



IMAGINING REALITY

7 STEPS TO CREATING YOUR BRAND STORY

“Quality storytelling always wins.”

— Gary Vaynerchuk, best selling author and CEO of VaynerM

First, a brief story

The creative presentation was bombing. The COO had blindsided his marketing team with a statement that killed, not just the campaigns in front of him, but the very idea of having a campaign idea. His contention: we should just list the features, promote the 20% introductory discount, and stick the logo on it. No need for all this fancy “branding” business. In other words, if we simply describe the product and present the offer, it would sell itself. The marketing team did as they were told.

The product flopped and was later killed. This really happened. There were other factors contributing to the demise of the product, but it’s safe to say that the lack of any sort of branding or storytelling played a major role. That’s because people don’t respond to clearly stated rationales, as the COO had posited, they remember and respond to well-crafted stories.

People don’t buy products. They buy into products.

Anthropologists contend that 70 percent of everything we learn is through stories. Even as we grow into stubborn adults set in our ways, we fundamentally remain a storytelling species. This is just one of the reasons why 175,000 new blogs are started every day. The real promise of technology and the Internet revolution is that everyone is now a storyteller. In the words of Joan Didion, “We tell stories in order to live.”

Standing out in a mob

For eons we've been hearing about the crowded mental environment. The 4,000 ad messages we're exposed to daily, the increasing number of responsibilities and decisions, the 300 emails, and five hours of meetings. But, let's face it, it's more than just crowded. It's deafening, raucous and pushy. It's a mob. All this time, marketers thought that they just needed to sound different or be more relevant.

It turns out that being relevant and different isn't enough.

Why? As [this article](#), by behavioral researcher Paul Zak points out, the reason that many businesses find it hard to get attention in the marketplace is that the act of paying attention is metabolically taxing for us humans. So we are pre-programmed to use it sparingly. While there are plenty of relevant brand messages that sound different, we don't have the mental capacity to notice them all. Not by a long shot.

The mob is entropy, so you have to be more than just different and relevant. Brands need to be offering people something more than a message or key differentiator. It's not enough to be offering something of value. The WAY you offer it must be inherently valuable and meaningful to the audience. Because, let's face it, while people are drowning in information, they are thirsting for meaning.



86%

skip tv ads



91%

unsubscribe
from email



44%

of direct mail is
never opened



200M

on the
Do Not Call list

You may be speaking, but the audience isn't listening. In order to attract their attention, marketers need to provide them with something they will love.

“*The best brands are built on great stories.*”

— **Ian Rowden CMO, Virgin Group**

Why storytelling? It's just the way our brains work...

Stories can move us to tears, change our minds, influence our behaviors, and even inspire us to action. Why is that?

“Our brains have been evolutionally hardwired to process incoming information through story terms and structures,” writes Kendall Haven, author of *Story Proof: The Science Behind The Startling Power of Story*. Recent studies into our brain chemistry back him up. As renowned neuroeconomist and author [Paul Zak has found](#), emotional prompting within a story triggers the brain to

synthesize a neurochemical called “oxytocin” that switches on the brain’s “attentional spotlight” and triggers feelings of bonding, empathy and narrative transportation. And those feelings move us to make changes in our lives.

...and always have.

From Socrates to Cicero to Springsteen, storytelling is how humans have always communicated information, shared experiences, inspired action and persuaded each other to buy into ideas.

“ Storytelling ideally confirms some truth that deepens our understanding of who we are as human beings. Stories affirm who we are. We all want affirmations that our lives have meaning. And nothing is a greater affirmation than when we connect through stories. It allows us to experience the similarities between ourselves and others – both real and imagined. ”

— Andrew Stanton, Oscar-winning Filmmaker, Pixar

Brand story at work: TRX Training

US Navy SEAL Commander Randy Hetrick had trained for many things. Sitting in an abandoned warehouse in South East Asia waiting for the “GO” order from Washington wasn’t one of them. To escape the boredom, he started tinkering with different ways to work out his climbing muscles (SEAL Teams need to be able to climb the sides of ships without being noticed). He grabbed a jujitsu belt he accidentally brought in his kit bag, some nylon webbing, and a few boat repair tools he had lying around and, before long, he invented an entirely new form of exercise.



[TRX Suspension Training](#) was born. Today TRX Training is a thriving \$75 million enterprise catering to elite athletes, champion sports franchises, world-class trainers, and military forces from Langley, Virginia to Tel Aviv, Israel.

Why this story works

Can you picture the scene? Of course you can! The trade press loves it because it is intriguing, sexy and inspiring. Pro athletes and trainers connect with it because elite military teams are considered to be among the most physically fit humans on the planet. The military themselves find it compelling because it was invented by - not just one of their own - a Navy SEAL Commander. And everyone connects with the creative spirit. In fact, it has grown largely on the strength of that very story.

Not everyone has a compelling founder story like TRX, Apple or Google. But every brand can develop a story.

So, what's your brand story?

Our client [BookRenter](#) helps cash-strapped, debt-burdened students survive college. [Dove's](#) story is about helping women brush off pop culture concepts of what they should look like and feel good about their bodies again.

What's your brand's story?

Did it emerge from a choice point? A founder story? How does it unfold? Who are the characters? What's the plot? Is there a backstory? A moral? What are the events in the story? Where and when does it take place? What are the cause and effect relationships that make up the story structures? These are the classic elements of story and they apply to your public narrative. Later on, I'll show you how.

