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Forget real

» Why brands should aim higher than authentic on social

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Brands are told to aim for authentic.

We say aim higher.

➤ **Authentic.** It's one of marketing's biggest buzzwords. Time and again, we hear from thought leaders and illustrious brands on social that what brands should be striving for – a social marketer's North Star, if you will – is authenticity. “Be human.” “Be real.” “Show up like a user.”

That's because social is unlike any other marketing channel. It's a world people increasingly live in. A world where people learn, create, react and protest. Most of all, it's a space they expect to be entertained. And if brands aren't prepared to meet that expectation, they'll struggle to bridge the disconnect – finding at best, apathy and at worst, mistrust on the other side.

What brands are trying and failing to do is realise that authenticity doesn't have a handy formula that's tried and tested. And somewhere in between every brand trying to be authentic on social – or saying they want to be authentic when they really mean something else – we've lost the true meaning of the word.

In fact, what brands need to do is stop trying to be authentic. They need to be accountable to the values and the causes they claim to represent. They need to be transparent about their own imperfections. They need to be self-aware about exactly who they are as a brand. And they need to be connected to the conversations they should be a part of – and know which ones to sit out.

When brands do all those things, authenticity becomes a natural byproduct of their social output. Because being authentic means being true to your brand. And there's no blueprint for that.

So while you shouldn't expect any pointers on how to write an authentic post, you can expect clever commentary and actionable tips and tricks from the brightest minds on our strategy and creator teams. In the first chapter, we'll cover accountability, and give you guidance on how to walk the walk and talk the talk. Next, we'll explain why transparency matters, and why mistakes aren't a bad thing - if you've read our tips to be smart about it.

In this playbook's third chapter, we'll tackle the complex art of being self-aware on social: what it means, why it's important, and tips to execute that self-awareness. Our fourth chapter will give you the courage to connect to the communities you have a right to be part of, the serenity to accept those you don't, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Finally, we've tapped into our inner social sleuth to bring you examples from the brands killing it on all four fronts, be it those we admire from afar, friends of the SocialMinds podcast or our own client partners.

So buckle up for the only social playbook that tells brands not to be authentic.

➤ **It's time to aim higher.**

Don't be authentic, be accountable.

➤ **Accountability is all about being clear and open when it comes to your business, values and culture. More than that, it's about delivering those values and fostering that culture through actions, not words.**

It's the undercurrent that should run through all aspects of your operations, from PR to new product development and supply chains. But it's critical on social.

That's because, unlike other channels, social is an open dialogue, where your biggest fans - and your loudest critics - can clearly be seen and heard.

And if you needed any more persuading, data tells us that accountability equals favourability when it comes to consumer's shopping baskets.

Neilson's Global Trust Report highlighted that 66% of consumers are willing to pay more for products from brands committed to social accountability. "Committed" is the key word: brands need to actively prove they're putting their money where their mouth is.



66% of consumers

are willing to pay more for products from brands **committed** to social accountability.

If you don't, **your audience will.**

➤ **The bottom line is this:** to truly live your brand values, you need to hold yourself accountable for your actions – because if you don't, your audience will.

No smoke and mirrors, no hidden agendas - just good old-fashioned honesty and integrity.

It's not easy, but in the long run, it's the only way to build a brand people truly believe in.

And once you've established that accountability, you can begin to forge meaningful connections.



Accountability should empower, **not intimidate.**

➤ **Brands need to operate within their own reality. Just because a topic is important to your audience, doesn't mean your brand is able to speak on it.**

You might be owned or have been acquired by a parent company whose own practices sometimes counter your values. You might be a fashion brand or a fast food organisation that's never going to be able to speak on sustainability without backlash.

So what can you speak about with substance? Can you speak on politics? Gender discourse? Ethics? Women's rights? Black empowerment?

There are so many issues that brands are expected to, or can feel pressured to, take a stand on. You just need to find the topic that won't make a hypocrite of you - and stick to that.

Three tips to ace accountability



Practise what you preach.

