



BRAND STORY

Bringing Brand Positioning to Life through Story

The following report is an abridged version from Chapter 8 of *The Indispensable Brand* by Mitch Duckler. The book provides a roadmap for crafting a brand strategy that rises above the noise and monotony in the marketplace... and for catapulting brands from indistinguishable to indispensable.



The Significance of Story

A story is essentially a narrative. It invites listeners to connect with the storyteller through creative and emotional relevance. No matter what the context, stories compel and motivate us in many ways. They serve as an effective vehicle for improving recollection (remembrance over time) and motivation (persuasion toward a new belief or action).

Examples of stories are all around us—in textbooks, magazine articles, political speeches, and business presentations. In fact, according to psychologists, about a third of our waking hours are spent creating stories. The rest of our time is spent consuming the stories of others.¹ Our lives and relationships flow through stories. Whether we are conscious of it or not, humans are usually persuaded more by emotional factors than rational arguments. Simply put, stories are easier to remember than facts or figures.

Great stories also create strong connections between people. The better the story, the stronger the emotional connection. Compelling stories often—though not always—build tension through conflict before offering relief through problem resolution. It is through this problem resolution—and listeners' ability to relate to it—that stories can build an emotional connection. As such, storytelling has meaningful implications for brands, since a great brand story can help a brand establish a meaningful connection with its target audience.



Storytelling in the World of Business

Storytelling is an equally compelling form of communication in business as it is in other societal contexts. Business is often thought of as being driven by evidence and rationale. However, it's important to remember that business executives are still human—still subject to the powerful, transformative properties of storytelling.

The popularity of TED Talks is proof of this. People tend to care less about the research supporting the talks than they do about the stories behind them. If TED speakers were simply reciting facts and statistics, audiences would not be as engaged, and TED Talks would not be as successful as they are today. Great TED speakers like Elon Musk, Jane Goodall, and Bill Gates make it so their stories and imbedded lessons can effectively take root in our minds.²

In 2016, Forbes Agency Council named “humanized storytelling” as one of the most important factors for a TED Talk. According to Brandon Stapper, who was interviewed in the article, “The more compelling approach is to focus on an individual. The audience can either relate to that person, or they cannot, but they should be compelled to some kind of buy-in, emotionally or on a humanistic level. We, humans, are suckers for human stories.”³

More compelling evidence of storytelling's benefits in a business setting is found in a report from Headstream, *The Power of Brand Storytelling: How Brand Storytelling Can Meet Marketing Objectives*, which surveyed two thousand adults in 2015. Specifically, Headstream's research offered four key findings about the importance of good brand stories:

1. YOUNG PEOPLE LIKE STORIES

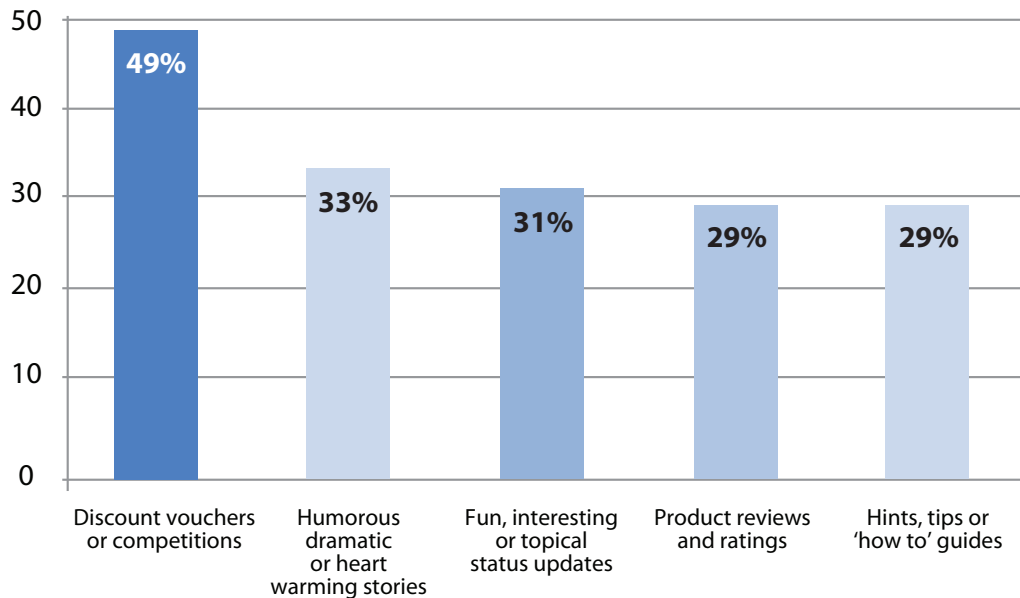
Headstream found that 79 percent of respondents preferred brands that told stories. Millennial consumers are less interested in sales pitches and more responsive to brands they can identify with on a personal level.

