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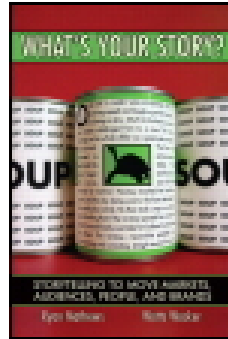
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What's Your Story

Storytelling to Move Markets, Audiences, People, and Brands



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■ The Big Idea

Storytelling is a universal human activity. At every stage in history, every society has both told stories and listened to them intently and passionately. Storytelling is the method by which people tell each other who they are, where they come from, what they believe, and how they're unique from one another. They capture their memories of the past and hopes for the future.

And, in addition, stories are the most powerful, most underutilized tools for competitive advantage. Whether you know it or not, your business is already telling stories; the important thing is to learn to recognize them as such and utilize them to help you succeed.

Why You Need This Book

What's Your Story? will help you take control of the stories your company is already telling and make them work for you – make them contribute to your success.

This book showcases such vital themes as the ten functions of storytelling; the abolition of context; the five most important story themes; storytelling for your industry, your company, your brand, and you; and mastering your storyteller's toolbox in order to make your stories more compelling, more believable, and downright unforgettable so that your stories get heard, remembered, and acted on.

The Story Of Stories

Successful companies know that more often than not in business, it's really the same old story – it's all about understanding how to use the elements of stories and storytelling to drive business improvement.

Any and all businesses in the world today can improve both internal and external performance through the study and mastery of the basic element of storytelling. It's so effective that good storytelling can actually launch industries themselves. Storytelling has the power to change the destiny of companies, industries, nations and ultimately the world.

It's quite possible that your business already engages in a good deal of storytelling. Creating stories and telling them are the most universal human activities. In the same way that we all use the basic concept of stories in everyday situations, businesses make use of stories to handle such key tasks as employee recruitment, morale building, sales, branding, and marketing.

Some people have this idea that business is a unique human activity that is subject only to its own rules and that storytelling is just a form of entertainment without commercial application – those ideas are dangerous. Tap into popular culture and/or link your business story to stories that already resonate with your target audience, and you'll be well on your way to success.

Truth Stories Versus True Stories

A story that conveys a *truth* seems like it should be considered more important than a merely *true* story.

Storytelling lesson #1 is that stories, whether personal or corporate, don't necessarily have to be true to contain truth. When it's done well, storytelling – especially corporate storytelling – becomes an exercise in conveying truth statements instead of true statements.

True statements are verified by contemporary observational methods. Our idea of what is true can often be evolving and fluid – true statements can be subjective, they report what was apparently true as seen at the time. They reflect immediate circumstances and are thus defined by the context of their time. True statements are experienced on a primarily intellectual level.

Truth statements, on the other hand, are timeless. This is because they can be – and are – verified by personal experience throughout history and reinforced by historical and popular culture. The truth is constant, immutable, and eternal; it will always be true at all times and in all cultures. Truth statements are objective; every element can be verified. Truths are experienced on a variety of levels – intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Lastly, truth statements define context.

The 10 Functions Of Storytelling

Storytelling lesson #2 is that in the end, storytelling always comes down to just two fundamental elements: connection with the audience (stories trace the connections of people with each other and their society), and engagement – the ability to build a connection and form a meaningful, sustainable relationship.

Here are the 10 functions of storytelling:

1. **Explain origins.** The story of 'the beginning' is the primal story. Origin stories are the critical building blocks of all mythologies and cultures – and of all businesses and companies.
2. **Define individual and group identity.** A second set of stories describes the relationship of the self to the other and, by extension, to all others.
3. **Communicate tradition and delineate taboo.** There has always been a need for an easily communicated and commonly accepted vehicle to explain social relationships and proper behavior. Establishing corporate traditions and delineating taboo behavior are obvious tools for reinforcing group identity.
4. **Simplify and provide perspective; reduce complex problems to a series of easily digested principles.** Intricate themes are converted into simple, universally accessible stories – such as “At Ford, quality is Job

- One” or “We try harder” – both of which eliminate the need for a complex discussion of plant capacity, value for money, and/or other considerations.
5. **Illustrate the natural order of things.** In the business world a pictograph, a story in symbols such as an organizational chart, is used to illustrate the chain of being. Everyone gets to see where he or she stands in relation to the whole company.
 6. **Concisely communicate complex history.** The story version of fact is easier to remember and retell because it eliminates any needless details and unknown or contradictory elements. It leaves out what might be confusing and/or challenging to remember.
 7. **Communicate moral and ethical positions and the transference and preservation of values.** Starbucks, for example, uses the stories of its charitable activity – such as its commitment to fair trade or giving away used coffee grounds for compost – to tell its corporate story.
 8. **Illustrate relationships to, and with, authority.** Greek myths were good at describing the fate of those who argued with the gods or offended them in some manner; modern corporations are as intolerant regarding defiance.
 9. **Describe appropriate behaviors to life or model behaviors.** Every story or myth has something to say about what life is – how it should be – lived.
 10. **Define reward and detail the paths to salvation and damnation.** This final principle lies at the heart of such stories as Lancelot’s search for the Holy Grail and Darth Vader’s rise, fall and redemption.

