mind

When John Seymour opened the first Sweet Chick restaurant in Brooklyn, he had a simple business strategy: Do Dope Shit. Since then, his Chicken & Waffles eatery has become a staple in the New York restaurant scene not only because of its food, but also because of its unique experience. Seymour says he just wanted to create a space where he and his friends would want to hang out, so everything from the menu to the music was designed for people like him. One day, the "people like Seymour" who came into the restaurant included the rapper Nas, one of Seymour's favorite artists growing up. After this chance encounter, Nas and Seymour forged a business partnership that helped Sweet Chick become a home for members of the hip hop community. Sweet Chick has now been able to expand, with three New York locations and one in LA. By designing the ideal restaurant experience with for people like himself, Seymour's restaurant feels authentic for those who share his interests. While the success and connection to the hip hop community was not something he planned, he does note that it is "pretty dope."

3. Be Transparent About Your Impact

In a conversation about authenticity, it may seem counterintuitive to mention McDonald's. Similarly, in a conversation about transparency, branded content is not always top of mind. In 2016 however, online publication Mic teamed up with the fast food giant for The Ripple

Effect, a branded content series around McDonald's impact on the food industry. Mic's COO Corey Haik explained, "Young people today want to learn about their food." The content series, which includes videos like, "Here's How the Beef Industry Is Putting Sustainability on The Menu," and "How Demand for Cage-Free Eggs Is Pushing Farmers to Look for the Sunny-Side," offers consumers a chance to be informed about the food they choose and for McDonald's to showcase its prowess as a pioneer in food safety and sustainability. For the series to be successful, Haik emphasized the need for McDonald's to shine a light onto otherwise obscure portions of their operation.

As many brands search for "authenticity" to speak to a Millennial audience, it is worth noting that often, "authenticity" just means "honesty." If brands pursue what they are passionate about, they will find their base of passionate consumers. If they are open with consumers about why they do what they do, consumers will trust them. If they lead by example instead of through their PR company, they will be respected. In today's environment, these simple truths will translate to the all-important authenticity so many seek.

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