2. STORIES TIE TO EMOTIONS

The most impactful types of stories are “humorous, dramatic, or heartwarming.”

Figure 1
Interest Drivers for Brands

Q: What would make you more interested in any brand?



Source: Headstream

People like it when a story makes them feel something. We’re more inclined to listen when brands deliver high-quality stories that affect our emotional state.

3. CONSUMERS LISTEN TO BRANDED STORIES

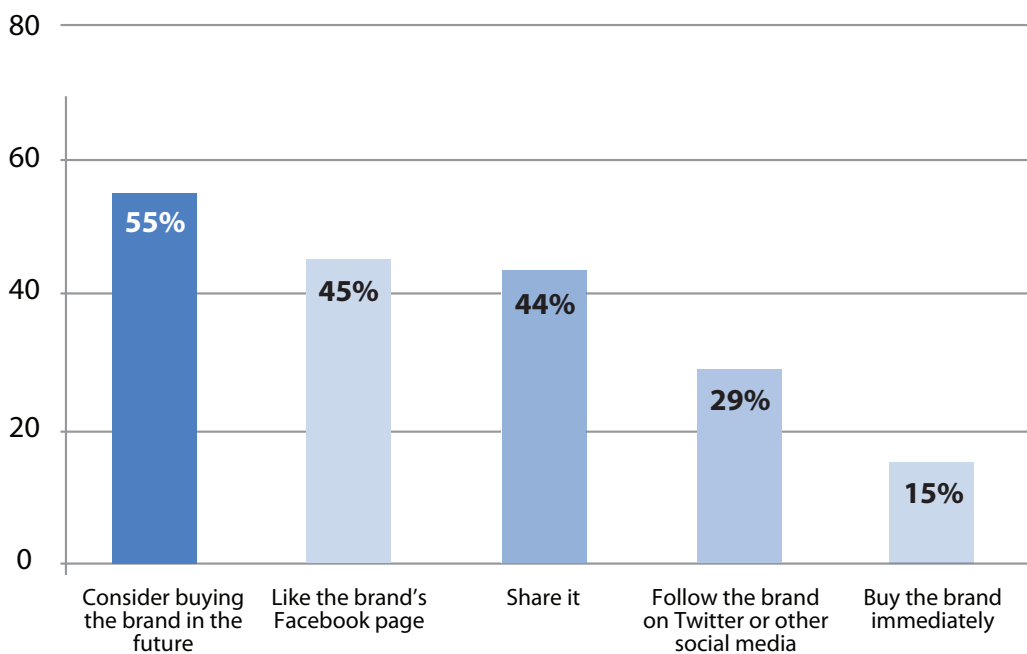
Headstream found that 64 percent of respondents believe that brands tell good stories. This is great news for brands because this means that consumers aren’t automatically assuming that brands only want to sell something. People are willing to hear a good brand story—if the brand is willing to tell it.

4. STORIES TRANSLATE TO REVENUE

Brands with better stories sell more in general, even if the stories themselves aren't sales vehicles. In fact, great stories created purchase intent in 55 percent of surveyed customers.

Figure 2
Impact of a Strong Brand Story

Q: If you really love a story from a brand, what are you likely to do?



Source: Headstream

Stories are highly effective brand assets, but brands need stories that resonate—stories that feel both familiar and exciting. Brand marketers must understand the building blocks of all great stories to create those powerful narratives.

Seven Story Archetypes (and What They Mean to Brands)

In 2004, Christopher Booker published *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*.⁴ He argues that all stories in the world fall into one of seven basic categories. The characters, setting, and motivations may change, but the story arc remains consistent. Let's break down the central components of each story type while sharing real-world examples of how brands use those story archetypes to connect with their audiences.

1. OVERCOMING THE MONSTER

We all love a tale about success against all odds—this is one of the most common story themes. When overcoming the monster, the hero faces a challenge that seems insurmountable. Whether the monster is literal or figurative, the hero must find inner strength to defeat it.

Brands that use this type of story should make the customer the hero of the tale.⁵ In these stories, the product isn't the hero—instead, it's the weapon the consumer wields to conquer the foe.

Example: Nike has successfully depicted the hero's journey for decades. In this case, the hero conquers the monster of laziness and apathy. This example is especially interesting because Nike paints the consumer as both the hero and the villain. Nike realized that everyone could relate to a battle against an inner monster, which in this case, is the inner voice that says, "I can't, because I'm too out of shape, too tired, and would rather sleep in." All Nike products help heroes (customers) emerge triumphant by challenging them to "Just Do It."

