About Barkley
At Barkley, we take pride in future-proofing business models and modernizing iconic brands. However, we are more than an ad agency. We are integrated business partners who are analytic and innovative at the core, using data to drive marketing conversation and strategies. This culture of innovation allows us to partner with our clients to create the solutions of the future. Our emerging technology innovation practice has built and deployed new technologies that create more engagement with the savviest generation of consumers we’ve ever seen.

About FutureCast
FutureCast is a marketing consultancy that specializes in millennial trends and modern consumer behavior. We literally wrote the books on it. Marketing to Millennials and Millennials with Kids are top selling marketing books that have renovated businesses all over the world. We utilize our deep understanding of the Millennial Mindset® audience and a proprietary typing tool to help brands identify their unmet consumer needs across generations fueled by millennial cultural trends to unlock their greatest opportunities for activation and engagement.
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Defining Brand Authority .......................................................... 2

PART ONE
Where to Start ........................................................................... 3
  - Brand Ideas ........................................................................... 3
  - Unmet consumer needs ...................................................... 3
  - Cultural relevancy ............................................................... 4

PART TWO
Approaches to Establishing Brand Authority .............................. 4
  - Brand modernization approach — brand history .................. 4
  - Human approach — brand story ......................................... 6
  - Inside-out approach — brand model .................................... 7

PART THREE
Putting It All Together .............................................................. 8

PART FOUR
Connecting to Partnerships and Content .................................... 10
DEFINING BRAND AUTHORITY

For the past five years we have been studying millennials and modern consumer trends. From retail buying patterns to flavor preferences to how income differentiates cohorts of millennials, we have shared a wealth of information about how millennial consumers behave differently in our market today. However, one of the greatest impacts this generation of Millennial Mindset® consumers has is on the way marketing professionals communicate brand stories, messages, values and ideas through a fully integrated world. We uncovered the truth that social media marketing as we thought we knew it is dead and instead found that brands need to focus more on informative, interactive and engaging content as the key driver of millennial love and participation.

That’s a problem. Companies must think of content as an opportunity for the brand’s voice to live everywhere, even when the product or service isn’t front and center.

But, where does this content come from? How can we build relationships with millennials through different platforms? And, most importantly, how can we convey our messages in a way that makes sense and resonates with the most connected generation in the world today?

BRAND AUTHORITY FUELS POWERFUL CONTENT STRATEGIES

Brands create transactions with products or services, but they can create long-lasting relationships and even love with a powerful content strategy. Your Brand Authority is the framework for creating such content strategies and for creating relevant conversations with consumers, based on topics they care about and are willing to share. Brand Authority comes in many shapes and forms and is also often referenced as Editorial Authority. However, both terms accurately describe this core component of your entire business.

As the foundation of your overall communication strategy, your Brand Authority allows you to build the content pillars that will help you identify what opportunities exist to lead and participate in relevant conversations above and beyond your brand.

Since content is communication people “choose” to spend time with, we like to think of your Brand Authority as your brand’s magazine: when you look at the contents page, what are the articles inside? The key is relevance. The topics must be:

1. True to the brand
2. Good for business
3. Relevant to people and culture

The truth is, millennials pay more attention to a brand with a point of view beyond its products or services.

NINETY PERCENT OF MARKETERS SAY IT IS IMPORTANT TO HAVE A GREATER CONTENT STRATEGY IN PLACE, ACCORDING TO ECONSULTANCY. ONLY 38 PERCENT ACTUALLY HAVE ONE IMPLEMENTED.
Establishing your Brand Authority is not easy, and it is certainly not the first step in your communication strategy planning. Once you have completed these steps, your Brand Authority will fall into place, giving you opportunities to repeatedly prove your brand idea to your consumers and permission to share your brand story through multiple channels.

**Brand Idea**

Brand ideas are at the core of everything. The brand idea is a long-term proposition that drives everything your brand does. We define it as the North Star for your brand. It guides and inspires every action you take, internally and externally. Campaigns come and go, but the brand idea is meant to live for years.

Think Nike and “everyone is an athlete.” Axe, “irresistible attraction.” Dove, “real beauty is individual.” Or Dairy Queen, “Fan Food. Not Fast Food.”

Let’s dig into the Nike example.

