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THE quest for brand authenticity among marketers has become akin to the search for the Holy Grail – a fool’s errand that ends in frustration. Authenticity is a subject that is endlessly debated, poorly defined and universally desired. A 2014 study by public relations firm Cohn & Wolfe cites three key characteristics tied to brands that are authentic. It includes “reliability”, “respectfulness” and “reality”.

In his book, *Start with the Future and Work Back: A Heritage Management Manifesto*, author Bruce Weindruch and chief executive officer of The History Factory outlines ways in which the world’s best organisations are tapping into their own unique inventory of experiences – their heritage – as a means of telling an authentic brand story.

Heritage management enables companies to tap into the abundant wellspring of authentic stories that lie within every organisation’s history. It can communicate an authentic brand story, unify distinct organisational cultures in the midst of a merger, or tell an old story in a new way to captivate and inspire employees.

Weindruch offers tips about ways past behaviour can be the best predictor of the future, and how heritage can be a useful tool in reassuring employees during times of stress that their company successfully overcame similar challenges in its past, and can do so again.

Heritage can also be a powerful mirror that reflects the truth about an organisation’s track record on diversity, or whether its customer-first positioning is simply a slogan or part of its DNA.

EVEN START-UPS HAVE HISTORY TO BE MINED

In some cases, an organisation’s heritage inventory spans hundreds of years, as is the case with The Hartford Insurance Company whose roots go back to 1810. In others, such as with a hedge fund, it may only go back two decades.

And at a Silicon Valley unicorn company (where the arc of history is short), decisions made last week are part of that organisation’s unique and authentic brand narrative and heritage. With today’s accelerating pace of business change, fast-moving companies like Tesla, PayPal and Amazon have already made history, disrupting longstanding industries such as automotive, payment services and retail.

CORPORATE STORYTELLING AND HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

WHY DO SOME BRANDS APPEAR SO MUCH MORE AUTHENTIC THAN OTHERS?



REACHING BACK INTO YOUR ARCHIVE CAN SUPPORT TODAY’S REPUTATIONAL CLAIMS

Another way to preserve heritage is to build an archive that can be used to offer indisputable evidence that the image you’re trying to project, the values you espouse, and the reputation you defend are not only legitimate, but also completely warranted.

You want to demonstrate that you’re an innovative company? Or that you’ve been at the forefront of environmental preservation over the course of your history? Well, often the proof can be found within your own archival assets, which can then be repurposed to validate your claims.

THE POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN STORYTELLING

Among the best chroniclers of any organisation’s story narrative are the men and women who have worked there over the years. Oral histories derived from current employees and retirees are a powerful way to gather context about important periods of historical change within any organisation.

Nothing will get a group of employees more engaged or emotionally connected to an organisation than hearing the authentic stories of a past leader, or even a previously unsung hero (a rank-and-file



employee) who made a unique contribution that bent the curve of history, shaping the organisation of today.

WHY ANNIVERSARIES MATTER

In a world where many businesses fail within their first five years, commemorating a significant anniversary represents another powerful form of heritage management that’s an authentic way to support your brand.

Huntington Bancshares, which celebrated its 150th year in 2016, was a case in point. Among the 200 oldest banks in the United States, the Columbus, Ohio-based Huntington used its sesquicentennial to engage its employees and other stakeholders around the stories embed-

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ded within its history.

It’s an inspiring example of how the men and women of Huntington and its predecessor banks, through grit and determination, built an organisation that could survive the Panic of 1893, the Panic of 1907, the Great Depression and the Great Recession of the past decade, and went on to become one of the largest banks in the Midwest.

This narrative of growth and success also links to the future, as the company later announced plans to buy FirstMerit Bank in a deal that would make Huntington the largest bank in Ohio, and an emerging contender in Chicago and Wisconsin.

IN A GIST

Today’s consumers and employees, especially Millennials, are looking for relationships with organisations that have a clear purpose and character.

The book offers useful case studies about ways in which leading organisations are embracing history as a means of defining (or in some cases, redefining) their brand so that authenticity becomes more than just a mantra.

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In 2014, president of The Inquiry Institute Marilee Adams, who was our guest on *The Leaderonomics Show* was so fascinated by the story of Leaderonomics that she turned the tables around and interviewed our co-founder Roshan Thiran on the genesis of Leaderonomics instead. Check out this interview at: bit.ly/LDRstoryvid

■ Kevin Kruse is a *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leadership expert. He is the founder of *The Kruse Group*. To engage with him, email us at editor@leaderonomics.com.

DO YOUR PEOPLE RECOGNISE THEIR STRENGTHS?

Let us help your employees understand what it takes to grow their leadership skills and bring positive impact to your business.

Our coaching experts are ready to journey with your organisation to discover and unlock hidden potential in your workforce.



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Email keatlim.chong@leaderonomics.com to find out more!