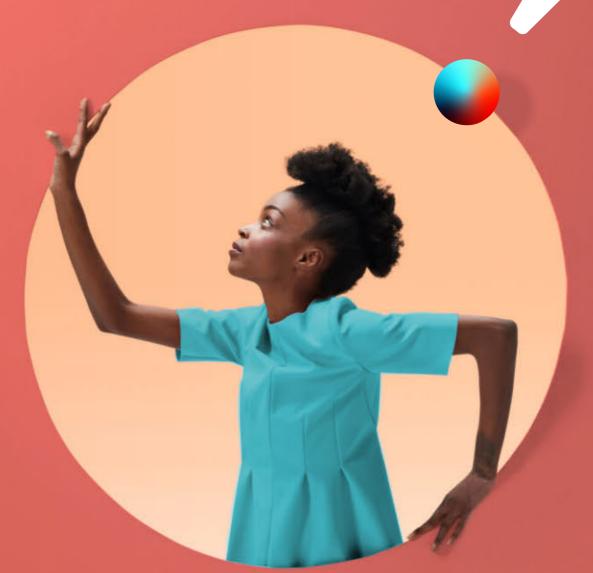
Imagining Reality

Five steps to creating your brand story





pinwheelcontent.com

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This is a true story

The creative presentation was bombing. The COO blindsided everyone with a statement that killed, not just the advertising campaigns in front of him, but the very idea of having a powerfully compelling, story-driven campaign idea. His contention: we should just list the product features, highlight the 20% introductory discount, and stick the logo on it. We don't need all the clever ideas. The product would sell itself.

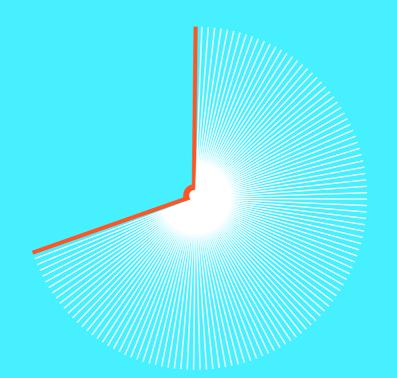
The marketing team fell in line. The product flopped and was later discontinued. Other

factors contributed to its demise, but the marketing played a key role. The lesson: eschew brand storytelling at your own peril.

Human beings respond to stories, it's in our DNA. They don't respond to lists of rationales and boring features.

People don't buy products. They buy INTO products. They buy the story.





Anthropologists contend that 70% of everything we learn is through stories. Even as we grow into adults and become set in our ways, we fundamentally remain a storytelling species. As Joan Didion wrote, "We tell stories in order to live."

Storytelling is how we stand out in a mob

We live in a crowded mental enviornment. The 10,000 ad messages we're exposed to daily, the 121 emails, and the six meetings per day. But it's more than just crowded. It's deafening, raucous and pushy. It's a mob. For marketers, that means it's not enough to merely be relevant and different.

As behavioral researcher **Paul Zak points out**, the reason so many businesses find it difficult to get attention is that the act of paying attention is so metabolically taxing that we're pre-programmed to use it sparingly. The human brain is built for long walks in the woods to hunt and gather, not juggle seven million terabytes of data. We

simply don't have the mental capacity to notice everything that might be relevant to us.

Given this, brands need to be offering people something more than punchy messages. They must offer meaning, emotion, drama adventure and valuable lessons. When people listen to a story, the chemicals in their body change, and their mind becomes transfixed.



44% of direct mail is never opened



86% of tv ads are skipped



45.1% of email traffic is spam

While
people are
drowning in
information,
they are
thirsting for
meaning.



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

As renowned neuro-economist and author Paul Zak **found**, emotional prompting within a story triggers the brain to synthesize a neurochemical called "oxytocin" that switches on the brain's "attentional spotlight" and elicits feelings of bonding, empathy and narrative transportation. These feelings move us to do something, to make changes in our lives.

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.



BRAND STORYTELLING IN ACTION:

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 started tinkering. Before long, he invented an entirely new form of exercise: TRX Training was born.

