



The Seven Pillars of Storytelling

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Published by: Sparkol Books

Published: December 2015

Illustrations: Ben Binney

Sparkol Books

Bristol, UK

<http://sparkol.com/books>

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Introduction:

The power of story

IMAGINE BOOKING IN to your Las Vegas hotel. You make your way to your room and begin to unpack but – horror! You forgot to bring your favourite going-out-shoes.

You bought them on the internet so you jump online to see if you can get another pair delivered to the hotel. But they're no longer on the site. Worried, you call the retailer's concierge service. Unfortunately they don't stock the shoes any longer and, dejected, you assume that's the end of the story. It's not.

The company's headquarters are just outside Las Vegas. The team immediately tracks down a pair of the shoes at a rival store in a local mall. They then drive downtown, purchase the shoes and hand-deliver them to your hotel, without charging a penny. Imagine if that kind of service existed.

It does. This tale about one woman's service from Zappos has been making the rounds since 2011. Zappos is still held up today as a company that treats its customers right. They've sent flowers to a sick customer and rescued a best man whose wedding shoes got lost in the mail.

In these moments of connection, Zappos gained lifelong customers and – crucially – contributed to a narrative about the company. A narrative that fits their vision of providing the best customer service on the planet.

How to win at Christmas

Or take John Lewis. Five years ago the UK retailer took a risk and hired a new agency to produce its renowned Christmas adverts. What the agency did over the next few years would send them stratospheric.

What revolutionary approach did the new ad agency take? Exactly what cave people did around the fire all those millennia ago. They told stories.

The 2011 advert contributed to a 9.3% year-on-year increase of sales and garnered an incredible response on social media.

The following year, using the same approach, John Lewis's seasonal sales went up a staggering 44.3%. A year later they had their most popular campaign to date and the 2014 Christmas video bagged more than 24 million views on YouTube alone.

By this point the retailer's Christmas adverts were more than marketing. They had become cultural events, part of the countdown to Christmas in the UK. They spawned media commentary, critical reviews, social trends and spoof and tribute versions of the ads.

So what revolutionary approach did the new ad agency take?

It was exactly what cave people did around the fire all those millennia ago. They told stories.

Instead of showcasing products, making promotional offers or claims about value, John Lewis told sweet little stories, each with a heavy layer of emotion helped by a schmaltzy cover song.

There was a boy who couldn't wait until Christmas – so that he could give a present to his parents. There was a snowman who ran away – only to return with a gift for his snow-woman. A lonely penguin who trudged downstairs on 25 December – to find a partner under the Christmas tree.



John Lewis Christmas ad 2014

These adverts do what great stories always have. They tug on the heartstrings and appeal to fundamental human desires – to contribute, to be included, to be loved. They build up dramatic tension and deliver an emotional denouement. They create a narrative that we relate to, that we want to share with others. They harness the power of story.

That's what this book is about. Harnessing the power of story for you. You'll learn the seven pillars of good storytelling for repeat success engaging with your audience or market.

Our brains are wired for stories

Jennifer Aaker from Stanford's Graduate School of Business was curious about storytelling's ability

to make us remember things. She had each of her students give a 60-second product pitch, secretly instructing one student to focus on telling the story rather than the facts. Her class wrote down whatever they could remember about each pitch. The results were astounding.

Only five percent of students remembered the stats, but a whole 63% remembered the story. Aaker argues:

When most people advocate for an idea we think of a compelling argument, a fact or a figure [...] But research shows that our brains are not hard-wired to understand logic or retain facts for very long. Our brains are wired to understand and retain stories.

So much so that a story can be 22 times more memorable than facts alone.



Jennifer Aaker: Harnessing the Power of Stories

When you listen to a boring presentation full of facts and figures, two parts of your brain are activated. They're mostly responsible for language processing – giving meaning to the words we hear.

When you're told a story, however, your whole brain wakes up. In addition to the language parts, the parts responsible for sensation and emotion also spring to life – and you experience the story's events almost as if you were living them. Freaky.

The brain doesn't look like a spectator, it looks more like a participant in the action. When Clint Eastwood is angry on screen, the viewers' brains look angry too; when the scene is sad, the viewers' brains also look sad.

– *Jonathan Gottschall, Fastcreate*

Even freakier, in 2010 a group of neuroscientists at Princeton University hooked both storytellers and their listeners to an fMRI machine as a story was told. They were amazed to discover that when a person tells a story to another person, both their brains show nearly identical activity across most areas. Their brains effectively 'sync up' with one another in a phenomenon known as neural coupling. That's how to connect with your audience.

**92% of consumers want brands to
make ads that feel like a story.**

Other studies using MRI neuro-imagery have shown that, when evaluating brands, consumers primarily use their emotions (feelings and experiences) rather than information (brand attributes, features and facts).

This isn't a subconscious preference either. Your audience are well aware of what they like – 92% of consumers want brands to make ads that feel like a story.

No wonder John Lewis won at Christmas.

Storytelling is your most powerful means of communication

When you think about ad campaigns from Apple or Nike, Guinness or Innocent, you realise that the products aren't centre stage. Instead, they focus on brand ethos, what they stand for. People buy into the story – a mythology that they want to belong to.

We're tired of traditional marketing.
Facts, figures and bold claims bore us.
We switch off at aggressive adverts.
But stories? We're hardwired to see stories as a gift.

