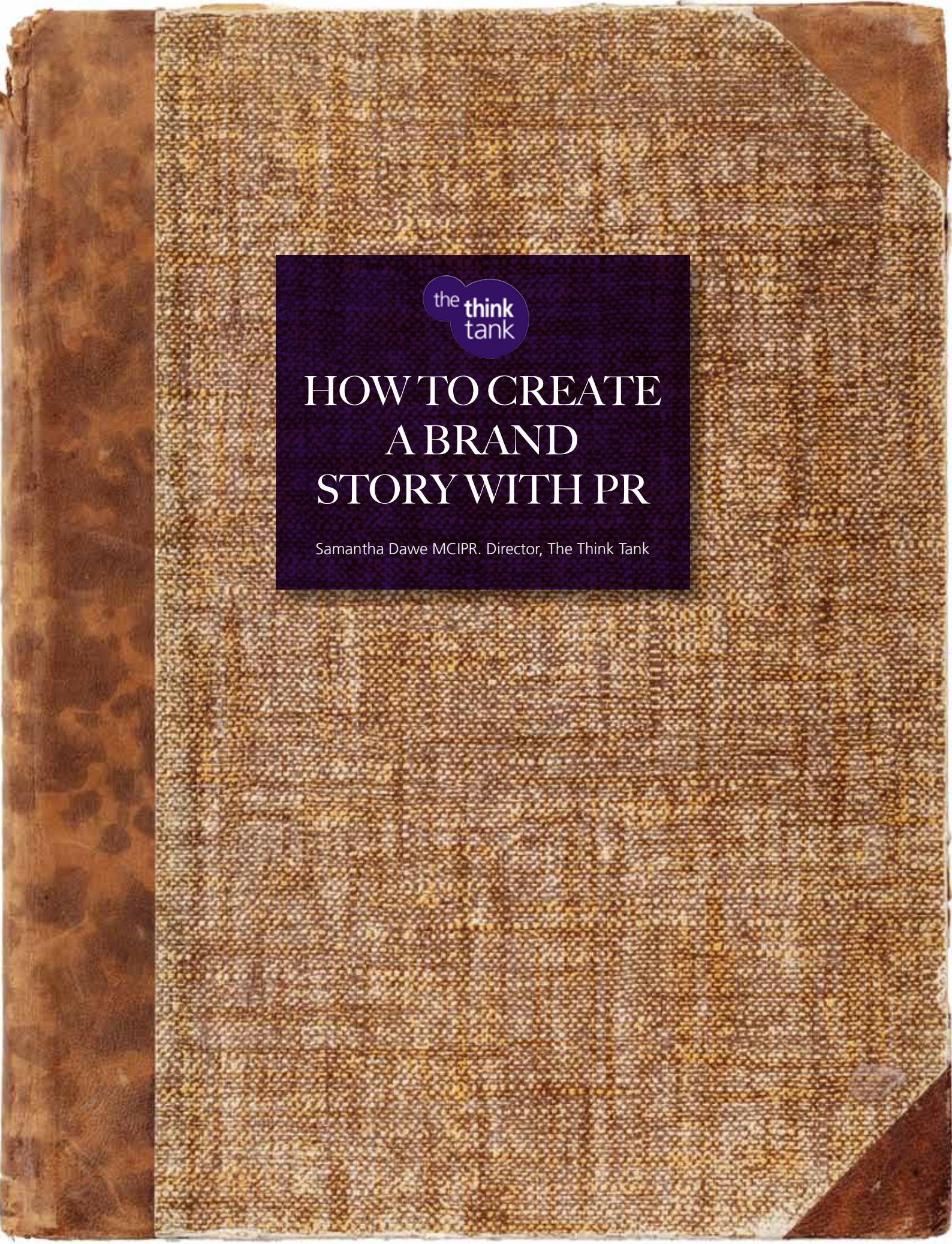


HOW TO CREATE A BRAND STORY WITH PR

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In our *"PR in a changing Media Landscape"* White Paper we looked at the media landscape through a range perspectives – and how today an organisation and brand can engage with earned, owned and paid for media. If all organisations and businesses are now 'media companies' because of this shift, the way information is produced has to change.

This shift also means that your business or organisation will be more open to the whole range of stakeholder audiences. And with this media proliferation in the new landscape, audiences have also become far more discerning.

Content of course is king; it's not the channel but the content itself that is important to stakeholders – probably more so today than ever. Creating engaging content is therefore critical.

A recent Google + hangout organised by Mynewsdesk for Social Media Week (22-27 September 2013) London (#SMWLDN) looked at "Brand storytelling from around the world" with a panel of participants which included Editor, Writer and Digital Media Consultant Jon Bernstein. Jon commented on the fact that journalism is storytelling but also went on to describe how some brands are very good at providing "news you can use". In the B2B arena where he started as a journalist, he added, some corporate IT stories had proved this time and again.

In fact Media Relations has always been about storytelling in one shape or form; this is because most of the time this is what is required for the media purposes – for journalists to be interested in running the story you need to be a storyteller too.

But with broader stakeholders and PR activities to reach these, storytelling can also be key. The importance of telling your brand or business story to myriad audiences – customers, media, employees, industry and financial analysts, trade, government in a way that resonates is an important skill.

