

# Content and Brand Storytelling



**PART ONE****How to deliver content that hooks and holds**

It is impossible to talk about great storytelling and content delivery without talking about the importance of language, both written and spoken. While it is fairly straightforward to tell a story in pictures, eventually the mind reaches out for words to describe and explain things. This is the essence of storytelling.

**Survival of the chattiest**

The drive to communicate through telling stories is hardwired into the human brain. It's a lucky gift, and arguably an accidental one, that has enabled Homo sapiens to outwit the brawniest of beasts with the sharpest of claws. Verbal communication has continued to evolve over hundreds of thousands of years to become the most useful survival tool at our disposal.

Being equipped to tell people what we want, without pointing or averting our eyes from a threat, has ensured our success as a species. And, historically, when opposing sides finally put down their swords, it was into a world of words – albeit carefully chosen ones – that they were transported.

**26 letters: a billion brand stories**

For brands, this is the number one consideration. Which words from that half-a-million coined from 26

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simple letters should be selected to engender conversation and spawn remuneration?

Brand managers are faced with the daunting task of taking the choicest words and placing them side-by-side, in the right order to formulate a story – to hook the audience and hold them.

The survival story leans heavily on the art of persuasion, and to persuade, one must have a decent story ready to deploy.

### **The problem with paraphrasing**

Trouble is, words are slippery little suckers? They slither and slide over each other like eels in a tub; they dive, shimmy and switch like a bait ball of sardines reflected in the eye of a nearby shark. The right word one moment, when suddenly and unexpectedly juxtaposed with another, becomes entirely the wrong word.

Words are fickle, mercurial, capricious, spiteful things! This is the main reason the wastepaper basket never sits far from the wordsmith's desk. Despite all this, we want them, need them, daresay even – as they turn kicking screaming away from us – love them. But why? Perhaps it is because they are the threads that become the fabric of each and every story that engages the customer, turning him or her, by gentle persuasion, from a browser into a buyer. Without words, without stories, the idea of meaning ceases.

### **Speak to the emotions**

But what is the litmus test of a good story, well told? Firstly, it must strike a chord at the emotional level. It's no good stimulating the mind if you can't reach in and touch the heart. Secondly, it must achieve the purpose of driving those whose minds and heart it resonates with to take some sort of positive action. Noteworthy here is that a call to action alone isn't much good if a good story doesn't precede it.

### **The letter that lined the pockets of WSJ**

Take the following example, a powerful letter that illustrates the power of a good story to drive business to stratospheric heights. The introduction, the meat of the story, is just 123 words. Combined with the easy yet persuasive 340 word call-to-action that follows, the 'billion dollar letter', as it's come to be known, was so named because, in its 25 years of continuous use, that's how much money it generated in subscriptions for the Wall Street Journal.

### **A tale of telepathy**

The writer Steven King in his book *On Writing* said that writing is telepathy, adding: 'all the arts depend on telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing offers the purest distillation.'

Over twenty-five years, the 'billion dollar letter' never changed; the timeless story was sent out over and over, communicating the same simple message to many thousands of people, invariably eliciting the same head/heart response that inspired action and got great fiscal results for WSJ.

Put another way good story takes the complexities of life and presents them in logical, cohesive, usually linear form that resonates with the wide range of complex human emotions.

### **Google: sexing up 'search' through storytelling**

Brands that have a grasp of telling a good story have a better chance of positively influencing consumer decisions. Squeezing the essence from what sits at the heart of your brand, then synthesizing it through the lens of clear thinking into a compelling narrative, is an invaluable skill.

Google's 'Parisian Love' is a perfect example of storytelling that takes something as apparently mundane as a search engine and gives it a romantic twist. Other innovative marketing campaigns by Google focus on how searches can become stories. Google's use of the human stories to personalize its brand have helped give meaning to the meaningless. Google has hung a trinket in its window, to remind the viewer that the window is there. Transparency, after all, is one thing, ignorance of a brand is another. Once in a while it pays to remind the world that your brand is there by using a little sleight of hand.