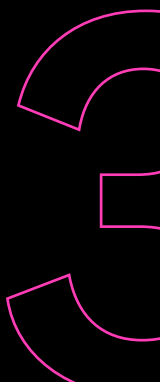
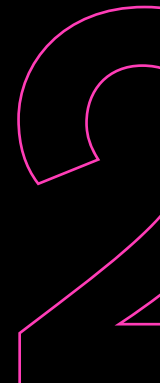
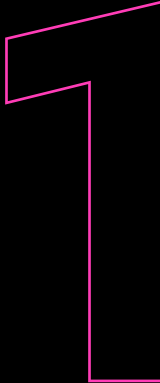
Don't make content pillars about your alleged commitments if you know your business practices contradict them – and feel empowered to challenge the order to post if it comes from above. For example, you can't talk sustainability if one of your business practices is destroying unsold stock, but you can if you know you're doing everything you can to reuse and recycle.

If you get called out, own it. Don't ignore it.

It's important to reply and publicly recognise the truth in what's been said – provided it's fair. If a creator calls you out on your Pride campaign and lack of queer representation in your content, listen and let them tell you how you can act, then see it through. Don't wait for the storm to blow over, turn it into an opportunity to do some real good.

Share your platform.

Representation is an easy and effective solution to be accountable to the promises you make. If you've chosen to advocate for Trans Lives Matter, ensure plenty of your creator collaborations are with either trans activists, trans creators, or educated allied activists – and that their creative input is considered.





Social sleuth: FENTY BEAUTY

ALL BLACK LIVES Matter.

WE WILL CONTINUE TO UPLIFT BLACK CREATORS ACROSS ALL IDENTITIES. THERE IS ENDLESS TALENT WITHIN THE BLACK COMMUNITY, AND WE WILL BE CALLING ON UNIQUE CREATORS TO BE FEATURED ON OUR PLATFORM.

Cast your minds back to 2021, when you couldn't move for empty black squares on social, with the most baffling of brands emerging to seemingly support the Black Lives Matter movement.

Most were perfect examples of what not to do. One brand, though, that showed us (not told us) they were in adamant support of the cause, was Fenty Beauty.

As a Black-owned brand, they made handling the situation with grace and integrity look easy – providing a lesson for all others. They ceased trading for a day on 2 June in protest, donated cold hard cash to several organisations, and used their platform to publicly call out the injustice, not just through words like most brands, but through actions – amplifying other Black voices online.

Even where some brands handled a situation like that well, their comms went back to no-representation normal the following day. But Fenty sets a stellar example all year round regardless of political climate; they've set the standard for makeup shade ranges reflective of reality.

In contrast, fellow beauty brand Youthforia recently received backlash for an unusable and offensive 'jet-black' foundation shade – for which they didn't apologise, only posting a soulless corporate statement about their product line a month later. Chalk and cheese, folks.

ALL THE COVERAGE WITHOUT THE CAKE
HERE TO SERVE ALL SKIN TONES
SHOP FENTY BEAUTY'S FOUNDATION

WE CARE ABOUT OUR CUSTOMERS AND AS WE CONTINUE TO DRIVE CHANGE, WE ARE CREATING A NEW POSITION INTERNALLY DEDICATED TO EXAMINING BOTH OUR CURRENT PRODUCTS AND THOSE IN DEVELOPMENT SO WE CAN BEST MEET YOUR NEEDS.

YOU CAN READ MORE ABOUT OUR VALUES ON OUR WEBSITE AND LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ROLE ON OUR CAREERS PAGE.

Don't be authentic, be transparent.



➤ **Transparency is the foundation of any strong relationship, and the same holds true for brands and their customers. In today's world, where social acts as an all-seeing eye, brands are under more pressure than ever to consistently deliver an experience customers can rely on. And it's not just for optics; transparency can impact your bottom line.**

That's according to insights from Sprout Social's #BrandsGetReal report, which found 53% of consumers were likely to consider brands that are transparent on social for their next purchase. A lack of transparency, however, left 86% of people likely to take their business to a competitor.

When brands get it right, it's like hitting the jackpot. But when brands inevitably stumble and make mistakes (let's face it, we're all human), owning up to those missteps and communicating openly with customers is crucial.



