BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

UNLOCK YOUR STORYTELLING POTENTIAL



B2B Marketing

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Joshua Morse

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Introduction

Telling tales

Surely this is no time for stories? We live in soundbites now. One-hundred-and-forty character statements. Image first, words later. Hashtag this, LOL that. Technology invented to enrich us has, ultimately, stolen our time and given us little other than stress in return. In this thousand-mile-an-hour world, stories are dead.

Or so you might think. But technology and tactics, as much as they become part of the fabric of our lives, do not replace our raw instincts. We are all stories. Seven billion of us. Individual, and uniquely challenged in our own wonderful ways. And there is one thing which unites us. We can't help but be drawn in by a good story.

From the *New Testament* to the Marlboro man, Shakespeare to *Star Wars*, nothing can grip us like a tale of triumph over adversity or the promise of a better life. The best stories tap into our most primal urges. Who doesn't want to feel successful, warm, attractive and loved? Who doesn't want to win?

As marketers we hoist the megaphone and shout about the benefits our products bring. We're faster, we're cheaper. We're stronger, we're prettier. But benefits alone rarely disrupt happy people enough to make them change their loyalties.

So, how can you cut through the clutter and get people to hear your story?

» Probably the most powerful form of communication we have at our disposal is storytelling. It has been incorporated by virtually every civilisation into their culture. It is the simplest, most memorable device we have for engaging, learning, entertaining and persuading. «

John Hegarty,
Hegarty On Advertising

More than words

Before we begin to explore the methodology for creating your story, let's consider how that story will relate to the other things you do.

If you want to be known as a credible, authoritative and authentic source you will need to make sure the other things you do with your brand, product and people ring true with what you say in your story. We have to live, breathe and retell our story in everything we do:

- Marketing materials
- Advertising
- Public relations
- Social media
- Sales meetings
- Networking events
- Recruitment.

Every touchpoint of your brand needs to be authentic to the story. So, customer experience, the way the phone is answered, the way people dress, everything around your business needs to have the same feel.

Finding your story

The biggest hurdle we B2B marketers often face is convincing ourselves we have a story worth telling. The fact is we all do. Behind every brand, product and idea is a story. We simply need to apply the right methodology to find it, and then tell that story in a way that matters to our target audience.

Remember, you don't have to write an epic. Some of the best stories are the ones we tell ourselves simply from looking at an image.

Look for stories in everyday life. What events transformed your outlook? At the right time we can all be fascinated by well-told stories about things as simple as losing weight, managing to get up for work on time, or struggling with debt. Anything people can empathise with can be the starting point for a story.

Four important stories to tell

In practice

Salesforce has an internal team dedicated to finding and telling stories. Rather than simply sell a product they aim to be an enabler for businesses to work smarter and they bring this impact to life through stories. This case study video with Barclay's gets the point across by showing, rather than hiding, conflict.

→ **salesforce.com/uk/customers/stories/barclays.jsp**

1. Your why story

The part of our brains which makes 'gut' reactions, the limbic brain, operates without words. It is an emotional decision-making tool which pre-dates language. It is here that we decide what we like, love and will spend money on before our logical mind splutters into action. If you start with hard facts rather than emotion, you are already set to fail.

Traditionally, brands have communicated *what* they do, then *how* they do it, and sometimes, finally, *why* they do it. This creates bland stories that start with outcomes, justified by methods yet rarely inspired by vision.

The most important story is *why* you do the things you do. If you are driven by a founding passion, tell that story. Helping your customer understand why you do things is critical.

By telling people why, we can hope to inspire them into doing business with us, rather than rely on old tricks like lowering prices to manipulate a sale. You will also find people who share your view of the world and who will be more likely to stick with you as they share your vision.

2. Your vision story

Building on your 'why' story, your vision is the picture you paint of your company's future and its role in the wider world. Think about how Microsoft set out to democratise computing by putting a PC on every office worker's desk. That vision was audacious in its time, many thought it ridiculous. What role can you play in a better future and how can you visualise that for your customer?

3. Your founder's story

Every business started with a single idea. The founder's story showing what caused that idea to spark to life, the challenges in making it a reality and the legacy that leader left behind (or hopes to leave behind) can make for compelling stuff. People whose own aspirations match your founder's will feel kinship with this story.