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**PART TWO**

**To boost engagement, turn the lens on emotion**



**Social platforms lead a return to the long-form**

While some lament the fact that storytelling has become something of a dry buzzword, the essence of it sucked out by overuse, it’s worth noting that nothing beats it, and that brands need to get better at it. It’s one of the reasons brands are often bypassing agencies and making a beeline for filmmakers and journalist to craft their narrative for them. Why is this happening? Predominantly because of social media and the elimination of restrictions on video length. Despite supposed short attention spans and scanning by viewers, the long form is making a rampant comeback, and both filmic and journalistic skills are in hot demand. On top of this, consumers increasingly expect a brand narrative. Of course, the caveat here is that whatever story gets told, it needs to be good – convincing, informative, sans BS, relevant, timely, engaging. It’s a tall order. Just ask Coppola and Scorsese.

**Or, you could keep it short and sweet**

Still, anybody who thinks that telling a great story is synonymous with delivering a protracted yarn would do well to consider Ernest Hemmingway’s shortest story ever told.

*For sale: Baby shoes. Never Worn.*

Short and sweet, it hits the spot. The apocryphal tale (the story around the story if you will), is that Hemmingway took up a bet that he could write a six-word story that would make people cry. Put another way, he believed in the power of words to transform thinking and touch the emotions in less than the two or three seconds it takes to read his six short words, pounded out on an old typewriter.

### **Kleenex mops up with emotion**

Kleenex happens to agree with Mr. Hemmingway. In an effort to make people cry and have them reaching for their favorite brand of tissues, this summer Kimberly-Clark, the company that owns the brand, launched a new campaign entitled Time for Change. The campaign resonates with the Pay it Forward ethos of helping people when they're down, and making the world a better place.

Although selling on the basis of facts and functionality, things like texture and absorbency, have hitherto been the go-to strategy, Kleenex is now going straight for the heart with 'share care' videos. In the words of Eric Higgs, Kimberly Clark's general manager, a Kleenex tissue isn't just a tissue, but a "gesture of care". The strapline someone needs one reflects the brands shift away from the product toward some of the emotive situations in which the product will be used. Other brands are also framing themselves in similar ways.

### **The bell tolls for luxury homes (in a good way)**

Take Toll homes, the biggest luxury home building company in the US. The reason Toll homes has managed to successfully connect with consumers is that it isn't focusing on itself, it isn't saying "look at us and the fabulous homes we build". The focus instead is on the experience that takes place in the spaces the company creates. Videos on its lifestyle channel – lifestyle being the big clue here – run the gamut from wine storing tips and outdoor home maintenance reminders, to fully fledged three-minute cooking shoots with award-winning chef, James Beard. The point is, focusing on the product is what people expect, and Toll has gone beyond expectation to drive phenomenal engagement. In a test launch, its 'grilled shrimp and arugula' video had 1.6million views. But the more important metric is that 90 percent of people watched more than 70 percent of the video, highlighting the demand for quality content.

Delivering the unexpected keeps people engaged. And here it seems that the age-old adage: sell the sizzle (or shrimp), not the sausage (luxury homes) still applies.

### **A novel idea, or are brand stories in a league of their own?**

One of the questions that springs to mind when thinking about storytelling is this: is telling your brand story similar to telling other types of story, such as novels, fairytales, and screenplays, or is it different enough to be treated as a unique discipline in its own right? Does telling a brand story need to be handled in a completely different way? The short answer to this would be, yes, handle it differently, and here's why...

Go to any movie, read any book from cover to cover, and something becomes apparent. If it's any good, it will engage the emotions, stimulate the mind and lead to deeper thought and possible conversation. In other words, it will stick. But a movie will end, and a book will end, whereas a brand story never ends.

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A company established for a hundred years is no doubt bursting with potential stories. The difficult thing is choosing what to say, and getting behind an emotive message that will resonate best with the target audience.

### **MorningStar Farms boxing clever**

As mentioned, many brands are turning to professional filmmakers and journalists to convey their sentiments, employing a documentary-style approach to their messaging. MorningStar Farms made “The Veg Effect”, running with the strapline: ‘5 stories, 5 different veggie full lives’.

Using stories to promote a vegetarian lifestyle, the brand called on a butcher (ironically), tap dancer, beer brewer, stuntwoman, and hip-hopper to tell their individual vegan and vegetarian tales?

### **Real stories, real people.**

Carefully curated, the subjects have been expertly filmed in their specific environments to talk about their vegetarian lifestyle choices. Once again, the camera doesn’t linger on branded products but draws the audience in with stories that resonate at the human level. And lest we forget, these real, emotive, visually captivating stories aren’t there to sell veg per se but to sell a specific type of veg-based product, namely products made by MorningStar Farms. They’re not shouting their name from the rooftops, or even the farm furrows, they’re getting behind stories that people can relate to, and it’s working.