53% of consumers

were likely to consider brands that are transparent on **social** for their next purchase.



Trust is a **two-way street.**

➤ Like when Luxe Collective founder Ben Gallagher shared an online apology to his customers for a business hiccup last year. His genuine approach was refreshing, building trust and unexpectedly boosting engagement. Similarly, KFC's playful response to its chicken shortage during the pandemic charmed its audience and turned a potential crisis into a moment that sparked conversation and built brand affinity.

But transparency isn't limited to owning up to your mistakes.

In its simplest form, it's open communication. Take cereal brand Surreal, which is using transparency to entertain and build trust as its outward-facing marketing team takes audiences behind the scenes of its most viral stunts, like its low-budget billboard.

No matter how you approach it, remember that trust is a two-way street, and keeping those lines of communication open is the key to a long-lasting, meaningful relationship with your customers.



Transparency starts with understanding your brand **and your audience.**

➤ Transparency isn't a one-size-fits-all strategy. While Surreal's unseriousness works in its favour, a financial services brand constantly admitting its mistakes online or revealing the messy inner workings of the business would provoke a loss of trust and hurt the brand.

It's essential to gauge the appropriateness and impact of transparency for your brand while ensuring not to overdo it.

All this to say: transparency starts with understanding your brand and your audience.

You need to know the parameters of the playground in which you can successfully play.

Here's where social listening is your best friend: for identifying your audience's shared values, behaviours, interests and conversations.

Apply these insights to your brand personality to determine how transparency shows up in your world, whether it's with sincerity or self-deprecation.

Three pointers for transforming transparency on social



Celebrate when it goes right and acknowledge when it goes wrong.

Maybe a campaign, initiative or content idea didn't turn out the way you hoped. You don't have to pretend it never happened. Can you go live with a fresh angle that admits or (if appropriate) makes light of your failures? No matter if it's already been and gone, or never saw the light of day, people respect brands that acknowledge their setbacks.

Get real.

There's a reason why people are turning to TikTok as their search engine of choice: to find products, services and recommendations from real people. Glossy product photography looks great, but users on social are used to seeing the product used or worn by people in natural lighting on a range of skin tones and body types.

Don't slip out of character.

Your brand tone of voice shouldn't be one-note – especially on social, where different platforms demand varying iterations of your brand's personality. And don't forget, your tone of voice should apply across everything you say. Cracking a joke one minute then sombrely stating legal comms the next is a surefire recipe for tonal whiplash.

Social sleuth: **THE ORIGINAL OATLY!**

➤ There's nothing Oatly loves more than giving best practice the middle finger. So when the brand created F*ck Oatly, a website dedicated to documenting its negative press, the initiative felt so wrong it had to be right.

According to creative director Michael Lee, the campaign was met with scepticism internally. For a brand renowned for its punk reputation, that speaks volumes about just how risky this was. But the risk paid off, cementing transparency as a brand pillar by proving it's woven through the brand's DNA.

F*ck Oatly also allowed the brand to set the record straight on misinformation cropping up on social regarding its marketing mishaps, like selling its oat residue byproduct to pig farms, which didn't go down well with vegan and environmental activists. While Oatly admitted this remains the case, the brand is now developing alternative (pig-free) solutions to close the loop.

If, like Oatly, sustainability is a core concern for your brand, you'll know there's a huge responsibility on your metaphorical shoulders. But no matter what value you embody, whether that's diversity, innovation or inspiring trust, remember that true transparency means admitting you're not perfect – but disclosing exactly what you are doing in pursuit of your goals.

[Watch the keynote recording](#)



Don't be authentic, be self-aware.