The Abolition Of Context

Those 10 functions of storytelling can be further reduced to a single, simple overriding principle: the function of a story is to provide a vehicle for communicating images that constitute an end in themselves, or, in turn, communicate a specific point of view, moral principle, or other such device to his or her audience.

Stories are almost totally dependent on their context being collectively recognized by an audience – if an audience and a storyteller can’t agree on a common basic framework (which is the definition of ‘Abolition of Context’), it’s impossible to tell a story that makes sense. The impact of a story will depend completely on the context in which the audience hears or views it.

Who Owns Your Brand?

An interesting trend has been taking place recently. Consumers, not marketers, have become the de facto co-branders without portfolio of the 21st century. Or, in simpler terms, the audience has become the storyteller. Increasingly, brands are being defined not by those who bring them to market – but by the market itself.

This of course means that when you lose control of your story, it starts to unravel and lose its hold over your customers. And this has resulted in the erosion of brand loyalty, thanks to the inability to tell a story convincingly and the inability to find and define, in a quite literal sense, the audience.

How, then, do companies reestablish a sense of identity? Through the application of classical myth making and storytelling. By defining a collective story or group myth, corporations can draw distinct lines between themselves and their competitors, definitions often adopted by both the companies' employees and their customers alike.

Five Critical Story Themes

Those seeking to create a corporate story can relax a bit. There exist five critical story themes that can be used to create a corporate story; all that needs to be done is to adapt a few new details to them:

1. **The hero's quest** – Heroes set off on quests that, if successful, will fulfill all their ambitions and help them realize their destinies. The lesson is that nothing comes easily or without trial.
2. **Creation stories** – Myths and stories of creation are the most universal of all the stories that deal with identity and purpose. The elements that can be tied directly with creation stories are as follows: authenticity, authority, continuity of tradition, credibility (validation over time), acknowledged source of innovation, kinship, collective strength, growth and evolution, and originality.
3. **Stories of transformation** – this can be used as a subtext to many larger themes. It is often one of the end products of the Hero's Quest, for instance, or it can be a punishment for failure to follow certain laws or strictures.
4. **Myths of the fall and redemption** – the idea of collapse and renewal lies at the heart of Judeo-Christian tradition. But these theme isn't confined to

just religion; innocence's loss through the fall and wisdom's gain through redemption can also be seen in the story of Prometheus.

5. **The myth of the crossroads** – these myths center around the criticality of choice. These are critical interruptions to a journey where the unknown is met, fear is confronted and either wins or is vanquished, and where critical choices are made.

Five Stages Of Business Evolution

Here we reexamine each of the critical stories we discussed in the previous section, and match them with a corresponding stage in business evolution.

Said stages are as follows:

1. **The entrepreneurial vision**– Every business, whether large or small, began as a vision in the mind of its founder or founders. It is the necessary precondition for all business formation. This story pairs up almost perfectly with the Hero's quest, as discussed in the previous chapter. The efforts of entrepreneurs – they start off by looking for something and generally take the long way around to find it and find success – match up with the Hero's quest.
2. **The establishment of the enterprise** – Stories about how businesses were built – whether accurate or not! – form the creative mythology of capitalism. This is why this stage matches perfectly with the Creation story discussed in the previous section. They set the backdrop for how companies want to be thought of by their employees and their customers.
3. **The corporate coming of age** – These are paired with the stories of transformation. How and why companies change or 'come of age' can become the stuff of legend (again, this is true whether or not the stories are actually accurate).
4. **The crisis phase** – The crisis phase of a business (every business usually has at least one in its history) very often echoes the stories of the fall and/or redemption stories. Businesses can and do enter into crisis at multiple points of their history. Often, they reach this phase when a business plateaus.
5. **The transition phase** – This phase is entered every time a business, its board, or its CEO takes a firm stand in the face of an uncertain future – corresponding exactly with the Crossroads stories discussed previously. Most businesses pass in and out of minor transition phases several times

each week, if not each day. But the Transition phase stories of note are the big ones, the kind where a firm or its leader was faced with a make-or-break decision.

Applied Storytelling 101: Industries

Here are some guidelines for storytelling in industries. More specifically, storytelling to back the creation of a new industry.

1. The establishment of a new industry involves the manipulation of several stories. More than just the one or two stories needed when you establish a new business in an already-established industry. You are establishing more than just one thing.
2. It's critical that the strands of past stories be woven together to form what seems like an entirely new story. Cast your vision as unique and contemporary. Use references to the past, but don't acknowledge them. Your story must seem as fresh as your industry even if it isn't.
3. Big stories require big storytellers. Someone big should back up what is being said – and stories to put up new industries are really big stories.
4. Inventing an industry is really hard work. Few people have ever done it, and it's becoming harder and harder to do every day.
5. Most of the time, creating an industry involves several individuals.
6. Stories supporting the creation of an industry have to be as inclusive as possible. Include all the details you need – or think you need – in order to establish the firm need for the new industry.

