

**Which brands mean what they say and say what they mean?**

Every brand has a story of some kind, and the brand is essentially the telling of that story. This can be trickier than it sounds because a story, by definition, has a beginning, a middle and an end. This is not necessarily a good construct for branding.

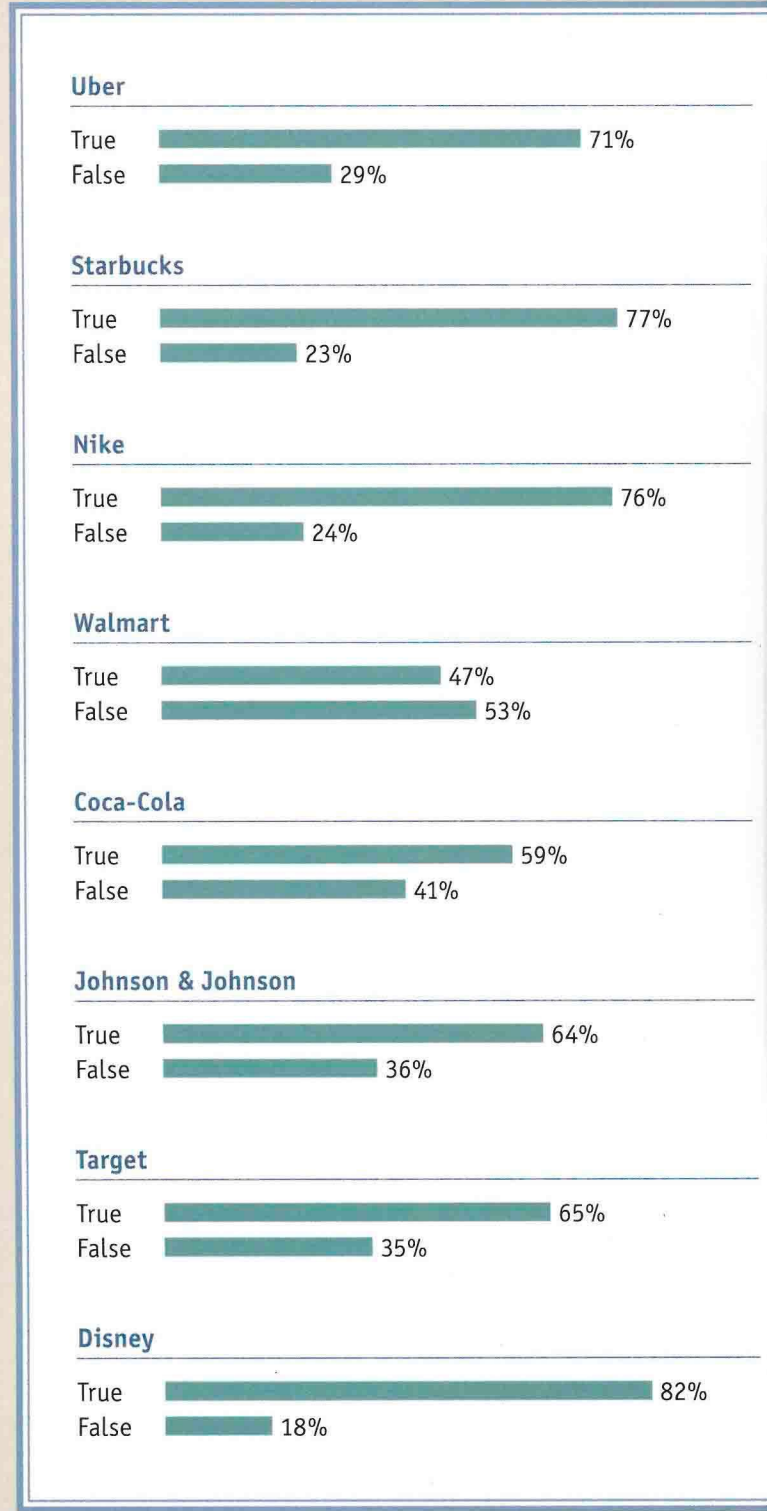
Most people either can't remember or have only the vaguest recollection of the beginning — the brand 'origin' story, as it's often called. Perhaps this is because so many brand stories start out the same way: one or two, or maybe three or four guys (usually) had an idea and hatched it on a kitchen table or workbench. The beginning also tends to be forgotten because it is often a relatively short passage in the story, set long ago and far away — although it typically sets forth an ultimate truth against which the brand's worth is tested over the rest of its life.

Further complicating matters, the story has no end! Or, if it does, it is an unhappy ending because it's over for the brand. Kaput. The upshot is that brands are endlessly suspended in the middle of the story, trying to remember the beginning and hoping it's not the end. It is not a comfortable place, and just about every brand at some point loses its way. This, of course, is another essential element of any story: conflict. Inevitably the brand, as hero, digs itself into a hole and then digs itself out...or not.

Whether it survives, and lives on in the middle of its story, ultimately is a question of how well it connects with its essential truth, the thing that made the brand a success in the first place. That is, its purpose. Then there's the paradox: Every great story is some mixture of fact and fiction. This is invariably true, but especially so in the brand experience. Features and benefits are the stuff of products and services. The magic of brands is in the myths they create — the stories that are not literally true, but that resonate as true. Myths are metaphors for the truth.

With this in mind, we fielded a simple

# True or




# r False

## Tesla

True  83%  
False  17%

## Airbnb

True  72%  
False  28%

## Budweiser

True  51%  
False  49%

## Apple

True  88%  
False  12%

## Google

True  85%  
False  15%

## Amazon

True  86%  
False  14%

## Costco

True  85%  
False  15%

## Facebook

True  52%  
False  48%

survey of *Hub* readers in which we asked respondents to evaluate two-dozen highly successful brands. Does their brand story ring true or false? It's another way of asking whether the brand is keeping its promise, or not.

The surprise ending is that all but one of the 24 brands passed the test. Walmart was under water, while Budweiser was in a 50-50 dead heat. Facebook came in at 52-48. Most of the others rang 'true' in a big way. As always, we invited respondents to explain their choices and this told a very different story. Readers unloaded, often with great passion and sometimes unvarnished anger, at how certain brands had let them down or otherwise betrayed their trust.

Much of the criticism centered on basic questions of price and value. Others were incensed over how some brands treat their employees, or how they, themselves, had been treated as customers. Sometimes they just didn't like the CEO. That the brand started out well but wandered off as it grew 'too big' was a common refrain. Many commented that they had no idea what the brand's story was, which may be most damning—or at least most telling—of all.

This strongly suggests that what matters is not the stories that brands tell us as much as it is the stories we tell about brands. This is one of those obvious truths that so often hides in plain sight. Sure, the advertising tells a story that people repeat; this was evident in some of the survey responses, as well. Yet, the narrative arc ultimately is supported not by what the brand says but by what it does, which is, of course, the very foundation of the brand experience.

A single word kept popping up to describe the brands that get it right. That word is "simplicity." Abraham Lincoln once said that no man had a sufficient memory to be a successful liar. Keeping that awkward spot in the middle of the story is down to remembering its purpose as a brand. That's as simple as it gets. The End. ■

Complete Results:  
[hubmagazine.com/true-false](http://hubmagazine.com/true-false)