The struggle for authenticity

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Assistant Professor of Management Cameron Verhaal discussed the unique challenges craft breweries face as they grow in a special presentation hosted by the Lepage Center on Feb. 19.

Cameron Verhaal, assistant professor of management at the Freeman School, recently visited The Shop at the Contemporary Arts Center to discuss how brands and businesses can deliver authenticity.

The Feb. 19 talk focused on the craft brewery scene and how notable players in the game have ensured they retain a “small brewery” image despite success and growth. This image, Verhaal explains, is key to the audience’s trusting the product and feeling more personally connected with the company.

To push this message home, Verhaal used the story of Rogue Ales. Rogue, now one of the 50 largest craft breweries in the country, continues to release new beers year after year despite many of them not selling well. The reason?

“They’re trying to project authenticity in the face of growth,” Verhaal said.

An important element of projecting authenticity, Verhaal said, is ensuring that a brand’s “front stage” matches its backstage. The front stage is what a brand tells its customers it is; the backstage is what the brand truly is. Just as people are told to be true to themselves, Verhaal said companies should do the same.

When Rogue strategically tells consumers it’s a craft business and backs it up with riskier, limited-production beer releases, this ensures that they are who they say they are. Even mass-production brewers like Samuel Adams tries to retain a crafty image with their slogan “Brewed Inefficiently Since 1984.”

This self-deprecating tagline is an entertaining deviance from the refined and elegant image many companies try to convey, but it also serves a direct purpose to foster camaraderie and a localized feeling. In an age of industrial standardization, when mass-production breweries fill thousands of bottles per day and affix perfectly angled labels, the idea of imperfection is comforting. When consumers see that slogan, they’re reminded of their own trials and errors. They’re transported to those countless summer nights grilling steaks and trying to get them just right.

Verhaal’s talk also highlighted another essential component of authenticity: show don’t tell.

“The point of what [Rogue] is trying to project when they do these things is they’re trying to tell you, ‘We care more about being innovative, being creative, pushing the boundary… more about doing these types of things than we do making money,’” Verhaal said.

Verhaal’s talk brought to light an increasingly important dimension to today’s branding. Whether through social media interaction or the release of limited edition maple bacon flavored beer, companies that can demonstrate authenticity through all layers of their business will reap the rewards. As bigger companies cling to mom-and-pop images, however, it remains to be seen how the barriers to entry for new businesses will be affected.