It's important to point out that not all stories are successful at planting images and thoughts into the minds of an audience. Many brands tell dull, one-dimensional stories that are just as forgettable as their feature list. On the flip side, there are 11-year-old bloggers out there telling stories and commanding audiences of millions.

To be captivating, your brand story needs a pulse - a human quality and an emotional component to it that the audience can connect with. It takes intuition, effort, and an appreciation for nuance. It's not an easy task... a bit like pulling sword from stone. Are you ready?

“*Brain scans are revealing...an evocative metaphor, words describing motion, or an emotional exchange between characters (can)... stimulate the brain and even change how we act in life.*”

[“Your Brain on Fiction” NYT, March, 2012.](#)

Here are the
7 steps to
developing your
brand story.

STEP 1

Stop thinking like a company

STEP 2

Get to know your audience

STEP 3

Create buyer mindset and persona

STEP 4

Develop a complete picture of the company

STEP 5

Create the brand persona

STEP 6

Craft the brand story

STEP 7

Establish the brand voice

STEP 1

Stop thinking like a company

“What?!!” you’re thinking, “Why is this even a step?” But this is in fact *the hardest part*.

Too often in my 25-year communications career, I’ve worked with executives that view their customers and prospects as people to be quantified, measured, and manipulated rather than living, feeling human beings to be delighted and wooed. Employees are “human resources,” website visitors are “eyeballs,” and prospective customers are “consumers.” That kind of thinking creates a wall between your brand and your audience that will strip out any emotional element and short circuit the brand storytelling process.

Step one is for you and *all of your key stakeholders* (Marketing Intern up to CEO) to stop thinking this way and imagine that you’re one-on-one with your audience.

Which leads us to step two...



STEP 2

Get to know your audience

You wouldn't tell the same story in the same way to a classroom full of third graders as you would to a conference room full of CEO'S. So you need to understand your audience on a deep level – not just know who they are, but how they think and what they care about.

TRX's audience was pro athletes, trainers, coaches, and military commanders. The Navy SEAL story gave TRX Training instant credibility with them. Ask yourself, how does your audience think? What do they believe in? What do they care about? What kinds of stories do they like? Are they an integral part of your story?

There are many ways to develop a deeper understanding of your audience. Some, like buying qualitative and/or quantitative research, cost money. Sometimes this is truly essential. Other times you can get there simply by asking executives, salespeople, customer service reps and others that actually talk to customers and prospects, a whole mess of questions designed to get inside the heads of your audience.

Exercise: Dumb Questions

When investigating audience motivations, I find it useful to play this little game I call "Dumb Questions." In Dumb Questions, you basically act like a typical 5-year-old and ask the why question over and over. Why do people come to you? (Because they are attracted by xxx). Why are they attracted to xxx? (because xxx). Why do they care about xxx? And so on and so on until you've reached the most basic explanation for why the audience buys, or might be inclined to buy, the product.

STEP 2

Get to know your audience

Questions to ask about your audience

1. *Where does your audience live? Specific areas? Urban, suburban, or rural?*
2. *What is their age, gender, income bracket, and education?*
3. *What do they do for a living? What's that job like?*
4. *How do you think they feel about your category?*
5. *What do they care about as it pertains to what you sell?*
6. *What are their assumptions as they pertain to what you sell?*
7. *What are they looking for when they come to you? To your competitors? Why?*
8. *How do they feel about your products? How do they feel about your brand?*
9. *Is there a logical order to the information that they must consume to before they become interested in your offering?*
10. *Is it an impulse purchase or a carefully researched decision making process? Why?*
11. *Are the people who make the decision the same people who do the research?*
12. *Who are the people that influence their decision?*
13. *What do the influencers care about?*
14. *What are their habits around your site? When you look at the site analytics, what does a typical user path look like?*
15. *When people come to your website but drop off and don't contact you, what do you figure are the main reasons?*
16. *In an ideal world, taking reality out of the equation, what would be their dream solution for the things that you sell?*
17. *If you're audience was to describe your brand, what words would they use?*
18. *Why do your current customers like or dislike about you?*
19. *Is there something related to your brand or your category that the audience is thinking, but not saying? Or talking about frequently that your industry hasn't addressed specifically (e.g. wireless carrier T-Mobile was the first to tap into the annoyance of poor call quality - dropping out and coming back - in a popular TV campaign in the mid 2000's).*
20. *Are there other ways that your audience services their needs outside of using products in your category? Why do they prefer those?*

“ Today’s B2B organizations, if they are going to stand out from competitors, will need to learn new competencies in understanding buyer narratives and creating compelling brand stories. It will be the difference maker in terms of how buyers make choices today. ”

— Tony Zambito, founder and leading authority in buyer insights and buyer personas for B2B Marketing

STEP 3

Create a snapshot of your buyer's mindset and persona

From the information that you gather in STEP 2, put together a profile for each of your typical prospects. One to two paragraphs covering the person's life and the intersection of their life and the company's product. Here is one that we created for a client - a popular textbook rental company catering to college kids. This was the result of a lot of phone conversations with actual customers.