» **Self-awareness isn't a singular, absolute truth. It's a delicate balancing act between two distinct, and sometimes even competing, viewpoints.**

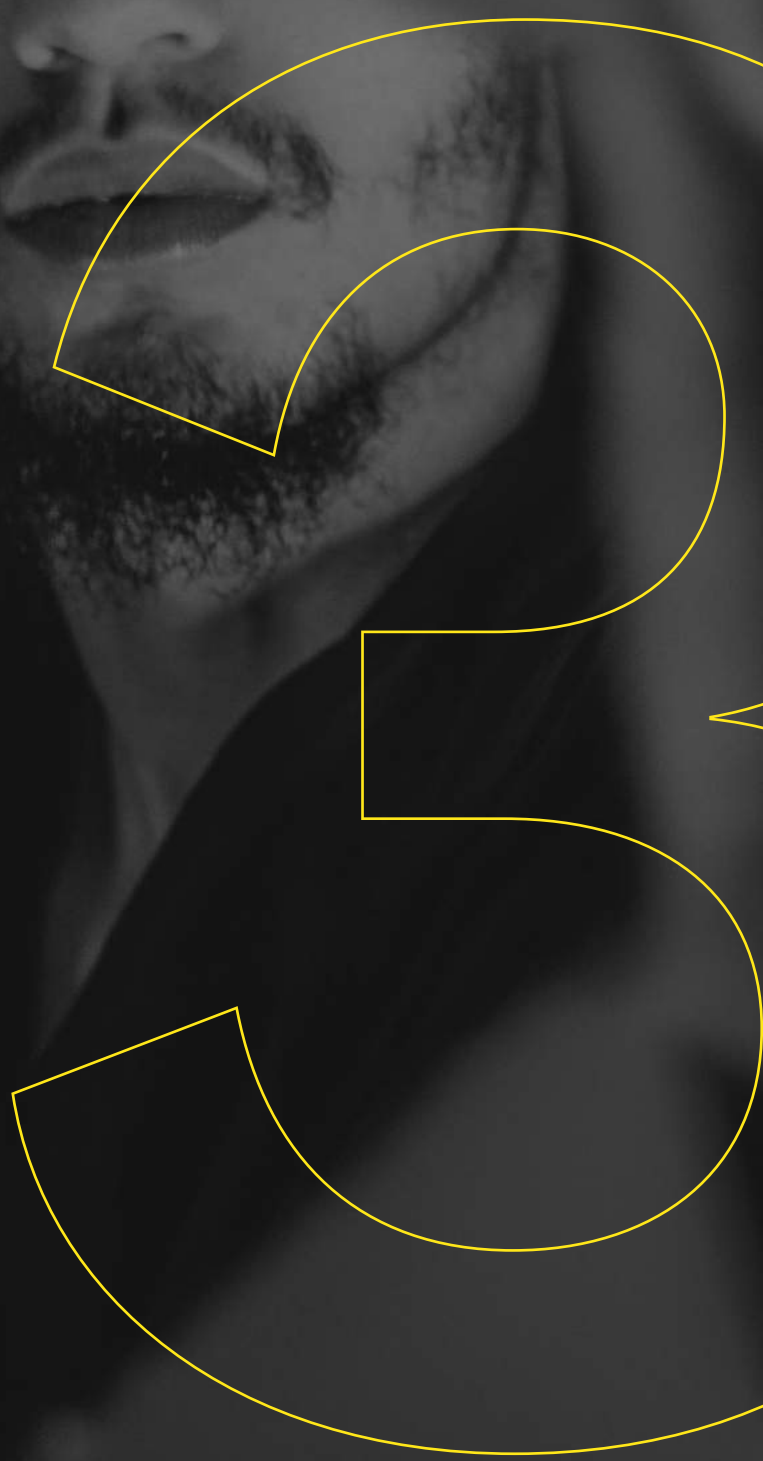
On one hand, you have your brand's internal perception of itself - the shiny, idealised version that you present to the world. On the other hand, you have the external view - how your customers and the rest of the world perceive your brand.

The key to true self-awareness is finding that sweet spot where the two viewpoints intersect, creating a harmonious blend of aspiration and reality. This sweet spot is where brands can showcase their true selves while still striving for growth and improvement.

That's challenging enough as it is on social, but factor in an unfavourable public image, complicated approval processes or a lack of buy-in from higher ups, and it's easy to see how these two perceptions can drift apart.

Self-awareness isn't achieved by getting outsiders to come around to your internal self-perception, but instead embracing how you're perceived by others - even if you think that perception doesn't do you any favours.