Nike sells more than just shoes. It has built its brand around the core belief and behavior that “everyone is an athlete” and has proven that to be true time and time again. In alignment with this idea, Nike has created an entire ecosystem that supports athletes on their journey towards health and high performance, beyond just what they are wearing on their feet. This brand idea and aligning brand values have propelled Nike to the top ranks of loved millennial brands across the board. As a result, Nike historically outpaces its competitors.

**Unmet consumer needs**

Why do we love Netflix so much? Because we didn’t know we needed it until we had it. The best brands solve unmet consumer needs before they fully surface. Most consumers couldn’t have gone much beyond their dislike for late fees in articulating the problem with the corner video store; until Netflix solved it. As technology advanced, the company did, too because the brand idea was never “we rent DVDs by mail.” Having a bigger brand idea—“video entertainment anytime, anywhere”—enabled Netflix to move seamlessly into streaming, overcome some early setbacks, and take the brand global.

Let’s circle back to, Nike, a brand on the forefront of athletic innovation for decades. As one of the first companies to track steps through technology incorporated into shoes and integrated with user smartphones, Nike has been the leader in setting trends in the health innovation space. The questions that arise become “what exists today that we can make better?” and “what can we do to make people’s lives easier and more productive?”
Cultural relevancy
In order to create a great Brand Authority, you must first understand what cultural relevancy your brand has in the market and to your brand fans. If your audience does not have any equity in your brand, then they will likely not feel bad about leaving you as soon as the next best thing comes around. The goal is to determine where the overlap between your brand culture and consumer culture exists.

For example, students at Ohio State don’t love their team because they love Nike. However, they have developed a strong relationship and brand affinity for Nike because that is what their team wears and what is sold on campus. The overlap between consumer culture (school pride) and brand culture (Nike sponsorship) has created a culturally relevant partnership that allows Nike to have a voice with a new audience.

Once you have established your brand idea, consumer needs and cultural relevancy, you will have a much more robust view of your consumers, what they are looking for and on which platforms they are most active. Armed with this knowledge, you will be able to determine the relevant content pillars that are the base of your Brand Authority.

You need to work with the equity you have already established to figure out innovative ways of relaying your message. This isn’t about creating something new. It’s about understanding what credibility your brand has that makes you a leader and participant in different conversations.

There is no formula for the exact steps it takes to get there. Every brand is different. There are vastly different products, stakeholders, fans and messages. Instead of giving a list of detailed steps, here are the approaches and points of view we take to get started.

Brand modernization approach — brand history
One good way to think about Brand Authority is to pull insights from a brand’s historical roots: how can your brand equity become powerful unfair advantages? Smart brands lean into their historical relevancy to learn what has truly engaged their most loyal fans over a long period of time. The key is not to just look at last year or the year you were founded. Explore your entire history and invest your resources in truly understanding what it is about your brand that built long-term relationships—this should not be too different from your core brand truths. The question then becomes, “how do we make our history relevant in today’s society?”
For Dairy Queen (DQ) this meant reviewing the company’s 75-year history. Despite the differences in the DQ system over the years, each customer came to love his or her own DQ for many different reasons. The key insight was that people actually rooted for DQ and really couldn’t care less whether other fast food brands came or went. The brand idea became Fan Food. Not fast food. The brand was personal, not corporate. So, when it came time for DQ to pick its next fall flavor, DQ realized the decision was not up to the corporate office because the brand belongs to the fans. This led us to the foundation of our “hometown/smalltown” pillar in the DQ Brand Authority.

In the Dairy Queen Blizzard Battle, we skipped fall flavor clichés (we are as sick of pumpkin spice lattes as you are) and created a hometown rivalry between the Pumpkin Capital of the World (Caro, Michigan) and the Apple Capital of the World (Wenatchee, Washington), to promote the Pumpkin Pie and Apple Pie Blizzards. We seeded friendly mayoral “trash-talking” between the two towns much like you see in the World Series, and had the characters of the two towns rally the DQ nationwide fan base around one flavor. We didn’t promote the flavors; we promoted real-life characters in each town who loved the flavors. Ultimately, the idea was born from the combination of the Brand Idea and one of the powerful pillars from the Brand Authority: hometown/smalltown.

While each hometown DQ store embraces the things that make it different, we found one overarching similarity between every store, town and customer. For DQ fans, Dairy Queen means summer. So, we asked ourselves, “How do we make summer timeless?” This led to the development of our second Brand Authority pillar that allowed us to have conversations about more than just ice cream, but also about summer and what that means for each individual customer.