Example buyer persona for a textbook rental site

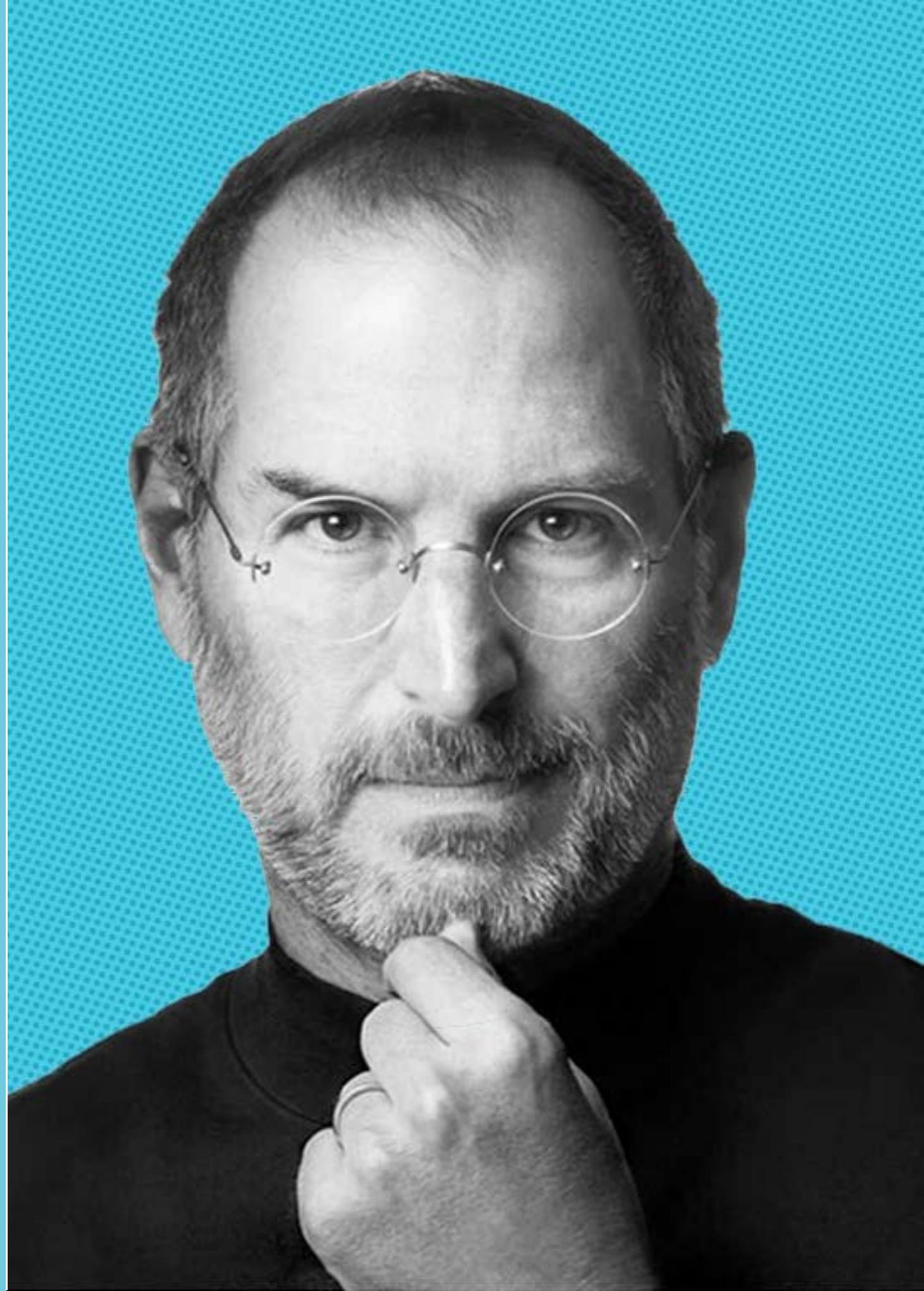
Christine is a 20-year-old junior at a large 4-year university with very little money. She's a lot more used to living and surviving on her own than she was as a freshman, that's for sure. She studies a lot, exercises, cultivates her friendships, and participates in sports/clubs of some kind. But Christine is stressed. Very, VERY stressed. Mainly about money and her mounting debt. Aside from tuition, she also needs to buck up for textbooks, supplies, food, clothes, mobile device payments, etc. etc. Beyond mere finances, she's also stressed about grades, guys, responsibilities, social dynamics, and the prospect of graduating in a depressed job market. The stress is practically unbearable.

She shops online for many things: entertainment, beauty products, technology, school supplies, etc. She often refers to 3rd party reviews to guide her shopping choices. She also shares information with fellow students. She sees textbooks as a necessary evil. She is required to buy them. So, given her financial situations and level of stress, she's looking for the best deal possible. If she can get her books more conveniently, even better. She's a busy bee.

By seeing the world through Christine's eyes, we could create a story that would engage her. We can ask ourselves, "Would Christine care?"

Storytelling in business: Steve Jobs

When Steve Jobs took the stage at Apple shareholders meeting in 1984, he started with quote from a Bob Dylan song: "The loser now will be later to win, for the times they are a changin'." He proceeded to tell the story of the big, bad IBM, setting it up as the Goliath to his David, and provided a chronological history of their misguided dismissiveness of personal computing. Then he jumpstarted the Apple II and let it introduce itself... to wild applause. This was a seminal moment for the company. [Watch it for yourself](#) >



STEP 4

Develop a complete picture of the company

What we are digging for here is background information that we'll later use to identify the intersection between the company, the brand, and the audience's reality to develop your brand story. In this step, you'll want to get some time with the leadership at your company (founders, CEO, etc.) and ask them questions like the ones below. Some of them might elicit similar answers, but that doesn't really matter. (Get them together in person, all in one room. Phone is second best followed by email as a last resort ONLY.) At Pinwheel, we typically record these conversations and transcribe them to ensure that we capture every little detail and nuance.