It sounds counterintuitive, but a savvy reframing can work wonders for reclaiming public perceptions and earning their trust. And trust is pivotal to purchase decisions. In fact, Edelman reports that around four in five consumers need to trust a brand to consider buying from it, and consumers are more than twice as likely to buy first, stay loyal, and advocate for brands they trust.



Self-awareness isn't a singular, absolute truth.



Playful self-awareness comes with enormous payoff.



A few years ago, the effective play from brands was worthiness. Shoes couldn't just be shoes – they had to also, in some capacity, save the world. TOMS was an example of how that tactic worked for a while. Patagonia is arguably a rare example of where it continues to do so.

This self-righteous approach to marketing relied on making promises that stretch the boundaries of what a brand is.

You couldn't just come to sell a product, you had to also aggressively sell an attractive ideology.

Today, a brand stepping forward on social wearing a hero's cape or making grandiose claims about how their product literally changes lives will be met with a collective eye roll.

But the solution to swapping self-righteousness for self-awareness is simple: give yourself permission to strip everything of its formality and be more honest than you're comfortable with.

You're here to sell something. You know it. They know it. And that's OK.

Three ways to be successfully self-aware



1 Reclaim your public perception.

Brands are far too used to operating in a world where who they want to be, and who they are, are two different things entirely. But social means there are no well-kept secrets. Instead of trying to hide your true nature, embrace it – but find a creative ‘in’ that spins your reputation in your favour.

2 Be honest about your intentions.

Everybody already knows you’re here to sell a product. Instead of selling values, we’ve seen a wave of successful social efforts from brands who openly let ‘the marketing department’ run their socials and enlist the audience’s help making content blow up.

3 Accept that you can’t hoodwink them.

It might be tempting to focus your comms narrative on your more wholesome attributes, but publicly acknowledging and owning your corporation status can be hugely endearing to social audiences – largely because it’s unexpected for brands to admit they’re, well, brands.





Social sleuth: RYANAIR

➤ An overused, but not overrated, example: Ryanair has paved the way for self-awareness on social.

Though its unique method can be contentious, what's undeniable is how the airline has proved beyond any reasonable doubt the value of showing up in ways people don't expect from a brand. What's more, it's not without strategy. Ryanair is a cheap airline – always has been, always will be. So, too, is its humour.

The brand knows it's no luxury carrier, so the social team owned it and turned it into a personality that landed one post a shoutout on Jimmy Fallon.

When any other Airline posts a boring TikTok...

iPad kids finding out there's no Wi-Fi on their 2 hour flight



[Listen to the podcast episode](#)



Who says Twitter admins don't have any power? Introducing our new seasoned Signature Fries, available from Monday 9 October #NewKFCFries



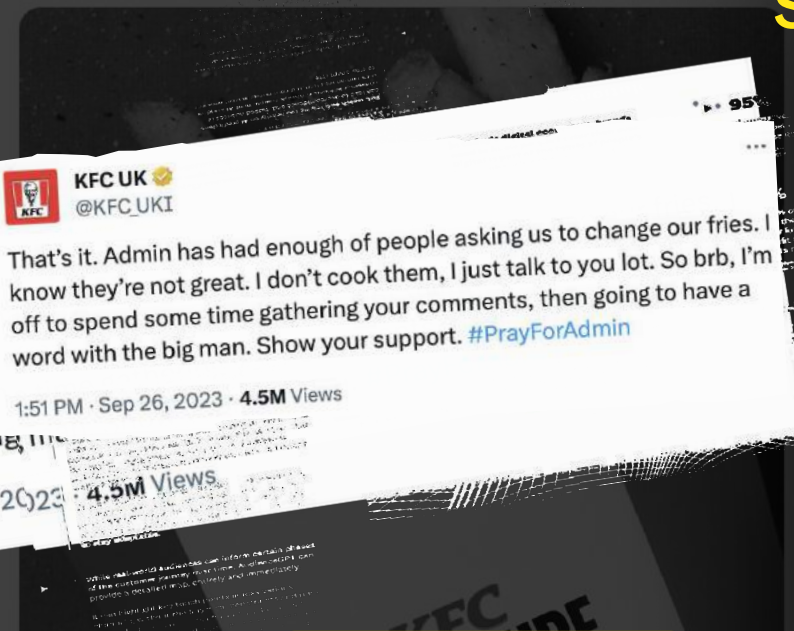
You've got a lot to say for a restaurant that has 'plain chicken' on the menu

Social sleuth: KFC

➤ Instead of avoiding the subject, KFC UK&IRE used its fries' reputation for being rubbish to an advantage when launching the new and improved recipe.

