



Ben Heslop

Remember that shock PR may backfire on you in the end

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Fake it until you make it: A sinister tale of deception or good PR?

The entrepreneurial journey, often romanticised as a glamorous pursuit of innovation and wealth, can sometimes veer into darker territory. As start ups strive to gain a foothold in the market, the temptation to bend the rules and cut corners can be overwhelming. We all know stories of people ordering things off professional looking websites only to receive lower than expected quality goods, or worse still nothing at all! While one is clearly theft, is the other great PR? Where is the line between offering a good deal and misleading a customer into a purchase they may regret?

I love listening to David Yelland and Simon Lewis on Radio 4's *When it Hits the Fan* and hearing the stories behind some of the big PR failures and successes but what should a business, especially a smaller local one do and not do to survive, appear relevant and professional in a tough market place? I look through some of the most common trends and ask is it worth it?

An often seen tactic is to exaggerate a company's progress to secure funding. Investors are drawn to companies with strong growth potential, and some entrepreneurs may embellish their achievements to attract capital. This can range from inflating user numbers to misrepresenting revenue figures.

While this might seem like a quick win, it can lead to serious consequences, including legal action and huge reputational damage. We have all seen the Dragons take apart a bold claim when it is pitched



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to them, they often smell a rat! This side of fake it until you make it obviously gets a big 'steer clear' from me!

My stance: Never lie about your business finances in any shape or form to others or to yourself!

Another questionable strategy is sensationalising your business to gain media attention. By crafting exaggerated narratives or making bold and sometimes controversial claims, entrepreneurs can generate a buzz and attract potential customers. However, this approach can backfire if the hype is not backed by reality. Negative press and customer backlash can quickly erode any gains made through such tactics. So, the old adage that there is 'no such thing as bad publicity' can be a highly risky approach. If you know your market well enough and have done your research, then you should know how to turn heads for all the right reasons.

My stance: Be present, consistent, engaging and well informed about your message and PR, shock value is a beast that can bite and is hard to return from!

Building a successful marketplace requires a critical mass of users on both sides of the equation. To attract early adopters, some companies resort to seeding the marketplace with fake users or activity on social media. This can create the illusion of a thriving community, but it can also lead to a decline in user engagement if the initial hype is not sustained by genuine activity.

Gone are the days where the number of followers on your TikTok, Instagram or Facebook mean much on their own. Engaged followers are the bedrock of your success and growth as they will be your biggest advocates. Numbers for numbers sake online can often turn these potential customers away from you and your product. I always imagine a physical shop that is filled to the door with customers just standing around doing nothing and you being the one trying to get to the till to make a purchase. You would very soon give up!

My stance: Work hard to grow your

following, lean into their support as it is far easier to sell to someone you already have as a customer and never chase the numbers.

Social proof is a powerful tool for building trust and credibility. To establish their legitimacy, some startups may fabricate customer testimonials or media coverage. While this can be effective in the short term, it can damage the company's reputation if the deception is uncovered. I have myself looked at a product reviews and sometimes it is very clear that what is a 'verified' customer review is bot-generated and makes alarm bells ring. I worked hard to have local users of my business review me on Google as this was and still is a huge tick in the 'authenticity' box both to the algorithms and the local populous.

My stance: A low number of real reviews will stand out clearly above a 1,000 one line multi-emoji bot responses! The customer is not that gullible in 2024 and can spot low level AI use!

So in my humble opinion, the good news is in the long run, honesty and transparency are often rewarded. Customers are increasingly discerning and value businesses that prioritise ethical practices and a true honest narrative. By building trust and credibility, companies can cultivate loyal customer bases and foster long-term relationships. This is never truer than on the local level. In my experience, Cumbrians really value local opinion. You can have all the hype and professional looking reviews and endorsements, but if a neighbour, nan or colleague says the service you offer is good, then it is golden.

Ultimately, the decision to 'fake it till you make it' in business is a personal one. While it may offer short-term benefits, it can have long-term consequences. By prioritising honesty, transparency, and ethical business practices, entrepreneurs and businesses can build sustainable and successful companies that stand the test of time.