Questions to ask about your company

1. *What was the initial spark for the company?*
2. *What problem in the world was it designed to solve for? What niche was it created to fill?*
3. *Why do you feel it's good that this company exists in the world?*
4. *Why did you join/start the company?*
5. *How did the company get its name?*
6. *How did the company grow from beginning to now? Who, when, where, why, and how?*
7. *What major obstacles did it overcome?*
8. *What is the secret to your success? What makes this company special?*
9. *Imagine that I'm someone coming to you, never heard of you, how do you explain the company's promise? Why is that valuable?*
10. *Let's take that and condense it. How do you pitch it in 60 seconds?*
11. *How did the consumer promise evolve over time?*
12. *What is the vision and mission of the company? Where is the company headed?*
13. *Who or what is your biggest competition?*
14. *What do they do well? Not so well?*
15. *What's unique about your company in the marketplace?*
16. *What are the three biggest challenges facing your company today?*
17. *Can you describe the company culture here?*
18. *How did it get that way?*

STEP 5

Create your brand persona

Now that you know the audience and the company background, let's find out how well they align with the brand. You may notice some disconnects or opportunities here where you could create more alignment.

Questions to ask your brand leaders

1. *What does the brand stand for in the world?*
2. *How would you describe your brand as if it were a real person? What characteristics would you use?*
3. *How would you describe the brand's belief system?*
4. *In your opinion, is that how your brand comes across when pitching its wares? Consistently?*
5. *When you think about your brand personality, do any real life people spring to mind, famous or otherwise?*
6. *Who would be your brand's ideal spokesperson?*
7. *Are there any brands in your space that are particularly compelling?*
8. *What sorts of flaws and/or peculiarities would you say that the brand possesses?*
9. *If I were to meet the brand at a party and have a conversation, what sorts of impressions would I walk away with?*
10. *In what sense is the brand memorable?*
11. *For every personality characteristic that you've mentioned, can you also think of examples where your brand is consistent with that?*
12. *Which personality traits are more real and which ones more aspirational?*

STEP 5

Create your brand persona

The output in this step is a brand persona statement that talks about the brand as a character in the overall story.

Example brand persona: a search engine for good

One Pinwheel client sells a search engine that donates half of the proceeds they receive from user searches to the charities that those users have designated. They also have ways for users to donate a portion of what they spend when they shop and eat out. Here is a persona that we developed for them.

(Client name) is well-educated and likely contributed in some significant way to financing their college tuition. Highly social by nature, they were active in school organizations and even chaired a couple of them.

Early on, (client name) got heavily involved in community organizations and developed a knack for getting people energized around, and involved in, a cause. Plus, they just have a magnetic personality. Never one to think small, they consistently tackled bigger and bigger goals over time. (client name) has plans to change the world.

A talented speaker, passionate advocate and confident leader, (client name) is never shy when it comes to pursuing a dream. In terms of beliefs, They are passionate about being transparent (showing the direct correlation between money and results...and overhead too), finding the right people and empowering them, inclusiveness, the power of a like-minded community, and the fact that any problem created by humans is solvable by humans.



Brand storytelling at work: Nike

For years NIKE has been telling the story of excellence in athletic pursuits. Of athletic gods among us...and about the athlete in everyone. Nike has essentially tapped into the classic story framework of the universal hero's journey in a way that is inclusive of the viewer. Every print ad, every TV spot, every press release, every single utterance of the brand supports this one single idea. But how do you achieve such a beautiful combination of cohesion and richness with your brand? How do you tell and evolve that story over the years?

STEP 6

Craft your brand story

While the previous five steps are all tried and true practices included in traditional branding methodologies, this step is less common and our approach to it is unique. It also requires a certain amount of self-trust and intuition to get to the finish line.

We start by noticing the intersection or overlap between the buyer's narrative, their existing assumptions about things, and the brand and company information that you collected. What does that look like? Holding this intersection in your mind for a moment, what sorts of stories spring to mind? The resulting brand story will represent a connection to your buyer's own narrative.

There are no hard and fast rules for crafting your brand story. It just has to work for you. So if you're wondering what a brand story even looks like, you're asking the wrong question. Come on, you know how to tell a story.

You've been doing it your whole life. Every night when you go to sleep, your subconscious tells you story after story. It's in your DNA. The question you should be asking is, "What story would get my audience intrigued?"

The following are some questions that we ask ourselves when flushing out the brand stories for our clients. You don't have to answer all of these. Just use them as a guide.

What is the prevailing category narrative today?

Spend some time deconstructing this. What's the current story system? Who are the players? What is the imagery that's out there? What imagery is inside people's heads with regard to the category? Can you identify a point of intervention in the prevailing narrative where you can interject your brand story and reframe things?

STEP 6

Craft your brand story

What is the theme of your brand story?

Probably the most important element of a brand story is what the overriding theme is. What's it all about? What is the general idea driving your story? For example, our textbook rental client's central theme is around the idea helping cash-strapped, stressed-out students survive college. Often times, brand stories are about choice points – moments when someone faced a challenge and made a choice that led to where we are now.

