
Using storytelling to make a compelling marketing narrative

Whether you know it or not, storytelling isn't just the latest hot topic in marketing. Storytelling is and always has been the basis of great marketing since before it even had a name. A great story can make people feel happy or sad, inspire them to take action, explain a complex subject, rekindle waning interest or help make something more memorable. The best part is, it doesn't cost you anything to tell a great story — just be authentic.

1 Begin at the beginning

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So you're no Hemingway — but that's okay. Start by giving yourself a solid framework. Define your audience, the people to whom you are speaking. Then define your goals. In many cases this will involve spurring some kind of action, though not always. You may be trying to inform your audience, raise awareness, or simply make an emotional connection. All of these interactions can build brand value. Make a list of goals and zero in on which is the one that will be your story's focus.

Now that you have the book-ends, you can fill in the rest. Take as an example a basic story, a fairytale like “Little Red Riding Hood”. It has a main character (Red Riding Hood), who encounters a challenge (The Wolf), and the conflict ends in resolution



(they all live happily ever after — except the wolf). Your character —whether it’s fictional or taken from real life, Arthur the Space Dog or a personal story from your own experience — is a stand-in for your target audience.

These are the basic elements to every story: character, conflict, resolution. Once you have them, you can work out the details.

2 A practical example

Let’s work through a practical exercise. The product: cubicle walls. Exciting, right? Life’s not all go-karts and ice cream, so we may as well go for a challenge. Who’s the audience? Office managers, architects, interior designers, office furniture suppliers — in the broadest sense: people who are likely to make decisions about cubicle walls. Who’s your character? It could even be you. Do you have a personal story you can draw from? If you do, great, if not — try to think of something authentic. If it resonates with you, chances are it will for someone else as well.

Since you can’t actually tell me your scenario, I’ll set one. Let’s say you’re sitting at your desk, working on a presentation, or writing up a report, or doing something else... office-y. Your coworker is sitting, barely two feet away from you, snacking

on corn chips. And they've got a cold. And they're wearing socks with sandals.

You're trying to focus on your work, but with all the crunching, snorting, smacking, snuffling sounds (not to mention what this all looks like) it's not only impossible, you feel like your head is literally going to explode any second. Then, miraculously, out of the sky falls a single solitary cubicle wall.

Ah, blissful silence. You need cubicle walls for peace and productivity.

Character, conflict, resolution — all pointing towards your goal.

Now try this same exercise with a different product, a different audience, a different goal. Maybe you're raising awareness about an issue, or soliciting donations for a non-profit, or trying to get attendance for an event. Tell the story.

3 The medium is the message

Once you know what story you want to tell, you have to figure out how to make it work across the various media where you intend to distribute it. Telling your brand story via an Instagram post has different requirements from a billboard or a video. Particularly when you're trying to get across a narrative in a print ad or on social media, you often need a single image to do most of the heavy lifting, aided by little to no copy.

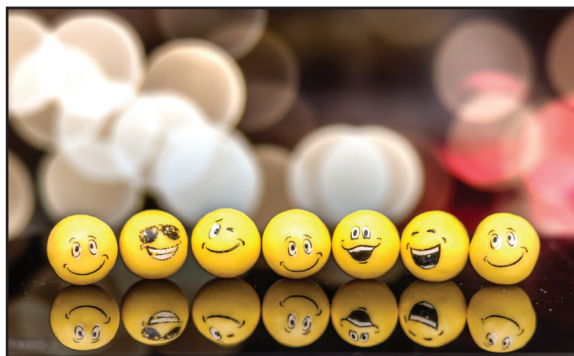
However you slice it, always keep your audience in mind. Tailor your message to be as universally relevant as possible, and as always: keep it simple.



4 This time, it's personal

Be vulnerable. Popular entertainment loves to set up superheroes and villains, but we all know real life isn't like that, and there's a tendency to resent anything that looks too perfect. When you can, use stories from your own personal experience, but make sure to show the warts — name your successes, but also include your failures, the places where you're trying to do better. This humanizes you and makes you, and your brand, more relatable. If you show you're willing to poke fun at yourself, to be embarrassed, you're more easily forgiven when you inevitably make a mistake — and everyone makes mistakes.

Be emotional. Organizations are slowly coming to the realization that human voices, human stories resonate more with audiences than formal, proper language. Go figure, right? Allow



yourself to be a human in your marketing copy. Think of a story from your past that conjures up strong emotions in you.

Imagine, for example, a small business owner. Growing up, she could never find clothes that fit her, and made her feel good. Then one day, out shopping with mom or dad, they go to a thrift shop and she finds that one thing. She almost cried with happiness that day, and that was the day she knew she wanted to share that feeling with others, and that was the day she knew she'd have her own apparel line to reach kids like she was.

5 The one you want

The action that you're hoping to inspire is just as important as everything that leads to that action. Sometimes you're not looking to make a sale, or inspire a donation, but simply want to educate. Stories work great for that too. Humans have been telling stories for longer than we've had written words in order to educate each other on survival, morality, technology — Ugg had to show Ook how to make fire after all, and that must have been one heck of a story.

Parables are a classic story form that's used to educate. Build a modern-day parable to educate your audience, whether you're selling or just informing. This is the classic cliché, "show, don't tell" at work (and remember, if it's a cliché, it's because it was true enough to repeat until it became a cliché). When you show your audience why

— why your product is necessary, why they need to be aware of your cause — they internalize it and make it theirs.

Then, you've not only made a sale, you've created a salesperson.



A few more thoughts

We've just scratched the surface of storytelling for marketing, and it's a topic with a lot of depth remaining to be explored. Do some research and dig up some great examples of brand storytelling to help you build your story, and also, bear in mind these other points.

Get to the point. Quickly: Ultimately, this is marketing, not novel-writing. There may come a day for viral 500-page tomes, but we're not there yet. Make your case before your audience gets bored and moves on. Moving on...

Not all stories are written: It's natural to think "story = writing" but stories can be told through pictures, through music or sounds — try telling a story with smells (scent-based marketing is a whole other topic, but it's worth a Google, if you're curious). Use the media available to you, and don't try to shoehorn an epic into a 15-second radio spot, or an Instagram post.

Play with basic story types, but don't be limited by them: A quick search of "marketing storytelling" will reveal numerous articles on the



The three examples above (from top to bottom, Duracell, FedEx, and Weight Watchers) all illustrate examples of storytelling in a single image. Find creative ways to use the media available to you.

basic story types. Read them, they're fun. You may get some interesting ideas. But don't limit yourself.

It's not about you: It's important to be personal, relatable and authentic, but it's equally important to remember that you need to make a connection with your audience. People rarely enjoy being talked at interminably about someone else's hopes, dreams and accomplishments. Make sure to leave room in your story for the audience.

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