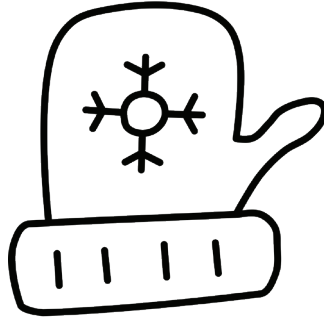


Chapter 9



LOVABLE IMPERFECTION

(ORIGINALLY CURATED 2014)



What's the Non-Obvious Trend?

As people seek out more personal and human experiences, brands and creators intentionally focus on using personality, quirkiness and intentional imperfections to make their products and experiences more human, authentic and desirable.

When the Swedish Tourist Association wanted to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the country's abolishment of censorship last year, the group landed on a unique idea. To illustrate the government's dedication to transparency, they created a phone number for the country – and invited regular Swedes to volunteer to answer phone calls.

The entire campaign was simply known as “The Swedish Number” and on April 6th, 2016 the phone line went live with an open invitation for anyone around the world to call. Predictably, some of the first people to call were curious journalists looking to see if it was real and exactly

how it worked so they could write about it. The resulting stories said much about the idea, execution and vision behind the campaign ... and about the country itself.

One reporter called and coincidentally ended up speaking with another reporter *from* Sweden who was on the other end also trying out the service with the intent of writing about it. Another writer spoke with a student in Sweden who was originally from Uganda and offered an outsider's view of the country.

In each case – the country's experiment in radical transparency proved the point that Sweden was a place for authentic uncensored self-expression. Both de facto Ambassadors admitted to having had no training, no instructions and no rules to follow. They just signed up online, picked a time and they were part of the program.

The fact that it happened to be Sweden trying this unique experiment should not have been that surprising.

The country had already made waves four years earlier with its bold attempt at transparency on Twitter by turning over control of the country's @sweden Twitter account to a new Swedish citizen every day. That initiative, called "Curators of Sweden" had its share of issues, but still continues today – featuring a new Swede every week.

What the Swedish Tourist Association knows is a lesson that many other brands, governments, associations and people are discovering ... that there is a beauty in having flaws and being willing to share them.

This is the essence of the *Lovable Unperfection* trend – where a form of radical transparency allows people and organizations to share their truthful story along with flaws and earn trust specifically for that reason.

A Short History Of Unperfection

Avid readers of my previous trend reports may notice that this is a trend that I featured in various ways for two consecutive years – the only such trend in my seven years of predictions.

In 2014 I called this trend *Lovable Imperfection*. In 2015 I named a similar trend *Unperfection*. The difference between them at that point was that the first year was mainly focused on connecting with people

while the second year applied more to businesses trying to be “strategically imperfect” through making their products or services purposefully flawed.

When it focused on people – the examples I used were well known villain characters from popular films or television like Walter White in *Breaking Bad* or Gru in *Despicable Me*.

In the year after – my description of the trend evolved to also describe brands creating manufactured products like Oscar Meyer sandwich meats, or imperfect brands like Ugg Boots or Crocs which have ardent fans despite the look of their footwear.

This year, I have put the two together to make *Lovable Unperfection*. But why include a trend that has already been covered in two previous trend reports once again – and what’s different? The truth is, I hesitated to include it again ... but the more I talked about the trend at conferences and had roundtable discussions with executives on the topic – the more convinced I became to include it once more.

It’s not the same as it was, though. The most powerful companies and leaders today use the right process to exhibit a radical form of authenticity that endears them to their audiences. This usually involves sharing vulnerability and being willing to fail publicly in order to build trust. Let’s take a look at a few examples of this in action.

Behind The Scenes Video

When Fast Food chain Wendy’s wanted to show customers where the ingredients in its salad come from, the brand put a GoPro camera on a head of lettuce and tracked its progress from the farm to the restaurant. The resulting video was posted on YouTube and watched over 7 million times.

A few years earlier when McDonald’s was asked on Twitter why the burgers in their ads rarely resembled the ones served to customers, Canadian marketing manager Hope Bagozzi created a YouTube video showing what a photo shoot for McDonald’s is really like. The three and a half minute video has been viewed more than 11 million times so far.