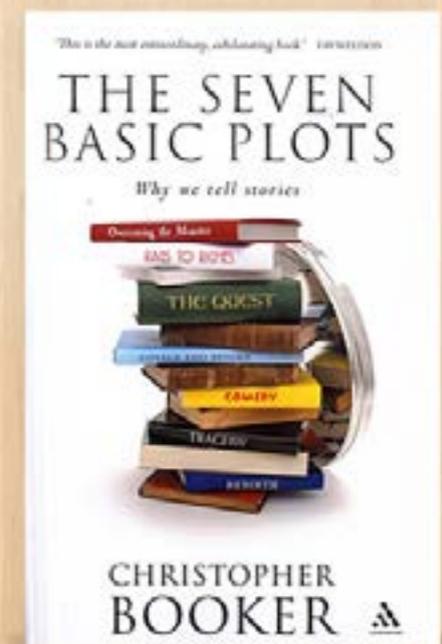
What is the storyline?

Are there connected events in your story? A chronological order? Since a brand's story is ever evolving, so too is the plot. A plot engages us, captures our interest, and makes us pay attention. A plot consists of just three elements: a challenge, a choice, and an outcome.

What are the major events in the story of your brand? If your brand is a challenger, maybe the events have to do with what created the niche that you're filling. Or perhaps the events relate to the failings of your competitors. Or maybe they have to do with government deregulation.

The Seven Basic Story Plots*

Author Christopher Booker poured years of research into studying stories. Along the way, he identified these seven basic themes that all stories share.



STEP 6

Craft your brand story

1. **Overcoming the Monster:** David Vs. Goliath, Apple Vs. IBM, etc.
2. **Rags To Riches:** Nike founder Phil Knight famously sold shoes out of the trunk of his car. Or maybe the hero is a member of the audience that's seen magical success.
3. **The Quest:** It's a never ending journey towards a beautiful (and perhaps unattainable) goal. Lexus's "Pursuit of perfection."
4. **Voyage & Return:** Involves travel outside of familiar surrounds to a strange land and then an escape back home. Great fictional paradigm, but not always well suited to brand stories.
5. **Comedy:** Dos Equis's "Most Interesting Man in the World," Old Spice's "The Man Your Man Could Smell Like," and Dollar Shave Club's "Our Blades Are F***ing Great." We could go on and on. Consumer brands tend to love this angle.
6. **Tragedy:** For some reason, it's cathartic to watch others suffer. Brands often employ stories of tragedy for dramatic (or even comedic) effect and to create a juxtaposition with the experience of their product or company.
7. **Rebirth:** Often when companies attempt a major re-brand like Oldsmobile's famous, "This is not your father's Oldsmobile" campaign.



SNAPSHOT STORYTELLING:

The people at GT Bikes know that quality craftsmanship is something that their bike-loving audience cares about. You could also say they care about durability and high-performance design. But those are just words. Boring. What's the story? When they thought about where their audience REALLY lives, they discovered that the thing that gets them headed up to the trails on Saturday morning is that feeling of flying down a mountain. So the story that they told was, "Fast, it's corporate policy." The award-winning ad campaign featured funny office mishaps and personal foibles that occurred because the good people at GT Bikes, well, they're moving fast. Too fast? Who cares. Fast is an end in itself. This entire story comes across in a single image and tagline. This is what I call "Snapshot Storytelling."

Is there a conflict in your story? How are you framing the problem? Where's the drama emanating from? Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys? What's at stake? Is the conflict simply a dramatization of the unmet need? Are there certain players in your industry that are bad actors? Is it a certain system that is somehow oppressing?

What does the story have to teach us? What is the "Why?" What is the moral? We do not retell the story of Adam and Eve because it teaches us to avoid snakes. The story of David & Goliath, for example, teaches us that a little guy with courage, resourcefulness, and imagination can beat a big guy. If Apple's story teaches us about the importance of challenging the status quo, what is your story teaching? As Simon Sinek says in his much watched [Ted Talk](#), "People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it."

Is your audience a participant in your brand story? You've identified who the audience is in STEP #3 of this process. Critical to crafting any successful brand story is identifying the audience to whom the story is addressed. The audience may a participant in the story... or not.

Who are they? What do they believe in? What do they care about? What kinds of stories do they like?

Who are the participants in your brand story? Who are the main characters? Who are the people, collections of people, or organizations that play a part? Maybe there are major decision makers in this story of yours. Maybe there are influencers. Describe them all as if they were characters in a play. Part of what helps stories persuade is empathetic identification with the characters.

Where does your brand story take place? Giving people a sense of place in your story helps to transport them. What are the physical situations involved in your story? This is usually the place where the characters think and act. What sort of mood is created by this setting? How does the setting relate to the plot and characters? Is it bucolic and suburban? Gritty and urban? In what way does the setting impact the brand or the characters and factor into the storyline?

What is the backdrop of your story? Sometimes brands focus on a vivid situational backdrop to create drama in their brand story. Our client Rafter, an education technology company that helps colleges manage their course materials more easily and cost effectively, employed this technique. Here is one take on their story:

“Today’s universities are in a tough spot. They face decreasing government support, intense pressure to minimize tuition increases, the need to find alternative sources of revenue, and a dropout rate of around 50%. Within this context, the typical bookstore manager is stuck with a course materials partner that is old, technologically archaic, and accustomed to living off the fat of the land for the past 100 years. With declining institutional funding, and increased pressures to woo students back from internet sites like Amazon, generate revenue, and deliver exceptional value, the bookstore manager needs a new partner in order to survive.”