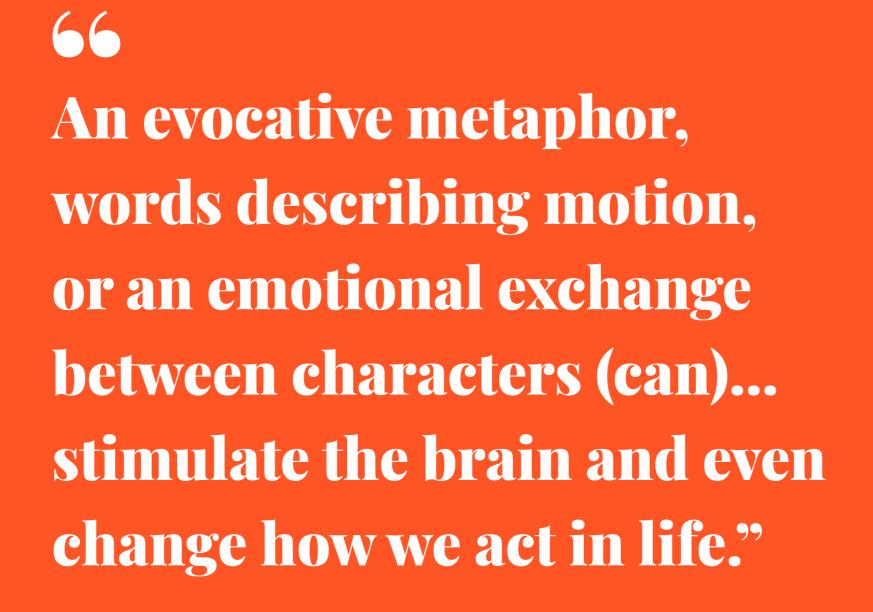
Today TRX Training is a thriving \$100 million enterprise catering to elite athletes, champion sports franchises, world-class trainers, and military forces from Langley, Virginia to Tel Aviv, Israel.



Why this story works

The fitness 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 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. But any brand can develop a story.



"Your Brain on Fiction," NYT, March 2012



Storytelling brings the human element to your brand

Most brands tell dull, one-dimensional, product-centric stories that are just as forgettable as their feature list. On the flip side, there are 11-year-old bloggers telling beautifully rich stories that command audiences of millions. To be captivating, your brand story needs a human pulse - an emotional component that the audience can connect with. It takes intuition, effort, and an appreciation for nuance.

But most of all, it takes a clear understanding of your audience.

How storytelling jumpstarted Apple

When Apple founder Steve Jobs took the stage at the shareholders meeting in 1984, he started with a 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 big, bad IBM (the villain of their story) – setting it up as the Goliath to his David and provided a short history of their misguided dismissiveness of personal computing. Then he flipped the Apple II's "on" switch and let it introduce itself... to wild applause. This was a seminal moment for the company.

Watch it

Step 1: Know your audience

It's not a good story if your audience doesn't connect with it. So the first step in brand storytelling is getting to know your audience. If you don't have the time or money to conduct formal research, you can do your own. At Pinwheel, we tend to interview C-suite execs, sales leaders, customer service reps, internal audience experts of all stripes as well as customers themselves. Then we transcribe the interviews, find the patterns, and weave together a tight audience persona.

Here are some of the questions we ask to get inside the heads of the audience. We also ask questions very specific to the client's industry and audience perceptions.

- 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 the most about as it pertains to what you sell?
- 6. What are their current assumptions about 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 and/or your brand?
- 9. Is there a logical order to the information they must consume before they become interested in your offering?
- 10. Is it an impulse purchase or a carefully researched decision-making process? Why? How long does that take?
- 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 those 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 your audience was to describe your brand, what words would they use? 18. Why do your current customers like and/or dislike your brand or product? 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? 20. Are there other ways that your audience services their needs outside of using products in your category? Why

do they prefer those?

Step 2: Create a snapshot of your buyer

Want to understand how your brand can reach people on a more personal level? Look for patterns in the information that you gleaned in that first step and create a fictional profile of a person that roughly represents the audience. This can help you understand how to reach people on a more personal level. It can be simple: one to two paragraphs covering the person's life and the intersection of their life and your product. Or you can create something more elaborate.

Here is a quick persona we created for a popular college textbook rental company after having several phone conversations with actual customers.

