

# Branding 101: Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say

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We live in a world FULL of advertising. We constantly receive messages from brands on what to buy and why to buy it.

But these days, for consumers to choose one brand vs. another, the specifics about the product or service matter less. What really matters is what the brand is saying, how it says it and what it does to back that up. People aren't only buying products or services anymore – they're buying experiences and they want to buy from companies they trust.

At [South by Southwest Interactive](#) in March, many of the marketing sessions I attended followed a trend of encouraging brands to become better listeners and more authentic communicators.

The key to gaining the trust of consumers and getting them talking about your product/service is to take strides in becoming more human and more relatable. The first step is to become a better listener.

## **Be a Better Listener**

Listen up! According to the “Analytics of Social Marketing” session at SXSW, [a report by IBM and EConsultancy](#) found that 81% of brands say they know what their customers want while

only 37% of customers felt that brands understood them. So how can you build long-term relationships with customers or develop content for your audience if you don't understand them? If you're not listening to what your audience is asking or don't know what they want from you, you're only hurting your cause.

Here are a few ways to open your ears to your audience:

1. **Socialize:** One of the best ways to listen to your audience is by finding out what're they're saying on social media. Are there frequently asked questions? Do you know how to answer those questions? What kind of content gets shared the most? And what kind of content creates the most engagement? Your competitors may talk about subjects that interest your audience so make sure you check their social profiles, too. Use your findings to modify your posts to produce content that generates more interest.
2. **Solicit feedback:** Include a survey link on your website, receipts, emails or social media accounts to receive feedback from your customers. Use this information to make improvements in your communications and address your customers on a more personal level.
3. **Think outside the box:** Interact with customers in your store, pick up the phone or hold a product/service demo. These actions allow you to interact with customers directly, adding a personal touch to your communication. For example, ask customers if they have questions about a product, what changes they would want to see, how they use it, etc.
4. **Walk a mile in their shoes:** Check out your own website, test your products and read your blog, social media posts and press releases, and try to see all these from their perspective, not yours. If you find yourself turned off by what you're saying, make changes immediately. [According to TheGood.com](https://www.thegood.com), brands shouldn't

make consumers look and listen to content that disrupts them or disinterests them. In fact, the more time you save consumers from irrelevant content, the more they'll love your brand.

## **Be Authentic**

Be transparent and more human. A [2013 survey by Cohn and Wolfe Brands](#) found that consumers around the world are demanding that the brands they use become more honest and more authentic in their communications.

You want to give customers a reason to feel good about doing business with you. Creating an authentic brand takes time, all the more reason to start now:

1. **Establish your brand identity:** [Levi's](#), for example, ties its marketing activities closely to its history and values. The company's advertising strategy is to highlight its legacy while its social media channels help raise awareness for causes it cares about. Know what your company stands for, know your company's values and stick to them no matter what.
2. **Make decisions thoughtfully and stand by them firmly:** According to the "Smart Ad Campaigns: Not about the product" session at SXSW, authenticity is best measured in actions. If your company chooses to tap into cultural and social issues like [Pantene did in 2013](#), make sure it's true to your brand DNA. A lot of criticism stems from wondering if a brand is being genuine or if they're just hopping on the social issue bandwagon. Show your customers you mean what you say by reinforcing points in your campaigns and being consistent.
3. **Be more human:** Companies need to speak like humans in order to build authenticity. If you engage your target in a relatable, down-to-earth way, you can get your message across without even showing your

products/services. Consider using customer experiences to create authentic stories. You can ask customers to submit stories about how they've used your product/service and what it means to them. This will help your brand engage with and be supportive of your customers and their lifestyles without having to sell them something. Check out how Squarespace does this in their Field Stories ad campaign.

4. **Keep content fresh:** Don't repeat yourself. In order to sound more genuine, spice up your content by finding new things to talk about on social media and not solely advertising your brand offerings. At [M/C/C](#), our social media posts follow the "Rule of Thirds." Our philosophy is that content should be one-third promotional, one-third educational and one-third cultural. This means you should post some content about what you offer, provide links/videos to content that educates users about a topic and share content that engages and interests users.

These days, people don't want to be marketed to – they want to be engaged with and they want companies to care about them. In order for your brand to succeed in the long term, you must start making strides now to becoming a communicator that meets the needs and wants of your audience.

Remember, you can always measure success by ROI, but sometimes it's the things you can't measure (i.e. emotional connections you make between consumers and your brand) that make the most impact.

What brands would you consider to be good listeners and authentic communicators?

***About the Author:** As an Account Executive at M/C/C, Misti aligns agency resources in the best ways to help our clients reach their business objectives. She works with clients*

*closely and daily and collaborates with various M/C/C teams to ensure successfully executed deliverables. A summa cum laude graduate of Sam Houston State University, Misti earned her Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations and Advertising with a minor in Marketing. She spends her free time cooking, working out, enjoying friends and family, binge-watching TV shows and cuddling her two cats.*