



OPINION >

# The power of honesty in advertising and why your brand should flaunt its flaws

By Richard Shotton

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Planning to move house? Here's a bargain you might want to look at from estate agent, Roy Brooks:

*"Wanted: Someone with taste, means and a stomach strong enough to buy this erstwhile house of ill-repute in Pimlico. It is untouched by the 20th century as far as conveniences for even the basic human decencies are concerned. Although it reeks of damp or worse, the*

*plaster is coming off the walls and daylight peeps through a hole in the roof, it is still habitable judging by the bed of rags, fag ends and empty bottles in one corner. Plenty of scope for the socially aspiring to express their decorative taste and get their abode in The Glossy, and nothing to stop them putting Westminster on their notepaper. Comprises 10 rather unpleasant rooms with slimy back yard, 4,650 Freehold. Torted up, these houses make 15,000."*

This is typical of Roy Brooks' style. In another ad he honestly appraised the stairs in a house for sale:

*"A lightly built member of our staff negotiated the basement stair, but our Mr Halstead went crashing through."*

Nor were buyers spared:

*"WE HAVE A RATHER REPULSIVE OLD MAN who with his child-wife, are looking for an elegant town res. pref Belgravia...Price not important but must be realistic as he has, at least, his head screwed on the right way..."*

Brooks' bravado paid off. His unique style earned untold levels of publicity in the 1960s: readers of the Sunday papers made a habit of seeking out his ads and he was regularly invited onto TV chat shows.

In the process it earned Rolls-Royce-driving Roy a fortune.

### **Admitting weakness has worked wonders for many brands**

Brooks' tactics aren't just an interesting quirk. They are extreme examples of the power of admitting a weakness when advertising a product. A toned down series of admissions can be profitably applied by mainstream brands.

In fact, many of the world's most successful campaigns have already done so. Think of 'Lemon', the iconic VW ad by Bill Bernbach, which gloried in the ugliness and small size of the Beetle.



## Lemon.

## Think small.

This Volkswagen missed the boat. The chrome strip on the glove compartment is blentished and must be replaced. Chances are you wouldn't have noticed it; Inspector Kurt Knauer did. There are 3,389 men at our Wolfsburg factory with only one job: to inspect Volkswagens at each stage of production. 13,000 Volkswagens are produced daily; there are more inspectors

than cars.) Every shock absorber is tested (spot checking won't do), every windshield is scanned. VWs have been rejected for surface scratches barely visible to the eye. Final inspection is really something! VW inspectors run each car off the line onto the Funktionsprüfstand (car test stand), take up 189 check points, gun ahead to the automatic

break stand, and say "no" to one VW out of fifty. This preoccupation with detail means the VW lasts longer and requires less maintenance, by and large, than other cars. (It also means a used VW depreciates less than any other car.) We pluck the lemons; you get the plums.



Our little car isn't so much of a novelty any more. A couple of dozen college kids don't try to squeeze inside it. The guy at the gas station doesn't ask where the gas goes. Nobody even stares at our shape. In fact, some people who drive our little

silver don't even think 32 miles to the gallon is going any great guns. Or using five pints of oil instead of five quarts. Or never needing anti-freeze. Or racking up 40,000 miles on a set of tires. That's because once you get used to

some of our economies, you don't even think about them any more. Except when you squeeze into a small parking spot. Or renew your small insurance. Or pay a small repair bill. Or trade in your old VW for a new one. Think it over.



Or the classic Bernbach campaign for Avis which admitted that it wasn't the market leader.



# **Avis is only No.2 in rent a cars. So why go with us?**



**We try damned hard.  
(When you're not the biggest,  
you have to.)**

**We just can't afford dirty ash-  
trays. Or half-empty gas tanks. Or  
worn wipers. Or unwashed cars.  
Or low tires. Or anything less than  
seat-adjusters that adjust. Heaters that heat. Defrost-  
ers that defrost.**

**Obviously, the thing we try hardest for is just to be  
nice. To start you outright with a new car, like a lively,  
super-torque Ford, and a pleasant smile. To know, say,  
where you get a good pastrami sandwich in Duluth.**

**Why?**

**Because we can't afford to take you for granted.**

**Go with us next time.**

**The line at our counter is shorter.**

Then there's Frank Lowe's campaign for Stella Artois which revelled in its high price under the strapline 'Reassuringly Expensive'.