Example buyer persona for a textbook rental site



Christine is a 19-year-old sophomore at a big 4-year university with very little money. She's starting to get used to living and surviving on her own. She studies a lot, exercises, hangs out with friends, and participates in intramural sports. 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, and, ya know, other stuff. 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 primarily buys on price and often refers to 3rd party reviews to guide her shopping choices. She also shares shopping ideas with fellow students. She sees textbooks as a necessary evil. So, given her financial situation 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?" A simple, but powerfully clarifying exercise.

Step 3: Develop a clear understanding of the company

Impactful brand stories exist at the intersection between your audience's reality, the company's authentic story and what the brand stands for. In this next step, we'll tackle the "company" part of that equation. You'll want to get some time with the leadership at your company (founders, C-suite, etc.) and ask them a slew of questions. Sometimes you'll only get short, truncated answers, so it's your job to pull the whole story out of them.

- 1. What was the initial spark for the company? (encourage them to tell it as a story)
- 2. How did the company get its name?
- 3. What problem in the world was it designed to solve for?
- 4. Why was that problem not being addressed well by anyone else?
- 5. Why do you feel it's good that this company exists in the world?
- 6. Why did you join/start the company?
- 7. How did the company grow from the beginning until now? Who did what, when, where, why, and how?
- 8. What major obstacles did it overcome along the way?
- 9. What is the secret to the company's success? What makes this company special?
- 10. Imagine that I'm someone who's never heard of the company, how do you explain its promise?
- 11. Why is that valuable?

- 12. How do you pitch the company in 60 seconds?
- 13. How did the consumer promise evolve over time?
- 14. What is the vision and mission of the company? Where is the company headed?
- 15. Who or what is your biggest competition? (hint: it may be something other than another company)
- 16. What does your competition do well? Not so well?
- 17. What's unique about your company in the marketplace?
- 18. What are the three biggest challenges facing your company today?
- 19. Can you describe the company culture here?
- 20. How did it get that way?

Some of the questions above may elicit similar answers, but that doesn't really matter.

Also, consider asking additional questions that take into account the things you already know about the company and industry.

Step 4: Create your brand personality

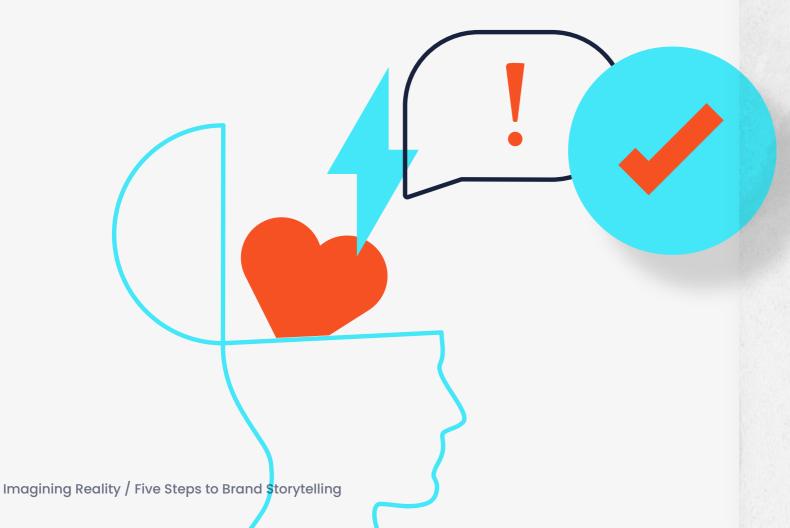
Brand personality defines the essential (intended) character of the brand - how it talks, thinks, behaves and responds. It is the heart and soul of the brand. As such, it's particularly helpful in determining HOW the story is told. But it can also inform the contents of the story.

You've probably heard the phrase that brands exist in the minds of your audience – and that fact cannot be overstated. But you still need a north star for your brand if you want to have any chance of informing your audience's perceptions.

Here are some of the questions we ask to help develop a brand's personality.

- 1. What does the brand stand for in the world?
- 2. (related question) What is the brand's strongest motivation? What is their personal obsession?
- 3. In what sense is your brand memorable?
- 4. If your brand were a person, and you were to meet them for the first time at a dinner party, how might you describe that person?
 - What personality characteristics would you use?
 - What are they wearing?
 - How do they behave?
 - As you sit next to them, what's the conversation like?
 - What flavor of ice cream do they choose for dessert (assuming all options on the table)

The goal of this exercise is to land on three to five personality traits, write descriptions of each of them and craft a short description of the brand personality. Here's an example of what this might look like.



