

Authenticating Real: A Rationale and Model for Auditing Corporate Authenticity

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This paper explores the convergence of two business trends: Authenticity and Sustainability. Both have become marketing and media darlings. And both can be elusive to define, but “when know it when we see it.” If they are connected, how? And can measuring and monitoring one through the other reveal opportunities to improve business performance, generate disruptive business models and strengthen collaborations? To understand the interplay between authenticity and sustainability, this paper deconstructs cultural and business artefacts [product design, social entrepreneurial motifs [the passion principle, do no evil], marketing, pop-culture, politics] as way to understand the two trends. It is equal parts cultural critique of the semblances of authenticity and sustainability in business, and practical business case studies. For the latter, it presents findings from two recent consulting projects for two very different international corporations [Interface and VANS], each at different stages of their journey towards sustainability. The first case study reveals an 18-month learning project at Interface to understand what impact their 15-year history with sustainability has had on their employees in Thailand, Australia, Ireland, Netherlands, and the United States. We set out to learn how these employees innovate and practice sustainability both in and outside of work. And using documentary filmmaking as a research tool, we uncovered the stories behind the data of sustainability. The project asked: Has sustainability opened up product and process innovation? Will authentic corporate sustainability bleed into employee’s lives? If so, what does it look like, and what is the impact to the business and community? The second case study reveals a global brand’s newly minted strategic focus on sustainability. As a corporate culture that thrives on irreverence and innovation, VANS is perhaps best known for its prowess in the skate-boarding community. VANS knew that any new sustainability platform would need to be born out of an authentic approach or risk being viewed as corporate lip service. Our process of cross-departmental collaboration and deep cultural understanding resulted in bottom up design and top down support for this new focus. The results were surprisingly honest. The primary take away from this paper is a new audit protocol to be used by corporations to authenticate authenticity in their operations and marketing. Performing this “Authenticity Audit” reveals “Authenticity Gaps” where innovation opportunities, business risks, and inefficiencies are hiding under veiled misalignment between corporate culture, norms, practices and goals. It posits that sustainability can often serve as a kind of noble distraction when not authentically aligned with the business. On the other hand, real authenticity manifests itself through faster decision making, reduced marketing expenses, greater innovation, less internal competition for resources, stronger collaborations, a more resilient culture, and more effective sustainability programs. It offers alignment across functional groups which create a kind of lubricant to move faster towards sustainability.