Applied Storytelling 101: The Corporation

If the story to be told is to be done in support of the modification of an already existing industry, a much “smaller” story, one that focuses on corporations instead, is needed.

To choose the right corporate story, here are 11 basic suggestions:

1. Try to make your story as human as possible. Make it the story of people and let their faces become the face of the company.

2. Tell your story – not the story you wish you had. It's very dangerous to be aspirational about the past; you can easily do so about the future, but not about the past.
3. It's a story, feel free to make it colorful.
4. Consult the classics if you're stuck for a plot. Mythology and folklore are full of good plot lines and literally devices, one or more of which are bound to fit your needs.
5. Whenever possible, let your customers help tell your story for you (as discussed in a previous section).
6. Always remember that you're telling this story to an audience that either hasn't heard it, doesn't know the players involved, doesn't care about it unless you give them a reason to care, is skeptical, is flat-out hostile to you, or all of the above.
7. Keep your story fresh. History is fine – but not at the expense of contemporary touch points to keep your story fresh and applicable.
8. Be conscious of opportunities to tie your vision statement, mission statement, corporate credo, web materials, press releases and so on, to your story.
9. Don't get carried away embellishing your story that your critics can use it against you.
10. Remain constantly aware of the audience. Always remember who they are and how they prefer to be addressed. Never forget that your audience is both internal and external.
11. If you're not comfortable telling your own story, hire someone to tell it for you.

Applied Storytelling 101: The Brand

Here are the 10 rules for storytelling branders:

1. Brands are the tangible connection points between an enterprise and its customers. A brand's story must engage an audience at a human level to be effective, which is why customer testimonials are so critical.

2. Stick to basic plots. Branding is an exercise in democratic communication, so it will help to keep your brand plots simple. Branding isn't a game of subtlety – brand stories should be built with interlocking layers of nuance.
3. Don't forget that you're telling a story. Good stories merely entertain, but great stories allow people to discover themselves or hidden aspects of themselves, and it's not hard to connect brands to this aspect of stories.
4. Avoid mixed messaging. Simple stories never involve contradictory elements. Make sure to keep such things out of your brand-related stories.
5. The development of great characters is one of the elements that set good stories apart. Brands that have developed iconic characters, such as the Energizer bunny and Mr. Clean, tend to be retained longer by customers – in some cases, even after the particular ad campaign or even the brands themselves have been cancelled.
6. Branding stories need to be more like fables than fairy tales. They're most effective when they have a moral or ethical underpinning. If you want people to believe in your brand, first tell them what the brand itself believes in.
7. The time horizon of your branding story needs to be tied to the characteristics of your brand. If your brand stays static over time, tie your stories to tradition and root them in history. If your brand is more dynamic and more innovative, keep your stories constantly updated.
8. All stories need to be entertaining. Brand stories are definitely no different.
9. Brands are also statements of qualities or characteristics in addition to being statements of values. You have to understand your audience in order to successfully tell the story of your brand.
10. Conflict may be a critical element in most storytelling, but it really needs to be tightly controlled in branding situations.

Applied Storytelling 101: The Individual

Here are some tips regarding storytelling for the individual.

1. Characters in a story don't have to be "real" to be "real." If you build a credible enough story, the characters can take on all the properties of actual individuals in the audience's mind.
2. If you're building an individual story, always keep in mind that there are two basic paths you can choose to follow. You can portray yourself as always having been one certain way. Or you could have developed certain characteristics as the result of a revelation, impactful experience or test of character.
3. Building up an individual's story is often useful in the business world. The danger here is that sometimes characters can outgrow a company and become larger than life. The person can gain too much leverage in the company; such situations always lead to temporary disaster unless and until resolved.
4. When telling stories, consistency is critical. Audiences suspend credibility in the case of fairy tales, myths, and movies, but they won't do so when it comes to real life.
5. Characters can only make sense in context. Don't try to tell the story of any individual – even your own – outside of the context that supports it. It'll just fail.
6. Credibility is critical. If your story isn't critical, any number of forces will try to poke holes in it.
7. Great stories are unambiguous. The moral of your story should be as clear as a bell. What's the point of telling a story if nobody gets the point?
8. Never, ever fall in love with your own story. Enough said.

Four Variations On A Theme

We close with four positions or roles you can take in relation to stories.

1. **Story finder.** Before you can tell a story, you need to find one, preferably one that's authentic, and, even more importantly, one you can claim as your own.
2. **Storyteller.** After the right story is found, someone needs to communicate it, and communication is the job of the Storyteller...
3. **Story seller.** ...and the Story Seller. Selling a story may, in many ways, be easier than just telling one; you just have to make sure you sell it to the right audience at the right time and through the right venue.
4. **Story storers.** Generally these are companies that aggressively archive and repackage their organization's stories.