You can see how brand storytelling can play an important role in setting the stage for the brand to be the hero. We didn’t have to include the entire litany of problems that

a bookstore manager faces (lest we bum them out). But we can subtly allude to them. After all, it’s their life. They know the problems.

What’s the timeline of your story? Do the events of the story occur over a brief period of time or many years? Or is it basically timeless?

Is there a cause and effect relationship in your story?

How did one character’s actions effect another character or characters? How did one event trigger another event or events?

A story begins. An actor is moving toward a desired goal. But then some kind of challenge appears from outside. The plan is suddenly up in the air. The actor must figure out what to do. This is when we get interested. We want to find out what happens.

What does your story foretell? What sort of world do you want to bring about? What sort of world do you want to help steer away from?

Bear in mind

- The currency of brand story is meaning, not truth. People believe things to be true because they are meaningful to them. So while we don't encourage you to lie, a little suspension of disbelief is just fine.
- Think about the Mecca that you are bringing people to. What does it look like? What's the solution and how does that solution make perfect sense given the story you just told.
- The brand story that you create can act as a framework - the lens through which everything you do, everything you write, and everything you design should be evaluated. Are your communications consistent? Are you building on the story or accidentally telling a completely different story?

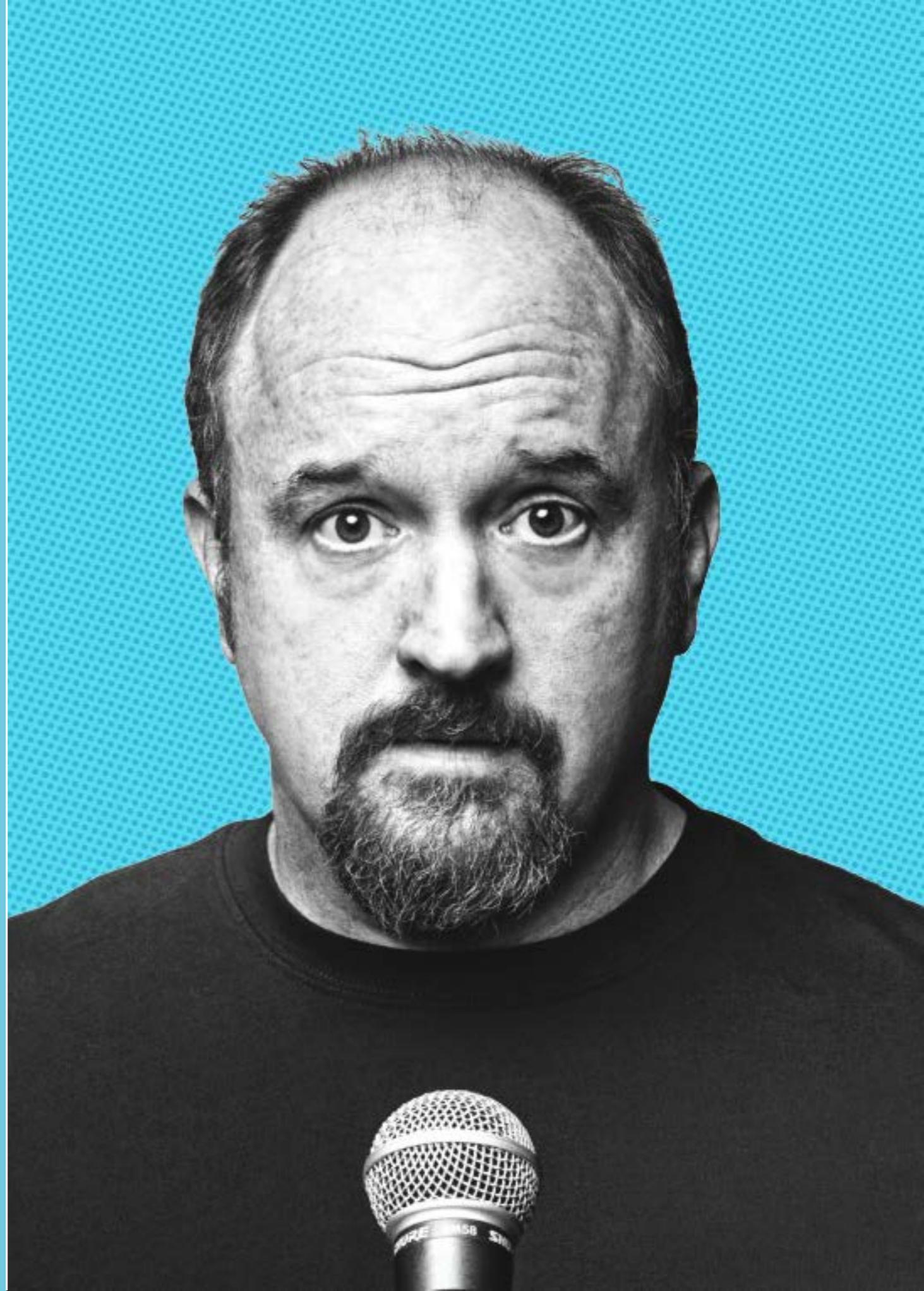


Brand story checklist:

- Is there conflict or challenge?
- Is it surprising?
- Does it make you care?
- Is it meaningful to your audience?

Storytelling in Entertainment: Louis C.K.