Generic brand personality example

[brand name] is a good friend and savvy mentor. They know what it's like to be in your shoes — they've been there, many times — and have the hard-won street wisdom needed to give you the type of honest, real-world advice that makes a difference. Best of all, they always have your back, ready with a warm smile and a spark of optimism that keeps you going, even when the going gets tough.

- Human: Warm, approachable and empathetic. Conversational and easy-going, but with a purpose.
- **Empowering:** Uplifting, energizing, optimistic. Understands what you're trying to do, and is absolutely convinced that you can do it.
- Authentic: Honest, straight-talking, down-to-earth. Doesn't use big, fancy words or over-complicate when plain-speak can still sound smart, professional and credible. We don't overpromise or exaggerate.
- **Trusted:** Credible, transparent, dependable. Speaks the truth, is direct, and tells people what they need to know to make wise decisions. Never compromises moral principles in the pursuit of higher revenues. Projects authority, experience and data-backed thinking.

An incomplete list of personality traits

Adventurous Affectionate **Aqile Agreeable Alert Altruistic Ambitious Analytical Argumentative** Artistic **Assertive Astute Balanced Brave** Calm Candid Capable **Careless** Carina Cautious Charismatic Charismatic Charming Chatty Chic Child-like Classy Clean

Clever

Coherent

Compassionate

Competent Competitive Confident Conservative Consistent Controlling Cooperative Courageous Crafty Crazy Creative Critical **Curious** Deep **Defiant Delicate Determined Devoted Diligent Diplomatic Disciplined Discreet Disruptive Dramatic Eager** Easy-going **Eccentric Efficient Emotional**

Empathetic

Energetic

Enterprising Enthusiastic Exuberant Fashionable Fearless Feminine Fervent Fiery Flashy **Flirtatious Formal** Frank Friendly **Funny Futuristic Generous** Gentile Grumpy Handsome Happy Hard-working Helpful Hip **Humble** Idealistic **Impetuous Impulsive Incisive** Independent **Indiscreet**

Ingeneous

Innocent **Innovative** Insightful **Inspiring** Intellectual Interesting Joyful Keen Kind Knowledgeable Laid-back Liberal Lively Local Logical Loud Loyal Masculine **Maternal Mature** Methodical Meticulous **Mischievous** Modern **Modest** Motivated **Mysterious Natural Naughty**

Neat

Nostalgic

Nosy **Nurturing Obstinate Old-fashioned Optimistic Outgoing** Outspoken **Passionate Paternal Patient Patriotic Peaceful Pensive Picky** Playful **Polite Popular Practical Precise Proactive Proficient Profound Proud Provincial Prudent Punctual** Reassuring Rebellious Refined Reliable Religious

Reserved Resolute Resourceful Respectful Responsible Restless Rowdy Safe Sarcastic Sassy **Scientific Sensitive** Serene **Serious** Sexy sharp Silly Sincere Sloppy **Smart** Snobby Sociable Solemn Sophisticated Soulful **Stable** Strong **Studious Subtle Systematic**