In our #SUMMERNOW campaign, DQ wanted to prove that, just like the brand itself, summer does not have to end. So, we went straight to the fans who needed summer the most—Boston’s Snow Removal Workers. These service men and women were on the front lines battling one of the most horrific winters to date so we decided they could use a little summer. We honored their service with a lifetime Blizzard pass and celebrated an early arrival to summer with the rest of our fan base.

Hometowns and Summer are only two pieces of the Brand Authority we established for Dairy Queen, but the concepts have allowed the brand to have a strong presence in conversations that genuinely matter to its fans.
Tapping into your historical relevancy is only one method to determine your Brand Authority. Another is what we like to call the human approach. Consumers today expect brands to be transparent and authentic and will not stand idly by if those requirements are not met. Only 49 percent of millennial consumers believe that global businesses operate in a transparent manner, according to Deloitte’s millennial research. This is due in large part to the fact that young adults today have never experienced a truly upward trending economy. They want to engage with brands they can trust and that operate in a way that mimics human behavior rather than corporate dishonesty.

If you approach your communication strategy in an automated way and simply adhere to traditional mass marketing techniques, you will miss the valuable one-on-one connections with each consumer that builds the trust they are seeking. The most inspired brands have quickly realized this new paradigm shift and are instead leveraging their Brand Authority to help guide them towards a more authentic, human approach to marketing. Millennials want to hear about things that really matter, not the fluff that used to define advertising.

Coca-Cola is famously known as the brand that “Opens Happiness.” With a Brand Authority inherently rooted in human emotion, Coca-Cola has successfully created a communication strategy that leverages and fuels human connection. The Share a Coke campaign has been one of the largest and most successful campaigns in Coca-Cola’s recent history, and it came to fruition because of one simple insight.

**CUSTOMERS WANTED TO BE TREATED LIKE A HUMAN—NOT LIKE A NUMBER ON THE BOTTOM LINE.**

The Share A Coke campaign was a solution to the problem. It created a new way for people to relate to the brand on a personal level, replacing the Coca-Cola branding with the brand of “you.” The campaign later encouraged fans to submit the names of people they wanted to share Cokes with, leveraging the desire many consumers have to take ownership of their brand experiences.

**How can you find the human side of your brand?**

1. **Embrace core brand values**
   Ask yourself, “What human values do you want to sponsor as a brand? And where does your brand fit most naturally in the spectrum of human emotion?” Increasing profit is not a core value. Neither is garnering more impressions nor higher conversation rates. Articulating and embracing brand values helps you tap into the true human emotion that correlates with your product or service.

2. **Ask your fans what really matters**
   Don’t assume you know what your fans like. Ask them. We live in an era where crowd sourcing is the norm. From new cereal to vacation destinations, Millennial Mindset® consumers are
not shy when it comes to asking the opinions of others.

As a brand that acts as a human, why not do the same thing? Find out what matters to your fans and use their responses to help establish your Brand Authority.

**Inside-out approach — brand model**
There are no longer average companies with great brands.

**Great companies are great brands.**

The beliefs, practices and business model that you embody internally are what become your brand’s baseline proof points.

The most salient, successful companies right now treat their business model and brand idea as one and the same. They’re simply thinking inside-out. The brand is everything.

One of the most notable millennial brands is TOMS shoes. When Blake Mycoskie, founder and chief shoe giver of TOMS, came up with the idea for the company, he wanted to create a sustainable for-profit business that was not reliant on donations. As a result, the one-for-one branded business model was created. Ultimately, the business model is the brand with the buy-one-get-one sales approach. This is not just a small, ‘do-good’ company; it is a successful global brand with a purpose based in values shared across a wide array of communities.

Essentially, this business model has directed the content and communication strategy for TOMS shoes. The company uses footwear as an avenue to discuss larger issues on an international scale. If this were any other company, however, consumers would not buy into it. But, because TOMS built itself around the core belief of improving people’s lives by providing sustainable footwear, it has credibility in conversations about international issues that may not make sense for other retail brands.

This inside-out approach keys in on the millennial demand for transparency from brands. The more millennials see behind the-scenes the more likely they are to buy in to your brand actions and messages.