4. Your customers' story

Creating a way for your customer to talk of their interaction with your brand, and the difference you make in their lives, is remarkably powerful. When prospective customers see people just like them whose problems have been solved, they can easily relate and will see a reason to buy. Whether you choose to use case studies or simply pepper your story with short examples and testimonials, featuring the voice of the customer can help win trust.

Considering in B2B we may sometimes, but not always, need to talk through the immediate customer to think about the end user, that's where the real value you bring is most relevant.

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Finding the facts

The simplest way to flush out the key facts you will need for your story is asking the five Ws:

- Who is the story about?
- What happened?
- When did it occur?
- Where did it happen?
- Why did it happen?

Finding your target audience

Beware the mass market

In launching a new story, as with a new product, you'll have greatest success appealing to the extremes before quietly moving to the middle.

The law of diffusion of innovations shows us how market penetration begins with a small group of innovators who actively seek out new ideas. They are then joined by early adopters, followed by the majority, and boom, you've hit the big time.

The classic trap marketers fall into is that in wanting to create a market-leading product, we attempt to appeal directly to that middle ground. But the majority doesn't buy without the innovators and early adopters getting involved first. So, rather than trying to understand and appeal to that middle ground, far more powerful is the opportunity to directly reach the innovators who will listen to your story, try your product, and then spread the message.

Don't try and target your competitor's community of customers. Those people already buy that brand's story. It's far better to find a marginalised niche whose specific needs are not fully served.

Tap into a common worldview

A worldview is a way of thinking which others can relate to. 'Data holds the key' is a worldview, as is 'stories motivate action'. We all hold scores of worldviews, some of which conflict in our own minds. Our worldviews also change as we experience new things.

Frame your story

For your story to work you need to know the worldview you are aiming at. Imagine we are talking about developing improved profiles of our customers and we want to talk to a group who think the answers are in the data. We need to frame our story in a way which resonates with them. Frames are words and images that help to reinforce people's worldview. To appeal to our data-oriented group, we will be best served talking about insight as opposed to emotion, even though both could frame a story around customer profiling.

Nine ways to build interest

Be exclusive

In marketing we should always be exclusive, in the best sense of the word. Exclusive doesn't mean snobby or aloof, and it doesn't necessarily mean top-end and expensive. It means you have firmly identified a customer to speak to and everything you do focuses on them – and excludes all others. With this specific customer in mind you can develop a storytelling technique which fits their worldview, and if it alienates others who are not in the target group – well, so be it.

Think about feelings

Think about the outcome you want from your story. This will be a way of feeling which the reader or viewer gets from the story. The important thing here is that by considering the emotional outcome, you can create content which helps people experience the way your product will make them feel before they even try it.

Be friendly

Show people some love in the way you write and share your story. Treat your customer as your confidante. Be open, be humble and always remember they have a choice where to spend their time and money.

1. Name names

If you can name people or brands which have instant recognition among your audience, you are on to a winning start. Whether they played an active role in starting the business, became a customer along the way or simply served as an inspiration, naming a known person or business creates context and intrigue.

2. Show me the money

Money truly does make the world go round. Without being brash, do be prepared to talk about the life savings and mortgage that went on the line to get things started. Or your driving quest may be to reduce prices to a point where we can all access affordable luxury. Whether it's about creating wealth or empowering others, talking cash creates interest.

3. Location, location, location

Places tell their own story and including them in yours provides a shortcut for your audience to understand your context. Paris equals romance, New York equals pace. Be specific about the shops, sights and surroundings which inspired you and use location to add drama to where the big decisions were made.

4. Suspended stories

Have a story within a story to build suspense. Start the first story and when it reaches its main conflict, move into story two, telling it in full, before returning to resolve story one. This suspense will keep people interested throughout.

5. Fear

There is a place for fear in marketing, but use it with caution. You do not want to be known as the negative brand which is forever pointing out the pitfalls. It's far better to allude to negative consequences briefly before focusing the story on your vision of a positive future.

6. Don't list product features

Don't rely on product features to justify your story. In fact, don't mention them at all. Your story is your chance to convey how it feels to be a customer. We don't feel in rational, incremental, measurable ways. Tell people what they can do with your product, not what the product does.

7. Language

Just because you're writing for a B2B audience doesn't mean you can't have some fun with language. Don't be too flowery but by all means create vivid, colourful descriptions of people and places. Dramatic detail will bring life to your story. Use different writing styles too. Punchy, impactful sentences can add drama.