Our social campaign for the seasoned Signature Fries used the popularity of the fries slander as a jumping off point to catapult the launch. Acting as Admin, we joined in the fries hating, thrilling the audience by validating their complaints, before appearing to take a stand on the community's behalf and pass the feedback up the chain to finally answer their prayers for tastier fries.

And it worked, achieving a whopping 10 million impressions across social.



[Read our case study for KFC's World Cup campaign](#)

Don't be authentic,
be connected.



00:00:16

Connection demands quality over quantity.

➤ Not long ago, a brand or influencer having more than a million followers would have sufficed to equal success on social. Today, that simply won't cut it. While the industry still places a high value on follow count as a metric, newer platforms like TikTok have changed the way brands think about virality, achieve cut-through and measure success.

TikTok's competitors have followed suit with their algorithms, meaning having all the followers in the world is no longer an essential precursor to mammoth views and attention. What's more, the creator economy has flourished, giving ordinary people the chance to grow and influence communities related to any and all interests. Brands are increasingly catching up to the fact that the number of followers they or a creator has is less important than the quality of the connection with those followers.

Where social teams once invested in customer service support in response to demand, community management fell by the wayside – but TikTok's explosive impact has also forced brands to reevaluate the relationship they have with their audiences.

The comments section isn't just a place to leave a complaint about your order not arriving on time. It's an outlet to engage, have fun, join the conversation and lean on your audience for their feedback. For all the talk of TikTok's influence, what this does is prove that brands *shouldn't* pander to platforms' fickle algorithms and instead focus on building a genuine community.

Follow count is just a number, but a community will follow you wherever you are. If you can successfully connect with your community, they'll organically become your biggest brand advocates: arguably any marketer's dream.

The goal isn't to appeal to all. It's to **find your people.**

➤ Connection is more than just engagement; it's about fostering a community that can build brand advocacy and loyalty. Before you can start to do that, though, people need a clear-cut reason to follow you, leave a comment, or share your latest Reel.

That comes down to knowing your brand purpose, tone of voice, and values inside out, as well as your position within your industry.

It's a saturated world, so the goal isn't to appeal to all – it's to find *your* people.

Social is a place where countless conversations happen every day, on any one given channel. So the pressure to comment on every single trend, sports event or pop culture moment can be all-consuming. But just because you *can*, doesn't mean you *should*. Always keep in mind the value exchange between your brand and your community.

Focus on relevant topics where you can contribute something meaningful or fresh to the conversation. It's helpful to have a reactivity framework or events calendar in your social strategy to reference as a guide.

Three notes on connecting with your community



Invest in an enduring conversation, not a one-off moment.

Your audience isn't static. It's constantly changing, finding new trends, interests and even vocabulary. To keep up, your content must be created by people embedded in that community. Invest in your community managers - these are the creatives sustaining this ongoing conversation, so they need to be personally invested in your product or sector.

Be honest about your intentions.

Brands' part to play in building a community doesn't stop at publishing the post. If there's a trending topic related to your brand, or a talkable moment cropping up thanks to what you've created, take advantage of it. Find ways to join, amplify, or lead the conversation to expand your brand's presence beyond the post or campaign across platforms.

Understand there's no "me" in community.

This conversation isn't between only you and your audience. It's about the interconnectedness between everyone who's there for the ride. Show off your audience and become a social facilitator by encouraging people to share knowledge or make friends in the comments. After all, that's why people turn up on social - to connect.



SMGWDYM = sorry Miss girl
what do you mean?



