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Storytelling: Breathe Life Into Your Messages

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What do great books, movies and marketing campaigns have in common? A great story.

With the plethora of advancing technologies—including one that limits our thoughts to 140 characters or less—it's ironic that the hottest trend in marketing might be the ancient art of storytelling. A great story can entertain, inspire, ignite and even move people to tears. In marketing, stories bring brands to life, giving them perspective, context and personality. In a time when customers are bombarded day in and day out with fragmented media and messaging, it's critical to build meaningful connections between brands and consumers. Every company that wants to remain competitive and relevant needs to be telling its story. Like ancient storytelling, brand stories can leave an indelible mark on people that can last for years, continuing to grow and deepen relationships.

Storytelling Delivers More Meaningful Messages

Brand storytelling isn't a new concept. With the explosive growth of social media and a renewed attention to content marketing, however, companies are focusing on strategic storytelling as a way to convey marketing initiatives to consumers. Storytelling accomplishes what other forms of marketing can't. "It has an ability to make an emotional connection with the audience and get into the heart and soul of the consumer," says Joe Cecere, President and Chief Creative Officer of Minneapolis-based Little, whose clients include Lowe's, Target and Wells Fargo. Cecere says that the human desire for storytelling harkens back to our childhoods. "Stories were things that we could engage in, get lost in and that stuck with us," he says.

Beyond making an emotional connection, storytelling allows brands to simplify the complex by weaving together multiple messages. "When used effectively, storytelling engages people, helps them connect the dots, and gets across complex and even difficult messages in a

memorable way," Cecere says.

Storytelling also helps customers connect with brands on a higher level that can drive buying decisions. "The brain is stimulated best whenever people relate to other people, their experiences or events," says Tara Guthrie, Marketing Communications Specialist for Alchemy Systems, an Austin-based company that provides workplace safety training and technologies. Storytelling "challenges the brain to learn, interact and conceptualize ideas that stimulate the brain on a personal level," according to Guthrie. She explains that this emotional connection is far stronger than the effects of traditional advertising.

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Stories of Origin

Telling the story of a company's beginnings allows a brand to recount memorable moments and impart a message to the audience about what inspired the founders to take a risk. The humble beginnings of Nordstrom department stores are a classic rags-to-riches tale. In 1887, 16-year-old Swedish immigrant John W. Nordstrom came to America with \$5 in his pocket and a dream of opportunity. Not speaking a word of English, he spent many years working as a logger and miner. After spending two years in Alaskan gold mines, he had earned \$13,000 that he would use to start the Seattle shoe store that would later become Nordstrom, Inc., which now includes 271 stores in 36 states.

This story invites consumers into the founder's journeys, struggles and triumphs. Shoppers who understand the humble origins of the lavish department store may be more likely to trust that each product has been carefully selected for its quality, workmanship and value.

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APPROACHES TO BRAND STORYTELLING

- 1 ORIGIN
- 2 VISION AND VALUES
- 3 CUSTOMERS

Just as there are endless variations of a story in literature or film, brand storytelling can take different formats. The three basic forms of brand storytelling are:

Stories of Vision and Value

These stories convey brand messages of how a business contributes to its world, makes people's lives better and sees itself in the future. Many companies list their vision and value statements on the corporate website, in employee handbooks and on a plaque in the lobby. "If we can get it down to a simple, impactful and relevant story about why the company exists, we'll create an authentic and memorable message," Cecere says.

In late 2013, Chipotle released a video that told the story of a scarecrow living in

a processed-food dystopia and his dreams of transforming his tiny garden into an abundant farm. In addition to exposing how automated machines have replaced American workers in processed-food factories, "The Scarecrow" memorably conveyed Chipotle's commitment to ethically produced, farm-to-plate food. "The Scarecrow" received more than 13 million views on YouTube, more than 12,000 Facebook posts and more than 31,000 tweets from 26,000 unique users. This translates into more than 126 million impressions without a single paid placement.

CHIPOTLE'S "THE SCARECROW"



Stories of Customers

Nothing is more powerful than the words of a satisfied customer. Consumers don't trust businesses that promote their own interests. Rather, they trust independent peers in similar circumstances. Customer stories may take the form of testimonials that tell how a business improved the lives of its customers. A series of testimonial videos developed by Alchemy Systems tells the story of the food industry as a whole, how the company was able to improve the operational efficiency of its customers and even highlights how the products and services have impacted customer profitability. "Instead of telling a story about our own product, we look to a customer's greatest asset—its employees—to tell the story for us," Guthrie says. Citing video as the "stickiest" or most memorable form of media, Alchemy Systems is taking a bottom-up approach to the video testimonial series. Featuring front-line employees who share their own stories of decreased workplace injury, enhanced job safety and improved productivity, the video closes with images of employees' family photos, reminding viewers that the company is "safe for these reasons."

"WITH THOUSANDS OF MESSAGES BEING DISTRIBUTED and received via multiple platforms every day, the success of brand storytelling lies in the creation of a story that connects with customers and prospects on a deeper, more meaningful level."

Tips for Telling a Better Story

A good brand story includes the same components of a classic tale: a hero, a conflict and a resolution to the conflict. Guthrie recommends the use of a story arc to create the framework for an effective brand story that walks the audience through a real-life experience. "After setting up the scenario or problem, the rising action paints a picture of a real-life struggle," she says. "The climax of the story is where it is implemented and realized. The conclusion portrays a satisfied customer, solution to a problem or a life made easier as a result of your product or service," she advises. Cecere believes that an emotional connection is essential in a world of constant and competing brand messages. "If you don't hit them in the heart, you'll lose them," he says.

There are psychological, biological and neurological reasons why people throughout history have been telling stories through any communication means available. Whether in the form of cave paintings, campfire stories, classic books or blockbuster movies, storytelling stands the test of time. Simply put, humans are hardwired to consume, experience and share stories. Storytelling is one of the most effective ways to connect with your audience through an authentic human experience. Storytelling not only builds brand authority and credibility, but also humanizes corporate brands.

We are all storytellers, but some of us are better at it than others. Americans consume more than 10,000 digital words every day. With thousands of messages being distributed and received via multiple platforms every day, the success of brand storytelling lies in the creation of a story that connects with customers and

prospects on a deeper, more meaningful level. Those marketers who continue to focus on keywords will soon go the way of the dinosaur. Today's content creators will have the upper hand if they produce evocative work with a laser-sharp understanding of the audience to construct their own stories and measure the results.

BIO

Cerri Knilians is President of Trade Press Services, a California-based corporate communications and media relations firm. Since 1995, the company has delivered writing and publishing services that help clients increase visibility, develop a competitive edge, become a recognized industry leader and achieve their marketing goals. For more information, visit the company website at www.tradepressservices.com.

FEATURED PERSPECTIVES



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