A company which recently rebranded to become part of a larger parent group was surprised to find out that many of its customers and employees were not aware of the reasons behind the rebrand and the breadth of what the company itself now offered. It is now looking to redress this with a brand storytelling approach delivered by PR and through social media channels. It will look at different business areas in turn, people behind the projects, and work it is doing with local communities to help tell the overall story of where the company is now after the rebrand and help position it as having a very positive future.

Creating the story

Telling a compelling story for PR purposes is an art form. But it is one that there are some rules you can follow and by the way these are just as relevant for writing great case studies.

The first and the hardest is stand back and stop selling.

That is a really hard sometimes for others internally within a business to understand. Yet this PR approach will still support your new business drive… it simply means looking at the information from a different perspective.

How you tell your story in the B2B sector often means putting your customer in the limelight. Your company does not always have the lead role for a story to be effective. Films and stories have multiple characters.

From a developing the content perspective you need to start with putting your 'journalist's hat' on and uncover who the core players are in your story and put in time/resource to gather their feedback.

The next key step is about having a point of view or theme to your story. What are the issues that your customers are facing in today's market? Maybe you are working with them to help future-proof their businesses – why? What can you see on the horizon that your customers need to be ready for?

Take your reader on a journey, perhaps through trials and tribulations, but one which ends by arriving a successful new point of destination. It could be cost savings have been achieved, but new, innovative ways of working is what the story is about. New ways of working have a story appeal – cost savings are the result for the business as a whole.

You need to make people part of the storyline – logos, products are secondary. Leave buzzwords out and wherever you can introduce real-life quotes and comments from your story participants.

Anecdotes and quotes bring a story to life; they offer a people perspective on your product or service. This is also true of pictures and photos, images and concept boards – they can all help tell the story of how something evolved.

The tone you need to use is about being persuasive. Having an interesting point of view is a great starter but people like to connect, so create understanding about the people who are highlighted in your story – what their role is, what specific challenges they face, how they approached a task or project, what their inspirations were and what they feel about the outcomes.

While one aim of content marketing is to increase your visibility on the internet, it's also important - crucial - to produce content that is engaging and valuable because that's what interests people and keeps them coming back.

Content marketers are really good at understanding the six basic parts to a story, and a good story has a start, middle and end:

- Setting – where the story takes place
- Characters
- An event that started things rolling
- Development
- The climax
- The ending (conclusion)

As recently as April this year, this CNN coverage
http://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/04/tech/post-it-note-history/index.html

shows that the story surrounding the invention of the Post-it Note still fascinates.

It's an example of creating something that has meaning; stories need content and emotion. But it also succeeds in working within the definition of brand storytelling – consistent and compelling content to build a picture of a company or organisation – in this case, 3M.

"It's been described as the solution to a problem nobody realized existed. But that hasn't stopped the humble Post-it Note from becoming a ubiquitous fixture of stationery cupboards worldwide, with manufacturers 3M producing 50 billion each year… The sticky yellow squares did not always look destined to set the office supply world alight. In fact, it took 12 years from when the technology behind the product was first developed, to Post-its hitting the market."

Using the story

Sharing successes and challenges is more compelling than reading a product information sheet. But making the most of your story is just as important.

Consider your ultimate audience – the people you want to reach with your message; this will help you identify the media outlets to target if you want press coverage.

On a website your story is in front of global audiences potentially, so thinking of the heading you want to use and where it sits on the site can be important for directing the right people to this content.

If possible, you will gain real traction by relating your story to some issue or theme that is currently in the news – this gives it further context. It might be a short story or a long one, if it works into the news agenda, it will add further interest.

You can use LinkedIn to gain a deeper understanding of customer issues too; being part of forums and groups can often give you inspiration for stories that you can tell.

Integrating the story with other marketing communications is also critical. If you are using content for promotional purposes you are likely to need to get sign off from those involved before pushing the button and disseminating it.

Storytelling is about an engaging and entertaining approach to delivering your messages. It is not so hard now in the B2B context to bring technical products or processes to life and using video or audio links to augment the written word; and an interesting photograph has always told a 1,000 words in print, and now does so on Facebook or on Twitter, Pinterest…

Infographics are also a great way to bring stats to life, make them seem more accessible and can help neatly summarise some of your story points.

The project demanded 10km of cabling, 4,000 light bulbs, was constructed using 250,000 bricks, took 100 man days – get into the habit of seeing if you can dig these sorts of facts out for your story.

Do a sense check – if your audience doesn't get it, they won't buy it. This is easier to evaluate in social media where for example you can see direct comments back via Twitter or the number of re-Tweets your story has had. But surveys or quizzes at events or customer focus groups are also where you can test your storytelling ability.

Try breaking the story down into smaller chunks; a company's history in 'milestones' is one way to do this. Or follow the progress of a project over a series of days or weeks; or with a series of photographs as something is assembled, or with a concept sketch and a photo of the final product.

And remember your content also needs to be crafted around what people are searching for (and therefore genuinely interested in) if you are using it online rather than what you want them to hear. Effective content strategies always go back to the customer.

Key guidelines

- Learning to tell your brand or business story in a way that resonates is a skill.
- A story involves a range of players – let others share the limelight.
- Take people on a journey; a good story has a start, middle and end.
- Real life comments and quotes add credibility.
- Think about the different channels you can leverage to tell your story, and prepare contently appropriately.
- Don't forget visual aids – images, infographics, sketches, concept models all bring a story to life.
- Effective content strategies are customer centric – creating engaging content is now more critical today than ever before.

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