However, this isn’t just applicable to philanthropic brands. One of the biggest value propositions of Zappos is ease and convenience. However, that proposition has been incorporated into the entire brand ecosystem. Employees are encouraged to work from home and a lateral internal work structure allows for cross-team integration at all levels. These concepts align with an inside-out business approach because Zappos can now prove it is committed to ease and convenience on a corporate level, not just in sales, and it relays that in its external communication strategy.
Similarly, for Spirit Airlines, this inside-out approach was the best possible opportunity to establish a Brand Authority that extends beyond just air travel and instead tapped into the idea of consumer control. After all, being transparent about pricing structure allowed consumers to understand WHY Spirit does the things it does and take better control of their travel costs. So, Spirit rebranded its a-la-carte, low-cost price model as the Bare Fare to quickly educate consumers about what they got with their ticket. We developed a four-part curriculum to teach people a new way to fly—the Spirit Way.

Without a functional, inside-out framework and a Brand Authority that supports it, your brand means nothing to millennials. And, without capturing the millennial market, you’ll never amass the army of brand advocates you need to partake of the nearly $200 billion in millennial-driven sales each year.

The key is to remember that this must be an authentic stance that your brand embraces in its entirety, not just on the surface.

As the framework of your content and overall communication strategy, your Brand Authority informs the content pillars that align with your brand idea and allow you to prove how you will solve unmet consumer needs and what relevancy your brand has in the market.

Remember, your Brand Authority is your brand’s magazine. You have your audience, you have an established purpose, now you just have to prove that purpose with the content you publish. However, you can’t just keep talking about your products or services.

Let’s go back to Nike. If you were to open Nike’s magazine, you wouldn’t see a picture of a shoe. You would see a young woman bent over catching her breath after running her first marathon. The point is that if all Nike talked about were shoes, readers would lose interest. Your Brand Authority lies in what your audience wants to read about, what they find relevant.

THE GREAT ADVERTISING PIONEER HOWARD GOSSAGE ONCE SAID, “PEOPLE READ WHAT’S INTERESTING TO THEM, AND SOMETIMES IT’S ADVERTISING”.

This is foundational to Brand Authority. Understanding and developing your Brand Authority gives you an
opportunity to engage, comment and create content that will propel your brand into the hearts and minds of the people with whom you wish to connect.

Having a strong Brand Authority also gives you the tools you need to identify the right conversations where you can add value. **This is entirely different from the conversations you own.**

Marketers more often than not have a strong desire to be the first ones to the party—to set trends or be the first to comment on something. However, there is a wealth of power in determining the right conversations that already exist, where your brand can have a voice. Owning the space is smart, but knowing when to own versus when to invest is genius.

Ultimately, adding to the conversation in real-time does not necessarily mean it is the right time. Investing in relevant conversations to your Brand Authority and focusing on a higher level of quality rather than quantity will allow you to tap into influential partnerships with a stronger call to participate (CTP) rather than simply a call to action (CTA).

Millennials value co-creation and co-ownership. As digital natives, they have grown up in an age where brands are more accessible and secrets are harder to keep. Brands that include millennials in the creation process and invite them to participate with the brand rather than just telling them what to do have a greater chance of earning coveted millennial love. And once they engage through participation, they are much more likely to build equity in your brand.

That equity then leads to stronger affinity and greater likelihood of purchase and long-term investment. Instead of expecting consumers to jump right in and buy into your message, you must invest your resources into establishing the right content pillars that make the most sense to both your brand culture and consumer culture.

For example, would you go anywhere other than Wendy’s to dip a French fry in a chocolate shake? Certainly not, because that is part of what makes Wendy’s, Wendy’s. The best performing piece of content ever produced by Wendy’s was simply one French fry being dipped into a chocolate frosty. Why did this perform so well? Because every Wendy’s fan could relate. They had equity in the idea, and Wendy’s is the only brand that has the authority to take that action.

However, when you begin to invest in conversations that do not align with your Brand Authority, you will quickly open yourself up to backlash and negative responses. Remember, your Brand Authority is essentially a mirror image of reality not just a mere image that you want to attach to your brand.
Starbucks was the focus of a major controversy when it released its “Race Together” campaign. The Seattle-based coffee shop encouraged baristas to write the phrase #racetogether on coffee cups in order to inspire their customers to have deeper conversations about racial issues. What seemed like a positive move in the right direction garnered extremely negative sentiments in the Twittersphere.