Tactful

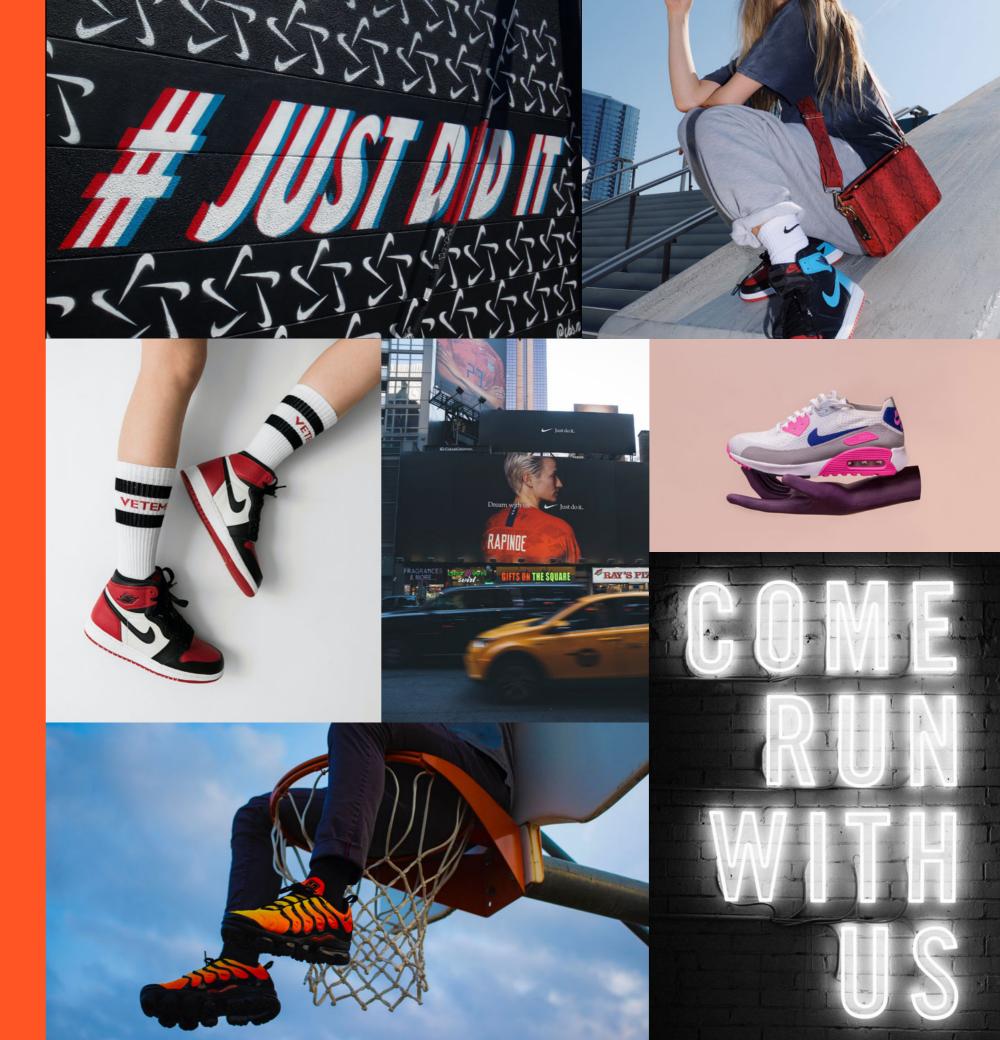
Talented
Thoughtful
Tidy
Traditional
Trustworthy
Unassuming
Unconventional
Urban
Versatile
Warm-hearted
Watchful
Wealthy
Wise
Witty
Young

Hint: It's best to have between3 and 5 key brand personality traits.



Brand storytelling at work: Nike

For three decades, NIKE has been telling the same story about that conflict between the couch potato side of you and sports champion side of you — a universal human truth — and the athletic excellence that can be achieved when you, "Just do it." It's the challenge and the victory wrapped up in a nice, tight little package. In the process, they've turned the audience (and their active selves) into the hero of their brand story. Every print ad, every TV spot, every press release, every utterance of the brand supports this one single idea. Yet, it's fresh and different every time.



Step 5: Craft your brand story

We're all storytellers to one degree or another. So if you're feeling intimidated by this next step, don't be. You know how to tell a good story... you've been doing it all your life. Every night when you go to sleep, your subconscious tells you story after story. Your mom and dad regaled you with stories at your bedside growing up. You tell stories all the time. This is in your DNA.

While the previous four steps are all standard practices in traditional branding methodologies, this step is unique to Pinwheel and yet a practice as old as time. It's an organic, creative process that requires a certain amount of self-trust and intuition to get to the finish line. There are no hard and fast rules for crafting your brand story. It just has to work for you.



What is a brand story?

Narrator The brand personality and the way that person talks MA **Characters Plot** ini Heroes, villains, Order of events, conflict, enablers, partners, etc. drama, climax, etc. Moral **Backstory** Brand origins and/or What your brand has to teach us about the world societal or business context 0 Setting **Audience** Where the story is set Who the story is written for



Get comfortable and curious

Clear your schedule and give yourself a nice chunk of time to work with. Then go find a nice, comfortable space with good light.



Set the Table. Grab a sketchbook and remove anything that's going to distract you. Clean, clear and reflect on all of the information that you've gleaned so far. This step is about preparing your creative mind for making connections and unexpected mental leaps.