Louis C.K.'s comedy is really just storytelling. He tells stories that expose the parts of ourselves that we're too ashamed to talk about. His boundary-crossing stories demonstrate how our hidden repulsiveness is a common bond. We all do, think, and wonder about these crazy, and often disgusting things. And knowing that we're not alone makes us feel a little better about ourselves. When it comes to storytelling, honesty and focusing on our common bonds is a good thing. Believing that kids with nut allergies are supposed to die is not a good thing. But then, he knows that. [Here's Louis doing his thing >](#)



STEP 7

Create the narrator voice

Using the insights you have gathered and the narrative that you developed, establish a set of rules around how the story is told. This includes establishing the style, messaging, language, terminology, and etc. These are your building blocks for communicating with the audience in ways that are connected to their goals and their own narratives. They are typically articulated in what's called a Brand Voice.

Find your voice

What is the right voice to use when telling your story?
How do you tell the story in a way that reinforces the image of the brand that's telling it?

Done well, voice allows the brand to convey its values and qualities through the language, both visual and verbal, that it uses. It's a filter we apply to every piece of

communication we put out there. By applying the voice consistently, the audience will become familiar with you and learn to trust you. For example, a brand like Google is straightforward and a little irreverent. Virgin Atlantic is cheeky. Merrill Lynch is confident and reassuring.

The way to construct a voice is to first define the character of the person who is speaking, the brand. You did a lot of the grunt work in STEP #5 defining this. Then consider the audience persona that you created in STEP #2. For example, given the textbook rental audience persona in the example that we used, a stressed out college junior, what character would be appealing? For them, it might be an older brother character – someone who has graduated from college and can be reassuring. Someone you inherently respect.

Now ask yourself, given the brand character, what the voice qualities would be. Create a two column chart of those attributes – no fewer than two attributes and no more than five (six max!). In the left column list the attribute. In the right column list a few bullets about what that attribute means for this particular brand.

Example brand voice attribute

- | | |
|----------|--|
| S | • Smart enough to boil complex ideas down into simple, bite-sized pieces |
| M | |
| A | • In tune with today’s technological trends |
| R | |
| T | • Has a remarkable way of creating things that take almost no effort to understand |

Example: Intro to Kaiser Permanente’s Brand Voice Guide:

The Kaiser Permanente brand voice is both the content (what we say) and the tone (how we say it) of our written and verbal communications. Brand voice helps us create a “living, breathing” personification of Kaiser Permanente in the minds of our target audiences—a company they can trust and relate to, one they feel respected by. This helps to differentiate Kaiser Permanente from other health care organizations and creates an emotional bond with consumers that is very hard for any competitor to break.

These guidelines will help you “hear” the Kaiser Permanente brand voice in your head when you write, edit, or speak on behalf of Kaiser Permanente. That voice will guide you in having a conversation with your audience, person to person.

These guidelines will also help ensure that both the tone and content of your communications are appropriate for your audience and consistent with our overall brand strategy.

They will help you consistently convey the Kaiser Permanente personality in all your communications.

Finally, these guidelines will help us speak with one voice—the Kaiser Permanente voice—and help ensure that our messages get heard.

In addition to these voice attributes that guide the storyteller to getting into brand character, the Brand Narrator document also includes other stylistic considerations. For example, a brand that wants to ensure that it comes across as a trusted authority might also include things like:

RELY HEAVILY ON FACTS

- Use metrics early and often to support our points
- Keep them short and punchy

9 other items that can be included in narrator voice

1. *Audience profiles (you've already developed as part of STEP #2.*
2. *Brand persona description (this is STEP 4. It would live here)*
3. *Topics we focus on and those we avoid*
4. *Phrases to use & phrases to avoid*
5. *Stylistic rules around calls to action*
6. *Point of view (3rd, 2nd or 1st person, etc.)*
7. *Key terms and how we define them*
8. *Brand name, tagline, and logo usage*
9. *Tips for compelling, effective copy*

IMPORTANT: Because we live in a multi-channel world now where we're telling stories in different sized chunks from entirely visual to full-on 90 second video creations, we need a base story, a good sized chunk, and we need a compendium of other ways to tell it.

Getting your story out into the world

Now that you have your brand story, the question becomes, “What do you do with that?” For starters, it’s typically NOT something that you’ll put out there in the world in raw form. It’s to serve as a source document for everything that you do. It is the story that you will be drawing from when it’s time to create your marketing emails, your eBooks, your microsites, your ad campaigns, your website, etc.

Reflect on your marketing strategy

How can you support and even embellish that story? What opportunities are the different content forms presenting you with? Are there specific headlines that relate? Does the story that you’re telling suggest particular content forms? How about certain content channels? What sort of imagery do you need to create to help the story really come alive?

For example, one of our clients is a global leader in eSignature. With their product, people can stop using paper and pen entirely and sign documents electronically. By replacing cumbersome and expensive paper-based processes with digital ones, companies can make money faster, reduce their costs, and be more efficient in all of their transactions. Their one-time tagline, “Keep Business Digital” summarized their story quite well, and we infused it in everything from their videos, to outdoor, to conference materials. We also considered digital marketing channels that were perhaps non-traditional, but that screamed the word “digital.”

TIP #1

The simple story is more successful than the complicated one

The simpler a story, the more likely it will stick. Using simple language and reducing complexity is the best way to activate the brain regions that make us truly relate to the happenings of a story. Try for example to reduce the number of adjectives or complicated nouns and exchange them with more simple, yet heartfelt language.