**PART THREE**

## Content and the platform puzzle: how the Discovery Channel solved it



When it comes to contextualizing brand story, more thought needs to be given to strategy, and one of the most critical aspects of this is distribution. Think of it this way: even the most wonderful tale ever told, ever written or filmed, doesn't amount to a can of beans if nobody ever reads or watches it.

### A click, alone, is not enough

Knowing when and where to fire, to give your masterfully crafted brand story the best chances of success, requires a certain amount of diligence. Understanding which platforms work best then using those platforms effectively is the difference between your brand story reaching a thousand or a hundred thousand people. Clicks are important, but the key metric is time spent. How sticky is your site, your story, the very approach you take with your audience? How long do viewers spend luxuriating in what you have made for them?

If, as Toll Homes in the last piece in this series showed, you not only achieve high click throughs, but, because you have delivered engaging content and maintained attention span for the full length of your

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video content, and published it on the best platforms for your brand, the chances of your campaigns being successful are multiplied.

### **Be platform specific**

One key thing that has changed for brands is that they now have to navigate a growing number of platforms. The time saved by technology, which has both enabled the creation of attractive content and, with the press of a 'publish' button, instant global interaction with that content, is negatively impacted by the superabundance of platforms to wade through, choose from and create content for. Straight out replication of content or crude repurposing won't cut it either. Today, brands must adapt their content to meet the specific needs of each individual platform.

### **Discovering platform mastery**

Take the Discovery Channel, the third most widely distributed cable channel in the United States, with ten sister channels. Its marketing team takes a needlepoint approach to reaching the right people with the right message at the right time. Several years ago, the company had, as many companies do, tried out the one-size-fits-all approach to digital marketing, assuming that what, for example, was good for a YouTuber was also good for a FaceBook user.

Far from being a paint-it-by-numbers solution to marketing, Discovery Channel's marketing team learned that audience behaviors were more nuanced than they had hitherto imagined and that even the same individual using different platforms had different expectations.

The major discovery made by the brand was: embrace the platform and don't ignore the time and place of social. Maximizing all-important ROI was all about getting customization right.

### **Seeking the right metrics**

Discovery Communication's most recent digital network, Seeker has its focus on adventurers, explorers, and storytellers. Launched in 2015 the channel and resource already has 300million social followers.

Having a separate strategy for Facebook, Instagram and YouTube is the main reason that, within a year, Seeker had managed to draw such a large, diverse global audience. For example, when Discovery Communication's marketing team found out that most people using Facebook scan through their posts with the sound off, and that the platform itself defaults to sound off for viewers, they had to reimagine their video content to get the most out of the platform. Video with bold lines of text to complement the images and grab attention was their chosen route was the answer.

### **Quick edits. Bold captions.**

In a mobile-first world where people are often plugged into their headphones while looking at the screen, bold captions marked the difference between viewers ignoring the video, or turning the sound on to access a deeper experience. Powerful words with powerful images were the hook. The interesting thing is that sound being switched on became a key metric showing how well a particular piece of content worked inspiring viewers to action.

### **Read all about it! Or just watch the video.**

Discovery News, which provides fun science content, has two million YouTube subscribers. On Facebook, the same brand has around 6.5million fans. Discovery does not deliver the same content to these two platforms. The demographics are different, the platforms are different, and the expectations of visitors are different.

Metrics revealed that visitors to these sites have different tolerance thresholds. Where YouTubers are happy to soak up dozens of videos, one after the other, their Facebook counterparts watch no more than three. All of which goes to show that, in today's online, digital world, without data brands are flying blind.

### **Every story needs a platform from which to tell it**

So when it comes to storytelling, crucially, it is the type of platform and the expectations of viewers will dictate video length and delivery protocols. Once the data has shown what these are it's down to the marketing team and its 'brand storytellers' to present their chosen stories according to these parameters.

Importantly, brands that succeed in engaging their target audiences aren't just telling stories; they're adapting, amending and editing those stories to get the highest level of impact depending on which platform their content goes on. This might be as simple as taking a long-form video, say three to five minutes, and assiduously, retaining the key elements of the brand story, cutting it down to 30 seconds, or it might mean starting from scratch with a new piece of tailored content. Either way, the important thing is knowing the customers, knowing the platforms, knowing how your customers interact with your brand on those platforms and how and what they like to consume, then giving them more of what they want in ever new and innovative ways.

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