Play. Disconnect from the end result and start jotting down ideas. Have fun. Loosen up. Take chances. Geek out. Imagine your brand in different real-life scenarios. This step is all about exploring possibilities. And perhaps it's about realizing just how vast the universe of ideas really is.



Ask Questions. Focus on the intersection between the audience narrative, their existing assumptions about things, the brand character, and company information you collected. Feeling into the connection between all of these different elements, ask yourself questions and jot down the answers. Don't rush it... spend quality time with each of the questions.

- What is the dominant category narrative today? Spend some time deconstructing this. What's the current story system? Who are the players? What sort of imagery are they using?
- What is the theme of your brand story? The most important element of your brand story is the theme. What's it all about? What is the general idea driving your story? For example, our textbook rental client's theme was helping students survive college. Oftentimes, brand stories are about choice points moments when someone faced a challenge and made a choice that led to where we are now. Other times, they are about addressing an injustice, fixing a broken system or filling a void.
- What is the storyline? Are there connected events in your story? A
 chronological order? An event that led to the founding of your company?
 Since a brand's story is ever-evolving, so too is the plot. A plot engages us,

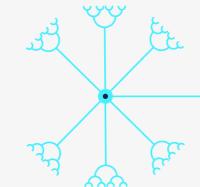
captures our interest, and makes us pay attention. A plot consists of just three elements: a challenge, a choice, and an outcome.

If your brand is a challenger, maybe the events have to do with the dynamics that created the niche that you're filling. Or perhaps the events relate to the failings of your competitors or industry. Or perhaps they're a response to an unmet customer need. Or maybe they have to do with government deregulation.

- Is there a conflict in your story? How your frame the central problem is usually where the drama comes from. And drama is like brain candy for humans. We love it. Who are the good guys? The bad guys? What is 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 don't retell the story of Adam and Eve because it teaches
 us to hate snakes. The story of David & Goliath, for example, teaches
 us that a little guy with courage, resourcefulness, and imagination

can beat a giant. 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."

- 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? Is your audience a participant in your brand story? Maybe there are major decision-makers. 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?





You have creative license

The brand story that you create acts 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?

The currency of brand story is meaning. 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.

Brand story development worksheet

The story theme			
The story plot			
The backstory			
The primary conflict			
The brand's role			
How the story resolves			

Brand story development worksheet

The moral/lesson			
The brand character			
Other characters			

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. Your story will most likely fall into one of these categories.



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 surroundings 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.

Seven tips for brand storytelling





The simpler a story is the more successful it will be

Simple stories 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.

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 phrases like "a rough day," clichés' like "a penny saved is a penny earned," and trite modifiers like "great," and "amazing."



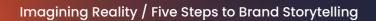


Just because your company isn't sexy, doesn't mean your story must be boring

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 horsedrawn 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.



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 – basically what it actually does in the world. Your social impact work, your promotions, internal branding efforts, employee programs, social media strategies, PR stories... think of the brand – not just as a storyteller – but as an actor in its own story.



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.



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. These tips are based on the same guidance given to Hollywood actors.

First, go inside.

Before you start to write, spend a few minutes putting yourself in the brand character mindset. Turn off your everyday office mindset, relax a bit and think about who the brand is.

Feel your way into the situation.

Now think about the situation you're writing for. What is the brand character's perspective? What kind of mood do you think fits the situation? How do you think the brand would want to come across?

Tap into the emotion.

What is the brand feeling about the situation? Go beyond an intellectual understanding of the subject at hand and really feel it on a visceral level – that's how authenticity comes through in your writing.





Tell your story through your brand experience

Storytelling isn't just about communications. You're creating a whole world – which means your story should come through in the way that people experience the brand. It can come through on the website, the product, the entire omnichannel experience. End to end.

Disneyland, for example, is a master class in brand storytelling. One stroll through the park is about as complete an education on brand storytelling as one can get. The brand story is all about preserving the magic of childhood and every itty 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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Todd is the Executive Creative Director for Pinwheel, a creative agency in California with an emphasis on developing content through a storytelling lens. He is an award-winning copywriter and strategic thinker with 25+ years of 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.



Pinwheel is a brand storytelling and content agency focused on health, wellness and fitness. We help brands develop deeply loyal followings so they can grow and flourish.

Talk to us!

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