Over the past year, brands from automotive manufacturers to global fashion labels are all creating their own versions of videos to take people

behind the scenes for how they make the things we buy. Many of them use raw unedited footage to exhibit a truthful unfiltered side that only rarely comes out.

In entertainment, this is the same model that martial arts star Jackie Chan used for more than two decades to build his audience. At the end of each of his films, there are a series of outtake of him attempting and failing the stunts from his film. Those outtakes endear him, show his daring personality and make him more human.

And then there is the example of the most confusingly honest hotel in the world – which has been winning for over a decade by promoting the one thing no other hotel would.

Hans Brinker Budget Hotel

Imagine for a moment if you are the marketing director in charge of a considerably seedy backpacker hotel in Amsterdam. The property you are responsible for promoting is so spartan that most frills people might expect at even a backpacker style accommodation are missing.

If you were like most travel marketers, you might decide to find a great photographer with a very wide angle lens and hope for the best. Then you might focus your marketing on some other angle, such as cost or location.

For Hans Brinker Budget Hotel in Amsterdam, the right strategy ended up being exactly the opposite: embrace their awfulness and talk about it honestly. For more than 15 years, the hotel has been promoting itself as the “worst hotel in the world.”

The brand advertising features unapologies like “sorry for being excellent at losing your luggage,” and “sorry for being the best in ignoring your complaints.” Another ad promises that staying there will “improve your immune system,” due to the hotel’s ambient slovenliness. When the brand opened a second location in Lisbon, the taglines for the new property promised the “same lack of social skills, different accent.”

As anyone who has ever worked on promoting a destination or travel property knows, sometimes expectations can set you up for failure. Frequent fliers expect to be upgraded to a seat they didn’t pay for, and then

get angry when they are not. Patrons of luxury hotels expect perfection, and often feel justified to complain about any little thing, no matter how small. The unusual solution, reasoned Hans Brinker's agency KesselsKramer when first proposing the campaign, was to lower expectations to a point where people could no longer be disappointed. Thus the concept of the "worst hotel in the world" was born.

The hotel uses innovative posters and direct marketing to promote their "experience" to their target audience of young backpackers. After all, what twenty-something wouldn't want to return home to boast to their friends and family that they stayed in the worst hotel in the world while in Amsterdam?

The campaign has turned the property's biggest negative attribute into the only reason for people to stay. And it has worked, as the hotel is routinely full and raved about on social media (for their marketing, not so much for the experience). Their success has even led to a coffee table book featuring over a decade of their entertaining advertising.

What's the lesson in this? Sometimes an extreme form of honesty and a healthy dose of *Lovable Unperfection* can be the ultimate competitive advantage.

Why It Matters:

We no longer live in a world where everyone feels the necessity to always strive for perfection. In examples from behind the scenes videos to boldly talking about a pitiful hotel experience, this idea of making purposefully flawed products, services and experiences as a way to make them unique and desirable is gaining popularity. What it means for all of us is that the emotional and personal aspects of an experience that make it memorable may be the exact same ones that might previously have been considered imperfect. The challenge for any of us will be to let unperfection moments exist and delight customers with them instead of desperately trying to remove them.

How To Use This Trend:

- ✓ **Embrace your “flaws”** – For listeners of National Public Radio, Diane Rehm has one of the most easily recognizable voices on air. Her voice is the byproduct of her long struggle with a neurological condition known as spasmodic dysphonia, which affects the tone of her voice. Yet Rehm’s flawed voice is part of her personality and charm, and it helps her stand out. Amongst a sea of perfect altos reading the news, her voice offers something different, and millions of loyal listeners reward her for it with their attention.
- ✓ **Flawed is different than broken** – It may be tempting to see this trend as permission to do things badly. That would be a mistake. The power of *Lovable Unperfection* does not come from refusing to fix broken things or offering a substandard experience or product. Even the Hans Brinker actually offers working plumbing and a real bed to sleep in, despite what their ads say. If you have something that’s broken, you need to fix it. But being strategically flawed – that can help you stand out in an unexpected way.
- ✓ **Make flaws a selling point** - Since 2015 Walmart has had a program to sell “ugly” fruits and vegetables in a bid to reduce food wastage – including weather-damaged apples and “Spuglies” (misshapen and smaller potatoes). Furniture salesmen have long described distinctive wood textures as unique and valuable rather than flawed. This same tactic might work for your brand as well.