# “My shout, he whispered.”



Every silver lining has a cloud.  
There you are, in the midst of convivial company,  
laughing, joking, holding forth on the great issues of  
the day and pausing only to savour your Stella Artois.  
And then the awful truth dawns.  
It will soon be your turn to stand a round.  
And not just any round, mark you: a round of  
Stella Artois, no less.  
The beer that is brewed with the most fragrant  
of female hops.  
The beer that is malted with the choicest of  
Europe's barley.  
The beer that is matured not for the usual meagre  
21 days, but for 6 long weeks.  
The beer that, as a consequence, is eye-wateringly  
expensive.  
If we are to maintain Stella's reputation for quality  
there is, alas, nothing we can do to reduce the quantity  
of money you must part with.  
We can, however, offer you a sound piece of advice:  
When it is your turn in the chair, make sure you  
are sitting down.

Stella Artois. Reassuringly expensive. 

Guinness and AMV publicised the slowness of the pour with 'Good things come to those who wait'. Cream cakes alluded to their high calorific content with 'Naughty but Nice'. (Incidentally, that strap-line was written by Salman Rushdie.)

And my favourite, the ads for the budget hotel chain Hans Brinker hotel which boasted of its low standards.



It goes on and on. It reads like a list of the greatest ads ever.

## **Beyond anecdotal evidence**

The evidence for the power of admitting a flaw is not limited to the long list of award winning case studies. There's academic evidence too.

Northwestern University analysed 111,460 product reviews and linked ratings to probability of purchasing. Likelihood to purchase did not peak with perfect scores but at 4.2 - 4.5 out of 5. The academics believed that perfect ratings had less impact because they were seen as too good to be true.

## **So why do imperfections make products more appealing?**

Admitting weakness is a tangible demonstration of honesty and, therefore, makes other claims more believable. Hans Brinker might be a dive but, by God, you'd have a good time. Guinness may take longer to pour but boy, it's worth it. Avis might not have the most sales but that makes it hungrier to keep you happy.

Everyone assumes that brands are fallible, so if a brand is open about its failings it can persuade consumers that its weaknesses lie in inconsequential areas. This theory partly explains the success of budget airlines. At launch they openly admitted that the trade-off for cheap prices was compromised service: no reservations and a pitiful luggage allowance. If

they hadn't admitted as much, consumers may have assumed the cost-cutting had come at the expense of safety.

## If admitting flaws is a good tactic, then why isn't applied more regularly?

The rarity is explained by the principal-agent problem. A theory first suggested by Stephen Ross, professor of finance at the MIT Sloan School of Management. He suggested that there is often a divergence between the interest of the principal in a company, the shareholders, and the agent, the staff.

So what is in the interest of the brand, the principal, is not in the interest of the marketing manager, the agent. If the campaign flops it might be the end of the brand manager's career. Imagine explaining to the CEO as sales dive that the key message of your campaign was that the brand was expensive. Even referencing the Northwestern's research might not save you.

For those interested in safe career progression this may seem a bit risky. However, if you want the best chance of growing your brand then flaunt your flaws. The principal-agent problem ensures it will always be a distinctive approach.

Counter-intuitively, the perfect strategy is to admit brand imperfection.