Social sleuth: LinkedIn

➤ When LinkedIn tasked us with taking over its UK TikTok activity, we knew this was a space where we could truly make magic happen.

To flip perceptions of social's biggest corporate platform and get Gen Z usership on the rise, we showed that corporate didn't have to mean boring. Grounded in audience insights, we gave the brand a refreshed TikTok strategy that would cement LinkedIn in the minds of young professionals as a place to write their own career story. And to truly resonate with them, we executed that strategy in a way that only a Gen Z Brit could understand: through tapping into culturally relevant British humour; partnering with career experts to give inclusive, actionable advice; and by building an entertaining presence within the UK's thriving corporate community on TikTok.

The results speak for themselves: a hefty 2000% increase in MoM profile views; 74% MoM increase in profile views and 111% increase in follower growth MoM. Plus, our community management was considered best-in-class by LinkedIn's global community engagement team.

[Read the case study](#)





Social sleuth: Holland & Barrett

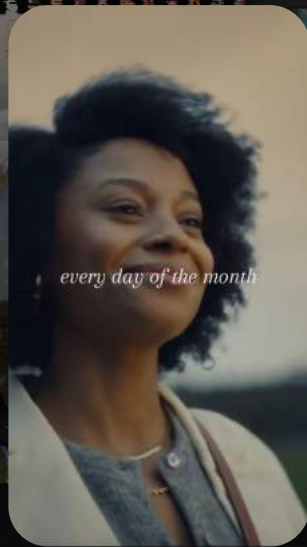
➤ Holland & Barrett tasked us with refreshing and executing its entire social strategy in line with its broader mission to become the top destination for trusted content in the congested health and wellness sector.

Moving away from a sales-focused approach, our content and campaigns, like promoting awareness of accessible exercise with The Movement Movement, generated broader conversations amongst the brand's engaged community around health and wellness.

Not underestimating the level of trust in the healthcare brand, we positioned Holland & Barrett as a guardian of relatable, inclusive and comprehensive health and wellness advice, executed through campaigns like #OwnEveryDay that racked up a staggering 10 million views, tackled taboo topics and encouraged the community to rethink "hormonal" using the power of creators.



[Read the case study](#)



Long story short



» **There's no magic formula for authenticity, but there *are* things brands can do if they want to dig a little deeper.**

All brands have values, but not every brand can stand by those values when the going gets tough.

To hold yourself accountable, you have to be able to practise what you preach. If you get called out, don't ignore it. Own it. And share your platform by representing those causes you've chosen to ally with.

Whether it's admin acting unhinged or behind the scenes office TikToks, social is where consumers expect brands to show their human side. And being human means being transparent about all parts of your brand, good and bad. Don't be put off by transparency – people respect brands who own up to, and make light of, their mistakes.

Sure, brands are expected to show their human side – but at the same time, there's no hiding the fact that brands have products to sell. This is where self-awareness comes in.