2. RAGS TO RICHES

Rags to riches stories begin with a hero that has almost nothing. People don't believe in the hero at first because the hero starts at a disadvantage. It's only through some positive characteristic, like hard work or ingenuity, that the hero can overcome immense odds to rise above and succeed. Beauty products love this story because it allows them to help consumers create riches for themselves (often through transformation). Education, training, and design companies rely on this archetype as well.

Example: Walmart's brand story is one of moderate rags to ultimate riches. In 1950, it started as Walton's 5&10 Store in Bentonville, Arkansas. It has since transformed itself into the behemoth it is today. Walmart's brand narrative is rooted deeply in the story of "Mr. Sam" and his goal to offer great value and customer service.⁶ Many years before opening his first store, Sam Walton went door-to-door to sell milk from the family cow. He later bought a Ben Franklin store in Newport, Arkansas with a \$20,000 loan from his father-in-law and \$5,000 that he saved from time in the army.⁷ With high-volume sales of lower-priced products, his sales strategy was a "crusade for the customer." Over the next sixty-plus years, the Walmart brand has become the largest company in the world by revenue, serving 265 million customers per week, and the largest private employer.⁸ Sam Walton's no-nonsense persona lives on in the brand through everything from Walmart's rigid requirements for vendors to his original promise of great value and customer service.

3. THE QUEST

This story is a linear progression from point A to point B. The protagonist stumbles across obstacles or challenges that must be overcome to progress the journey (and story). Travel and education brands tend to focus on the journey into the unknown, like many other brands in the customer service and entertainment sectors.

Example: The North Face brand stemmed from a small mountaineering store in San Francisco that began in the 1960s.⁹ Its name refers to the side of the mountain with the most unforgiving conditions, which would naturally require the best clothing and gear to tackle. The brand soon grew from a store name to a line of products as the owners began to make their own apparel, with a focus on innovation and performance. North Face remains the go-to-brand for high-performance apparel, footwear, and equipment, pushing the limits of innovation so its customers "never stop exploring."

4. VOYAGE AND RETURN

This archetype is about traversing a mental state. The traveler leaves, gains wisdom, and returns wiser for having been on that journey. The hero travels into the unknown before ultimately succeeding and returning home. Experiential brands about escape or indulgence often tell stories of voyage and return, allowing users to become immersed in a totally different world.

Example: The beer brand Corona's slogan, "Find Your Beach," is more than just a tagline.¹⁰ It's part of an underlying story about breaking away to a personal happy place. When the slogan was first advertised, commercials focused on relaxing scenes at the beach. People would be sitting, toes in the sand, with a tub of Corona bottles beside them. The beach iconography invites beer aficionados to discover a personal state of mind that helps them escape the mundane.

5. COMEDY

The comedic story follows the Shakespearean definition of comedy (vs. sit-com), where parties must face confusion and struggles until they can finally be together. These stories usually involve lots of humorous chaos.

Example: An example of this archetype would be when Allstate tells its customers, “You’re in Good Hands with Allstate,” using the visual of cupped hands to tell its story of protection in the face of misfortune. This is a comedy story that focuses on the calamity that will happen if consumers do not trust Allstate to protect them. This archetype is what inspired the brand’s “Mayhem” campaign, where mayhem is personified and causes unfortunate scenarios covered by Allstate insurance policies. The comedy archetype shines through Allstate’s offer to keep consumers safe when mayhem occurs.

6. TRAGEDY

In tragedy, a character’s flaw or suffering proves to be too much to overcome, resulting in a story without a happy ending. While the tragedy and comedy archetypes both use a brand to protect oneself, the stakes are higher in a tragedy. Medical companies, financial planning companies, and public safety entities often use this archetype to tell a story that encourages safer behavior. It is especially effective for campaigns like public service announcements. This type of account can be used to remind people of potentially tragic consequences, convincing them that the risk of not buying the product is higher than the cost.

Example: Kidde, a maker of fire safety products, can be traced back to its founder, Walter Kidde.¹¹ He was a pioneer of fire safety in the early 1900s. The peace of mind offered by Kidde safety products is essential to the brand. This concept was recently showcased in a Kidde TV campaign called “Technology Saving Lives.” The campaign showed three real-life testimonials of people whose lives were saved by the use of Kidde products. “My son would not be here today,” was one such reference to the potentially tragic consequences that were avoided thanks to Kidde brand products.¹²

7. REBIRTH

Rebirth is a story of change through enlightenment or hardship. After the resurgence, some fundamental component of the past changes, and the reborn person (or brand) now experiences the world more positively. Many categories of brands are in the business of rebirth, including fashion and cosmetics, which communicate the transformative magic of their brands’ products.

Example: The Salvation Army’s brand story has been one of renewal for 120 years. Its founders initially sought out people in bad situations and offered them help in the name of the Christian church.¹³ The organization provides an array of services, including human trafficking prevention, disaster relief assistance, and addiction treatment. It’s tagline, “Doing the Most Good,” leverages donor support to better the lives of people who have fallen on hard times so that they can be renewed with hope.