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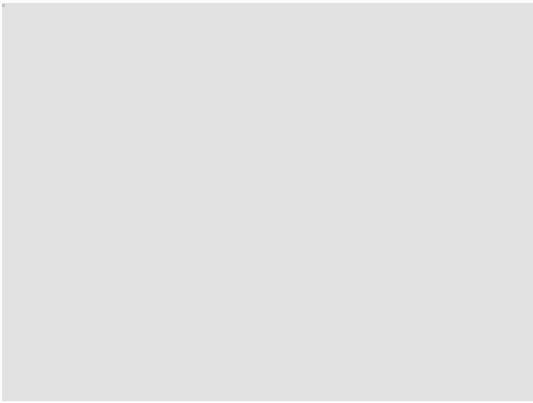
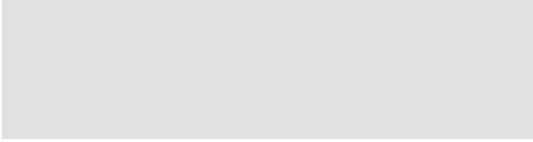


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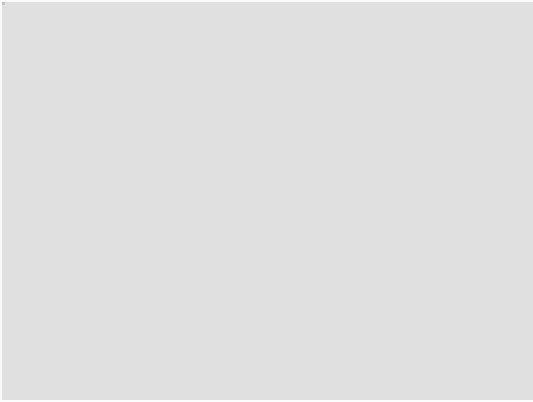
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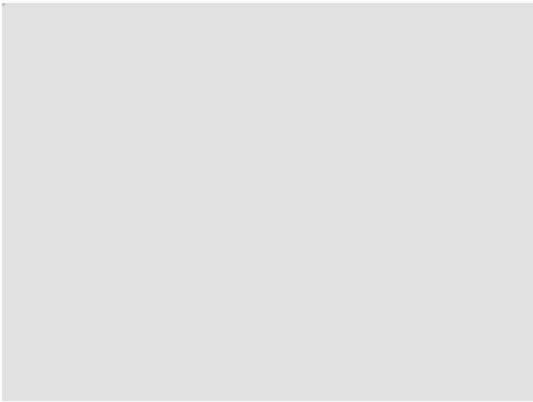




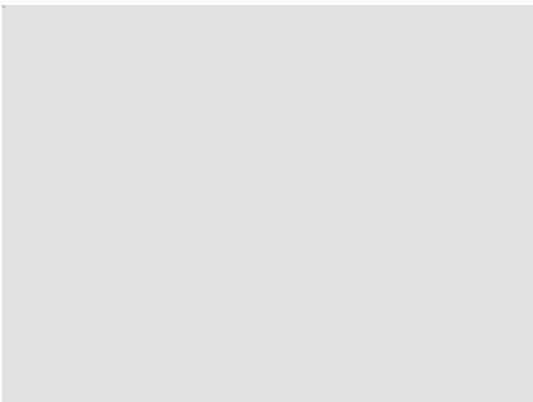
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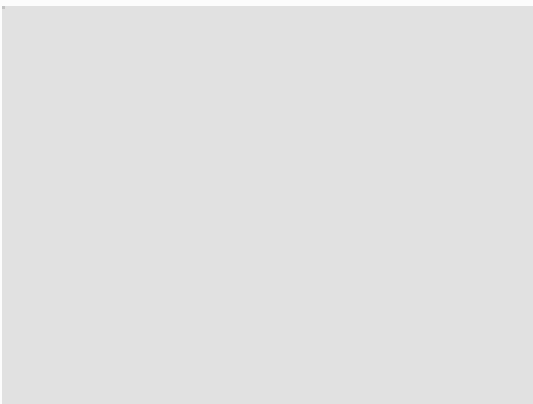
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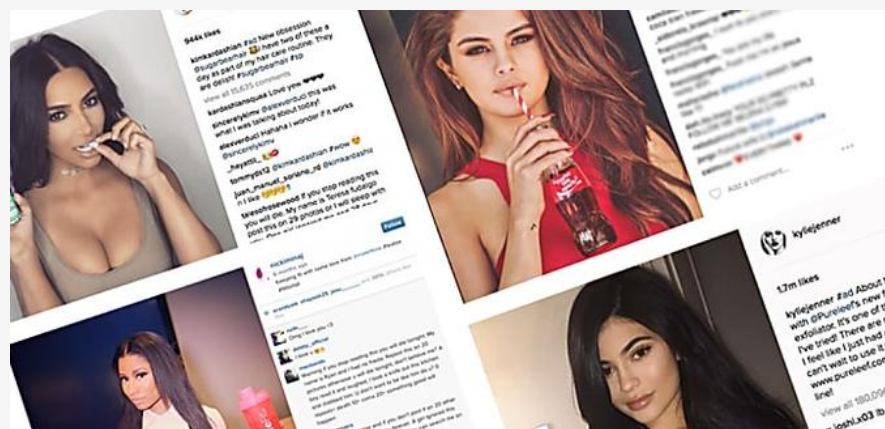


