

Communicating growth demands multiple channels

Sustaining growth marketing success can be achieved with an integrated approach that weaves a story across a mix of earned, owned and paid channels.

By Adam Cormier

Businesses today are leaning on marketing departments to deliver more than a 30-second television ad. Elevating brand awareness and influencing the customer experience, all while being held accountable for net new revenue, is today's expectation of marketing departments.

These needs can be fulfilled with the art and science of storytelling.

Helping define the term "story," Robert McKee and Thomas Gerace, co-authors of *Storynomics*, *Story-Driven Marketing in the Post-Advertising World*, surmise that, "the essential core event in all stories ever told in the history of humanity can be expressed in just three words: conflict changes life."

Today, screens of all sizes are bombarded with messages striving to propel the audience to action. Messages that aren't tied to the brand's story fail. If there's no brand story, the message had no shot from the get-go.

Unfortunately, in conference rooms around the world, "story" is used interchangeably with things that are not a story, like narratives, journeys and, worst of all, use cases. These things are important to incorporate through the different stages of story to integrate the voice of a customer, but to equate them with the story itself is an unfortunate malpractice.

Human evolution drives us to desire stories. There's both a physiological and psychological reaction to a well-told story. Naturally, we identify with an empathetic protagonist and go as far as to mirror emotions and actions. Most importantly, we use our storage bank of stories to inform our action/reaction to present and future situations. Stories, regardless of fact or fiction, give us a frame of reference that is the basis for making decisions. In other words, a good brand story naturally compels a trusted buying decision.

How to tell a good brand story?

As brand storytellers, we live in a world of ever-shifting forces. On one side, there is the changing and fractured mix of channels with which to communicate the elements of story. Combining this flux of channels with shrinking time and space demands that we are data-driven, creative and disciplined.

There's drama in data

Understanding the intended audience requires a deep and ongoing review of data. An effective story touches the needs and desires of the audience. To convert from

audience to prospect, the target personas created within the marketing organization must detail not just demographics, but also a rich understanding of the motivations, pressures and objects of desire. As time passes, the trustworthiness of channels ebbs and flows, so data analysis is an always-on commitment. Consistent evaluation of data will help drive the channel mix as it relates to the different stages of the story. From social channels to landing pages to blogs, each and every channel presents an opportunity for content — earned, owned and paid — to be integrated into a storyboard that brings the audience through each story stage.

Creativity differs by channel, audience

A story-driven model ultimately tests the marketing department to break away from a feature/benefit/award theme and think bigger about the brand and its place in the minds of employees, customers, prospects and the community. The challenge posed to the marketing team is to develop an empathetic protagonist out of a thing, not a person. Understanding that audiences are more cynical today than ever before, thanks to years of mistrustful actions from corporations and executives, a story's power comes from positive emotional ties. With this, creative "character" development is required to achieve a connection. Giving "life" to an inanimate object involves well-crafted words and dynamic imagery. Instead of the 30-second television ad as the primary channel, today's marketer has the creative freedom to reach audiences with a near infinite mix of pairing words and imagery by communications channel. A marketer today can take an idea, integrate it within the brand story, and deliver a truly customized message to a specific target where, when and how the target desires to receive that message.

Disciplined to keep the story vision

Science and the history of humankind proves that a story is a foundational element to how we react and respond to the actions and environment around us. Changing to a story-driven model is a cultural shift within an organization, but the benefit is a sustained emotional connection with customers and employees. This requires discipline among marketing, sales and leadership to stay the course. Like great TV shows that keep audiences engaged season to season, a disciplined team keeps the story vision through the many arcs, twists and turns as

the business evolves.

The most compelling success stories in business are aptly named and connect with us on an emotional level.

To conclude with an additional passage from *Storynomics*, "The mind builds stories to bridge the gap between itself and the universe, between itself and the past, present, and future. Story form imposes order on chaos; it penetrates the enigma of the *seems* to express the cause and effect of the *is*; it unifies events to bring meaning out of meaninglessness.

Knowledge expressed in story form gathers other human beings around its themes, uniting communities and building cultures."

For B2B marketers at technology companies, a story-driven approach solves many challenges, from product/solution adoption and awareness to customer experience. "Speeds and feeds" do not make a story. Bringing life to a brand that is empathetic, humble and understanding of the audiences' object of desire will impact results dramatically. Start with understanding your audience while taking a critical look at the protagonist (the business). Audit existing content by its core value. If it does not fit a binary problem/solution construct, it holds no value in the brand story. From here, assess the gaps, set the long-term vision and storyboard the plot twists to success.

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PR news brief

AbMac tunes Gibson comeback

Abernathy MacGregor is handling the encore performance of legendary guitar maker Gibson Brands as it plans to emerge from Chapter 11 on Nov. 1.

The Nashville-based company today introduced its new management team led by president/CEO James "JC" Curleigh, who was formerly president of Levi jeans brand at Levi Strauss.

Curleigh, an owner of Gibson and Epiphone guitars, is joined by chief merchant officer Cesar Gueikian, a performer in several rock and heavy metal bands and founder of Melody Capital Partners, an alternative asset management firm with 1.5 billion in assets under management.

Curleigh said the reemergence from bankruptcy marks "the beginning of a new era for Gibson to build on its proven heritage and iconic status."

Gibson declared Chapter XI in May, burdened by a heavy debt load connected with a disastrous push into home entertainment and headphones.

AbMac's Kate Murray and Dan Scorpio represent Gibson.