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,
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. Tarted 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.
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 ashtrays. 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. Defrosters that defrost.

Obviously, the thing we try hardest for is just to be nice. To start you out right 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’.
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.

Richard Shotton is head of insight at ZenithOptimedia. He tweets @rshotton

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