Stories move us by offering an experience or moment through which we grasp the feeling or insight the brand is trying to communicate. The more specific the details we choose to recount, the more we can move our listeners, the more powerfully we can articulate your values.

TIP #2

Use meaningful language

Avoid overused, throwaway phrases at all costs. If a word or phrase is overused, people will ignore it. In fact, scientists have proven that certain words and phrases [have lost all storytelling power](#). This means, that the frontal cortex—the area of your brain responsible for

experiencing emotions—can't be activated with with phrases like “a rough day,” clichés’ like “a penny saved is a penny earned,” and trite modifiers like “great,” and “amazing.”

TIP #3

Just because your company isn't sexy, doesn't mean your story must be boring

Here's an example from Hellman, a German company that sells customized logistics solutions.

"Founded in 1871, our company started with one man, Carl Heinrich Hellmann, using a horse-drawn cart to deliver parcels in and around the town of Osnabrueck, northern Germany. Four generations later, Carl's great-grandchildren, Jost and Klaus, own and run the company and operate in 157 countries. While it is a global organization, we still honor, and take inspiration from,

our humble beginning. To us, every customer is precious and every project requires a unique solution. This powerful combination of an individual approach within an international framework ensures that we deliver top-quality, customized logistics solutions, every time."

I love the imagery used here and how they leverage their founder story to generate credibility around the idea that a global company can provide custom solutions. It's not the most compelling brand storytelling ever, but it's not terrible either.

TIP #4

Don't just tell it, act it out

Yes, you should tell the story everywhere it makes sense. But the story should also drive how your brand behaves. Your [charitable giving efforts](#), your promotions, internal

branding efforts, employee programs, social media strategies, PR stories... think of the brand as an actor in its own story.

TIP #5

Use imagery-rich language

One of the ways that people conjure a story is through imagery-rich language. Referring to the size of something as “Mt. Everest-sized” or referring to a villain in a story as “fire-breathing.” Something inside the brain triggers an image and that act of imagining automatically involves the person in the story. Avoid being melodramatic about it, but try to conjure the right images.

TIP #6

Get into character

Take a deep breath and become the brand. Concentrate on its mindset, situation, mannerisms, voice and personality. If executed well, this will result in a believable portrayal that captivates and entertains us every time.

Disneyland: a master class in brand storytelling

One stroll through Disneyland is about as complete an education on brand storytelling as you can get. The brand story is all about preserving the magic of childhood and every single little bitty detail at the park has been considered as a vehicle to reinforce that story. You buy your ticket and the cashier says, “Enjoy the magic.” This vibe is infused into every sign, every employee, every structure, every costume, every single object in the park. In fact, they’ve done such a thorough job of it, that the term “disneyfication” has come to mean, in part, infusing a place or object with a particular idea. The lesson: use details to create an immersive experience; just take care to ensure those details don’t stand out so much that they detract from the story you’re trying to tell.

Tips for Compelling and Effective Copy

These guidelines will help you make your communications easier and more enjoyable to read, and make it more compelling.

Realize that your audience is busy

Your typical audience member is juggling many things and doesn't have much free time. What you write must be brief and clear on the first reading. If Abe Lincoln can deliver the Gettysburg address in 272 words, then you can deliver a "Return Policy" in under 20.

Make your writing easy to skim

Ban large blocks of text. **Bold key points.** Use underlining for extra emphasis. Use subheads like we do in this document. Allow some white space.

Communicate the most important points in the headlines and subheads

Well-written headlines and subheads that focus on important features and benefits make it easy for your target audience to quickly grasp what you're trying to communicate. They'll appreciate that.

Connect headlines and subheads logically to the copy that follows

Copy should expand upon the premises you've set up in heads and subheads and provide additional information that is meaningful to the reader.

Use graphic treatments to break up large blocks of copy and help arrange content

Large blocks of copy are easier to read and understand when broken up by subheads, bullet points, sidebars, columns, and other graphic treatments. Graphic treatments also make copy more interesting to the reader's eye and provide multiple points of entry on the page.

Advance smoothly from one paragraph to the next

Transitions from paragraph to paragraph (if you absolutely must be writing that much) should be smooth and logical so that your reader doesn't have to stop and figure out what the connection is between one thought and another.

Vary sentence lengths to give animation and rhythm to the copy

Use rich words that vividly illustrate your point. Use sentences of varying lengths—including extremely short sentences—to animate the rhythm of the copy and make it more pleasurable to read. It is even OK to occasionally use sentence fragments. Send telegrams, not essays.

Never be satisfied with your first draft

Always build in time for a re-write. During your re-write, employ your delete key to cut unnecessary words. Rearrange points to improve the flow. Look for holes. Check your facts. Check it against this Voice Guide. Be ruthless.

Have fun, and remember this... “Those who tell the stories rule the world.” - Native American Proverb

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



S. Todd Anthony is the Executive Creative Director for [Pinwheel](#), a San Francisco-based creative agency with an emphasis on developing content through a storytelling lens.

He is an award-winning copywriter and strategic thinker with 25+ years helping brands connect and engage with customers. Todd has worked at agency mainstays like Ogilvy, JWT, McCann, and Y&R, held leadership positions at media goliaths CBS and Yahoo, managed design and development teams, launched brands, created brand voices, and written copy for every imaginable placement both online and off.