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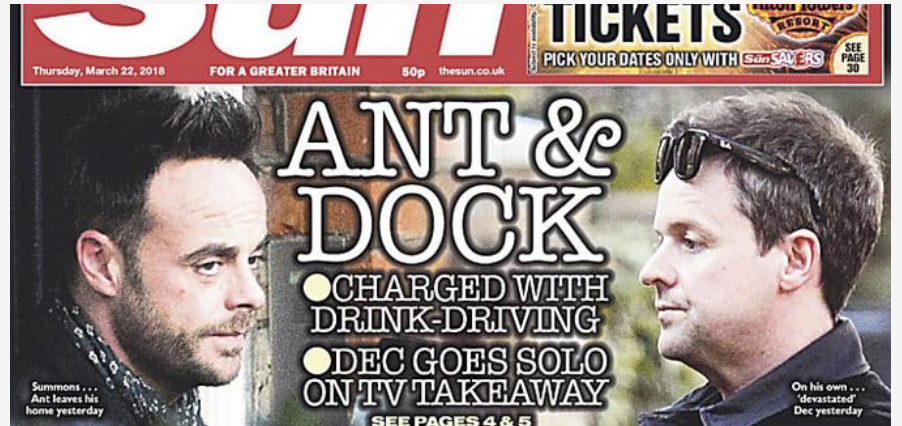
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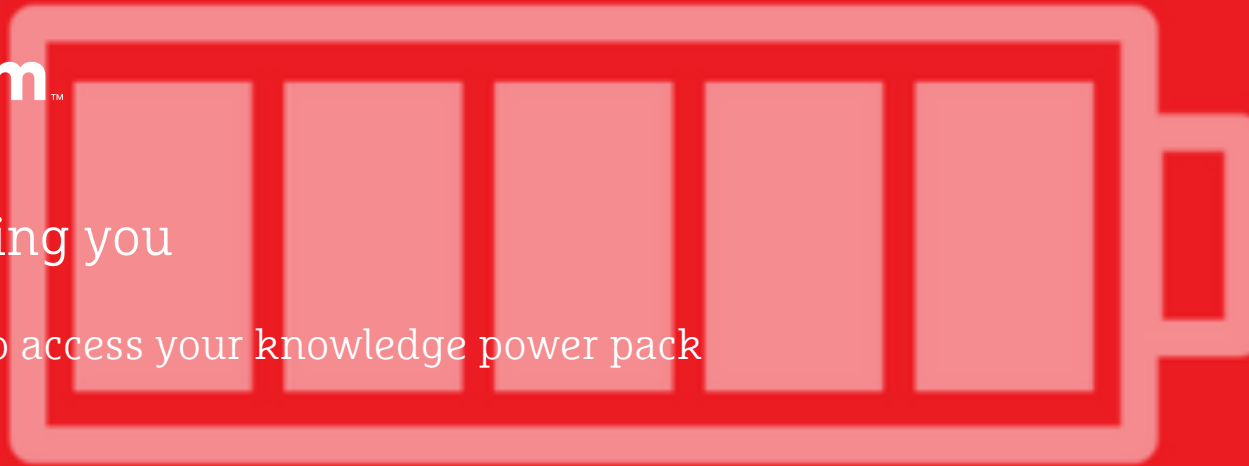
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