“The campaign has drawn sharp criticism online, with many commenting on the company’s lack of diversity in hiring and whether employees are equipped to engage in these discussions, among other issues,” according to the L.A. Times.

Consumers were quick to voice their opinions on Twitter, claiming Starbucks (a company whose leadership team is predominately white male) had no business investing in these types of conversations. Ultimately, Starbucks had established all the background pieces (purpose, needs and relevancy), but made a claim without the necessary proof. Because diversity was not a core value imbedded into the infrastructure, the second the company began pointing fingers externally without first embracing their own recommendations, it opened itself up to backlash.

Although Starbucks is, and will continue to be, a top-loved millennial brand, this campaign extended beyond its Brand Authority. This is a perfect example of how a brand that pushes its authority too far and structures itself from the outside-in rather than inside-out risks losing it major fans.

Millennials expect you to prove your Brand Authority. That proof lies within the content you publish and the actions your brand makes. Some brands take the approach: we’ll just talk about everything. Unfortunately, talking about everything makes you noise instead of a trusted ally. The best brands are spending time establishing their Brand Authority to determine the right conversations to lead and where opportunities exist to create content that is relevant to consumer culture.

Notice, content is not what you publish online and in print; rather, it is any form of communication that consumers interact with. If you post a video to your Youtube channel or status update on your Facebook page, is not content until someone interacts with it through genuine engagement.

Brand Authority tells you which cultural conversations your fans care about. From there, you can build an ecosystem of brand actions and messages that inspire interaction and engagement.

Red Bull has excelled in creating a brand platform that taps into the genuine desires and cultural values of its brand fans. It did this by following two cardinal rules:

1. Understand your audience
2. Don’t sell a product, sell an idea
Red Bull’s core brand value is “giving wings to people and ideas.” What started out as just an energy drink has extended into the space of shared experiences through consumer empowerment. More than 69 percent of millennials consider themselves adventurous; another one in four millennials would rather pay money for an experience than for a product. Red Bull understands the leverage an energy drink has with an audience of adrenaline junkies.

So, instead of selling a product to its audience it has established its authority in the worlds of excitement and adventure.

Red Bull also does not rely on traditional advertising to oversell its message and products. Instead, user-generated content and event/experiential marketing campaigns are the biggest drivers of brand buzz. Red Bull has created a community of brand ambassadors who are evangelists for the brand, posting original content and spreading the word to their networks. Millennials are overwhelmingly the largest curators and creators of original content and trust user-generated content 50 percent more than branded content. When you align your Brand Authority with what your consumers are passionate about, you will build strong relationships that result in greater trust and more participation.

Let’s recap: your Brand Authority is not only a vital component of your overarching marketing strategy, but also your life-line to building meaningful partnerships with your consumers and loyal brand fans. It’s true that advertising must sell a product, but the larger truth is that modern brands have beliefs beyond their enterprise alone. This creates a huge opportunity for great brands to build a Brand Authority that allows them to sell their product by selling their belief system.

Millennials are a generation unlike any other. Their fluidity across both digital and physical channels keeps them constantly connected to each other, and they expect the same access to their favorite brands. Accessibility comes from being in the right place, at the right time, with the right message—and these things all stem from a strong and well thought out Brand Authority.

Your Brand Authority is one of the most valuable foundations of your brand. Without it, you risk losing not only your cultural relevancy, but also the most fundamental understanding of your consumers: who they are and what they really want to hear and interact with. Beginning to think about your Brand Authority through the different lenses of historical relevancy, humanization and an inside-out business model will enable you to begin building not only a great content strategy but also a greater capacity for relationship-building that will turn your consumers into genuine fans and brand partners.
To summarize, here are eight key points to remember:

1. **Center your Brand Authority on your core values and beliefs and consumer interests**
2. **Make sure your Brand Authority stems from your brand idea (you can’t do any of this without knowing who you are)**
3. **Embrace your past, present and future, and do not be tied down by real-time marketing—instead, focus on right-time marketing**
4. **Evaluate cultural trends and see if there is a fit**
5. **Explore opportunities for partnerships**
6. **Define the times when you want to own conversation versus when you want to invest in the conversation**
7. **Take a big stand**
8. **Court your fans and ask their opinions to fuel participation.**

In short, every time you’re tempted to act like a corporation, act like a friend instead. Brand Authority, ultimately, defines your relationships with the people who matter most to your brand.
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