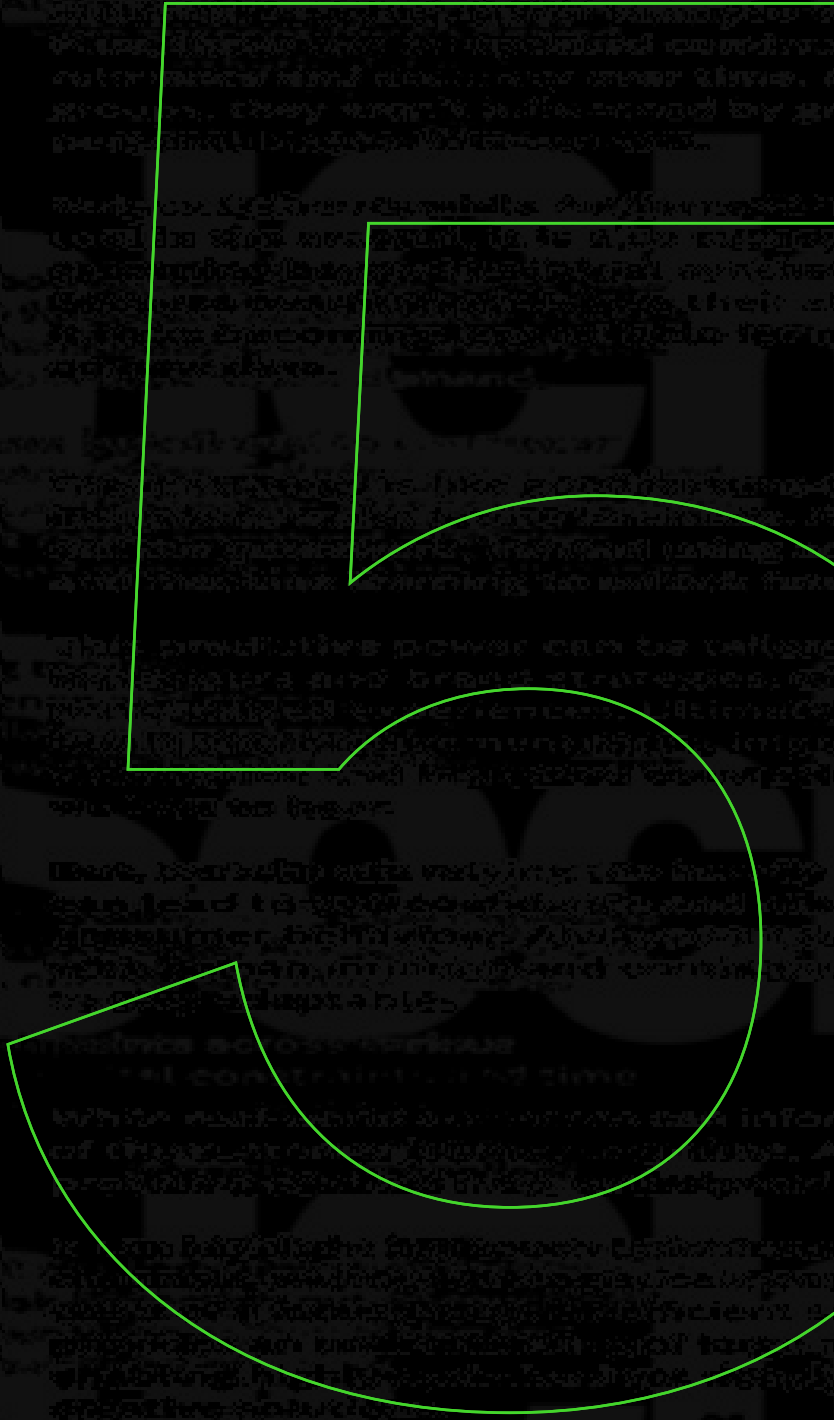
Social means there are no well-kept secrets, but even if your public perception is less than favourable, a savvy creative angle can work wonders.

And finally, remember that social is a marketing channel unlike any other. You're not shouting your message into the void; you're having a two-way conversation.

» **In a saturated space, mass appeal won't work.**

Instead, focus on finding your community, and connecting with them in a genuine way by investing in the creatives sustaining those conversations.

Your essential checklist for aiming higher than authentic



Forget aiming for authentic. Aim for these instead



Checklist notification



Be accountable

now

- Practise what you preach.
- If you get called out, own it.
- Share your platform.



Be transparent

2m ago

- Celebrate when it goes right and acknowledge when it goes wrong.
- Don't slip out of character.
- Get real.



Be self-aware

3m ago

- Reclaim your public perception.
- Be honest about your intentions.
- Accept that you can't hoodwink them.



Be connected

6m ago

- Invest in an enduring conversation, not a one-off moment.
- Don't drop the ball.
- Understand there's no "me" in community.

Get in touch



We'll take your strategy and campaigns to the next level.

With our innovative creator model and people-centric approach, we've delivered granular strategic insights and social-first creative for the biggest brands, like KFC, Jameson Whiskey, BBC, TikTok, Holland & Barrett and LinkedIn.

➤ Get in touch and you could be next.

➤ Scan the QR code to get in touch.





Melissa Harvey
Content Marketer



Georgia Hill
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Eve Young
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