We're tired of traditional marketing. Facts, figures and bold claims bore us. We switch off at aggressive adverts. But stories? We're hardwired to see stories as a gift.

Nowadays, the ads that get shared are those that inspire the audience.

Stories help our audience understand who we are. More importantly, they give them a reason to interact with us, to join us on our journey.

And the good news is that you don't need a £7million Christmas budget or a 90-minute Lego Movie script to create a narrative that moves your audience.

What about tweaking your marketing content to focus less on the features of your product and more on the feeling your product gives people? Or finding a way to share the *why* behind your business in your

next presentation? Or spreading the story of a customer whose life you helped to change?

Businesses are using stories to inspire their own workforces, to explain who they are, to capture and transfer knowledge, build communities and engage their customers. They're discovering that having a strong narrative helps a business form a solid identity, ready to innovate and grow.

Storytelling doesn't come naturally to everyone. That's why we wrote this book. We want to show you how stories are put together, in a way that you can easily apply to your own situation.

You don't have to devise elaborate characters and backstories. You just need to understand what kind of stories will work for you. The following seven chapters cover everything from finding your identity as a business, to identifying heroes and villains.

It's time to find your story.

Emotion:

How to give your story a heart

WHAT MAKES SOME stories connect with their audience, while others are forgotten straight away? What is it that makes people feel involved, that gets them on your side – ready to act on what they've heard?

Whether your story is being written, recorded, presented onstage or shouted from the rooftops, these five simple principles will give it emotional impact.



The hero



The villain



The dispatcher



The (magical) helper



The princess



The donor



The false hero

1. Keep it simple

Most stories follow a pretty basic structure, with only a handful of character types to choose from.

These include:

- *The hero*: the protagonist must be friendly and relatable
- *The villain*: struggles against the hero
- *The dispatcher*: character who sends the hero off
- *The (magical) helper*: helps the hero in their quest
- *The princess (or prize)*: the hero deserves her throughout the story but is unable to marry her because of an unfair evil. The hero's journey is often ended when he marries the princess
- *The donor*: prepares the hero or gives the hero some magical object
- *The false hero*: takes credit for the hero's actions or tries to marry the princess

If you're selling bathroom cleaner, you could place your viewer at the centre of the story as the hero with a grimy bathroom. Your product could be the magical object or helper. The villain could be the germs – you get the picture.

Alternatively, you could make your customer the princess who needs saving, and your product the hero. There are many different ways of looking at this, but thinking about roles will help you figure out how all these pieces fit together.

It's the same if your video promotes an idea. You might not be selling a physical product, but your idea can still be the thing that helps the hero complete his quest and live happily ever after.

2. Create and satisfy desire

To convince people of your product or idea, you should show that your product fulfils a need or desire that they have.

In most stories, everything is fine at the beginning before something bad happens and the hero has to fight to make things okay again.

Your customer was getting on quite happily until mildew started destroying their bathroom. You have to demonstrate how your germ-busting product is going to put things right. Think about interesting ways to show the customer that your product will restore the equilibrium to their life. Even better, show them how it will improve their lives forever.

Make achieving a new goal an exciting, rewarding process and your audience will never be bored again.

If you're working in a learning environment, consider tantalising your audience with half-told stories. Tell only half of an intriguing tale and work your way gradually through the information that needs to be learnt, with the promise of learning the outcome at the end.

Alternatively, try working the information into the story itself. What if your hero were to progress each time he or she completed a module? Make achieving a new goal an exciting, rewarding process and your audience will never be bored by the subject matter again.

3. Make it memorable

The stories we tell might all be roughly the same, but you need to define what makes you special. Endless facts might seem the logical way to highlight success or transfer information, but stories are actually the perfect format for creating a lasting impression.

Lois Geller, a marketer and writer for Forbes, believes these four factors are key to a memorable advert:

- Disruptive and relevant visuals
- Strong brand identification
- A brilliant headline
- ‘Something else’

The ‘something else’ is a variable, but often it’s something that inspires curiosity. You want your viewer to ask ‘What’s going on here? This looks interesting’. Hopefully you already have a good idea of what it is that makes your product or idea unique.

4. Be conversational

Imagine you’re telling your story to just one person, a loved one for example. Write as if you were speaking directly to them and them only. Conversations are two-way, so ask questions throughout – even if you answer them yourself.

To make your story memorable, be selective about what information you include. Choose words that your listeners use every day. Replace jargon with everyday words.

Make sure the language you choose is positive and inspiring, not accidentally negative.

For example, ‘this video makes learning x easy!’ is far more inspiring than ‘this video will make learning x less difficult’.

5. Respect your listeners

It’s important to be confident in your delivery but also to remember that this is not about you.

**Don’t talk about how great you are –
you show how happy your customers
are instead.**

There’s a big difference between telling a story and making a sales pitch. If your story is about how you help customers overcome hurdles, show clearly how you do it. This doesn’t mean you should talk about how great you are – you show how happy your customers are instead.

Start sentences with you and your instead of I or we. For example, ‘Our product is brilliant at removing mildew’ is weak compared to ‘96% of you said you removed more mildew than ever before.’

These five principles are pretty simple, yet they are foundational for telling a story with heart.

But how do you go about deciding what kind of story to tell in the first place?

There’s a simple way to do that too. Recognising the universal plots that underpin all stories makes it much easier. In the next chapter we’ll learn how to find the right one to bring your message alive for your audience.

End of excerpt