Six Guiding Principles and Considerations for Brand Storytelling

To capture the attention of consumers, brands must tell their stories in a way that makes sense to their audiences. Brand leaders should consider the following suggestions to get the most from their stories.

1. IDENTIFY YOUR PURPOSE

Consumers are very interested in the companies behind products, so many companies are choosing to position their brands around their unique purposes—their “why.” That purpose is often one of the primary reasons customers purchase from that brand.

Even if a brand is not positioned around a purpose, the “why” can still be an excellent source for a compelling brand story. According to James Dowd in his presentation *The Science of Story*, “There’s always a story behind a brand, whether it’s in the product line or the company value system. It’s just waiting to be told.”¹⁴ A brand’s story is most powerful if its purpose is both relevant and relatable.¹⁵

2. CONSIDER YOUR ORIGIN

How a company was founded can often provide great inspiration for a brand story.

Jim Beam, a family tradition since 1795, relies heavily on the story about its founding and “America’s native spirit.” This applies to all of the company’s spirits, not only to the Jim Beam brand. According to Rebecca Messina, former Beam Suntory chief marketing officer, “All of our brands have a great heritage and an incredible story to tell. When I visit our distilleries and speak with the family members of our brands’ founders, I can listen to them for hours. Part of my job is to make sure those stories are relevant and accessible to the consumers who purchase our brands.”¹⁶

3. UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

Like with brand positioning, the target audience is relevant to the brand story. Customers are typically not the only stakeholders of a brand. It is important to determine who the most important audiences are for a brand story. In most cases, there will be more than one.

Different audiences will gravitate towards different tones of voice, themes, and other communication aspects of a story. It is also important to account for different sets of expectations and create a brand story that satisfies all of them. The story must remain consistent as well for the audiences of any category to take it seriously.¹⁷

4. CREATE CONSISTENT AUTHENTICITY

An authentic story will help customers relax, the first step toward earning their trust.¹⁸ Storytelling should not be a formulaic and mechanical process. Instead of using a story that worked for someone else, allow your voice to shine through. A sincere story from the heart (that remains consistent across audiences and channels) will gain the most interest.¹⁹

5. BRING OUTSIDERS INTO THE FOLD

Inspiration for great brand stories can come from outside company walls. Customer testimonials are excellent sources of inspiration. According to Headstream's study, 57 percent of consumers "love" stories based on true events that happened to real people."²⁰ Real-life stories also represent one of the best ways brands can avoid coming across as self-serving in their storytelling.

Let audience members define the story on their own, and in the ways that are most relevant and personal to them. Singtel, a Singapore telecom company, embraced this concept. It asked its Twitter followers to talk about times when fast network speeds are most useful. The company then turned the best suggestions into comedic skits, even bringing in Singaporean comedy icon Hossan Leong.

6. IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BRAND (UNTIL IT IS)

Companies need to avoid the temptation to make the brand story all about themselves, but they must keep in mind that the brand story is ultimately designed to help sell the brand. During brand story creation, managing the entertainment and sales aspects is a delicate balancing act. Dowd's presentation reminds us that customers are the true heroes of their own stories, but they couldn't be the heroes they are without the brands by their side.²¹



What to Do Once the Story Has Been Crafted

Once a brand story is solidified, you must pay close attention to its dissemination. Only posting story-related assets on a blog will not suffice. Brand marketers should follow a deliberate strategy that includes social media posts, email campaigns, traditional media placement, and other conventional marketing strategies. Every channel has a different blend of audiences, so the dissemination strategy should be adjusted with that in mind.²²

Consumers prefer to control their own story consumption, so brand marketers should also utilize paid media to place their stories in convenient locations for audiences to view. Video marketing has also gained popularity in recent years, an unsurprising development, given the emotional nature of stories and increased potency of audiovisual content. Dove, Apple, and Weight Watchers are just a few brands that communicate their stories through video and have experienced tremendous success.

The delivery of the story should ultimately be treated with just as much care as its creation. Executing a multiplatform approach to spread the message to different target audiences on different channels will ensure that the brand receives the attention it deserves.

Tell a Story for the Ages

Brand stories have recently gained popularity as a strategic asset and activation tool. Within a given target audience, the brand story is a narrative designed to evoke positive emotions about the brand. While a story might inspire an advertisement or campaign, a great story will outlive almost any advertising campaign a company develops. Brand stories have lasting power. They even outlive brand positioning, which can lose relevance as consumer preferences shift over time.

Brand stories, positioning, and other aspects of branding have the ultimate objective of creating meaningful differentiation for the brand. The brand story remains an effective brand strategy tool to help marketers establish a competitive advantage.


Notes

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