Always write in the first person. This is your story. Address your audience as an individual.

8. Analogies and metaphors

Explaining things by comparing them to something else is a great way to convey complex or new concepts and make them relevant. Similarly, original and vivid metaphors can help us create a picture.

9. Use humour

We all love to laugh, but all too often jokes will distract from your message. Much better to use self-depreciating humour and poke fun at yourself. Creating an expectation of what comes next in your story, and then breaking that expectation can also work well.

In practice:

Pentagram, the international design company, celebrated 40 years of creativity with a showreel which finds a happy place between fact and fib. It begins, "the year is 1972, a child is born in a car on a petrol station forecourt" and we are hooked in as the brand is made human and its story unfolds.

→ vimeo.com/42562659

Three types of title

If you want people to read or hear your story, you'll need to hook them in with a strong headline. Consider what is most fitting for you, and be prepared to change the approach for different media.

News

What happened and why is it interesting. This is a journalistic approach and should be unbiased.

E.g. 'New CRM system aims to double conversion rates'

Intrigue

This style builds curiosity. It sets the context and shows part of the outcome without giving too much away.

E.g. 'Can conversion rates be doubled just by changing your CRM?'

Promise

This makes a direct promise of information to achieve a specific outcome.

E.g. 'This new CRM system will double your conversion rate'

Facts, fibs and frauds

A big question you will need to be comfortable with is how true to life your story is, and how far, if at all, you push the truth.

Facts are dull. They have an essential place further into our purchasing decisions as our logical brains post-rationalise our instincts. In your story, however, you should use facts sparingly.

Consider Bombay Sapphire gin with its 1761 recipe, blue glass bottle, heritage fonts and picture of Queen Victoria. This appeals to worldviews of provenance, flavour and heritage. So, how do we feel when we learn that the product didn't exist until 1987? Chances are by the time we find this out, it is of little concern as we have bought into the brand and forgiven its outing as pastiche. Fibs are the small white lies which make the world more interesting. And more often than not they are lies which we tell ourselves based on what we see and how it fits our worldview.

Frauds are well and truly over the line, and if you use them you will be found out. The acid test is to put yourself in your customer's shoes. Consider if you bought the product on the premise of what you have said, and how you have made that person feel about the product, would you be unhappy at the truth? The old adage of 'don't let the truth ruin a good story' can only apply to a point. Stretch the truth to a point where people feel cheated and you'll have made your last sale to that customer, and that customer will pay you back with negative word of mouth.

Structuring your story

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You'll now have some ideas of what your story will be about and can use the following framework to bring it to life.

The classic three-act story

All the best stories fall into three parts. However, we don't show this structure to the audience. Make them feel there is a very natural flow through each act. Also, expect to keep acts one and three brief so the concepts and characters are quickly introduced and the ending is decisive. Use act two for all of the action.

Act I: The problem

Here we grab the audience's attention. We learn who our hero is, and most importantly the obstacle they need to overcome. As curious creatures we can't help but want to know whether our hero fulfils their ambition by beating the challenge they face. This curiosity compels us to read on.

Top tips

Your opening should create a question in your audience's minds. You needn't always start at the chronological beginning. Find the greatest point of conflict from the story, dramatise it and use it in your opening to create an initial spark of interest before looping back to explain its context.

It's important to create mental images in people's minds of who they are reading about, so take a few words to name and describe your characters and the setting.

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Act II: The conflict

Run through all of the challenges the hero has faced as they try to overcome the problem. It's never plain sailing, and every false horizon where the hero thinks they have climbed the mountain only to find more work helps build interest. This needs to repeatedly swing between the negative emotion of feeling overwhelmed by the challenge into the elation of finding solutions. The challenges faced should escalate in severity and there should be enough detail to make them plausible.

The resolution that will come later must be enabled by a guru or other catalyst for change. That person or idea needs to be introduced in act two. Never try to be the hero of your own story as that will simply read as bragging, show you have humbly learned from others instead. Remember this isn't an Oscars acceptance speech – you can't name everyone, so even if there have been numerous interventions pick the one single biggest character who has helped you find your way. By talking about the people who have inspired you, you can help inspire your audience too.

Top tip

Your story doesn't have to be a tearjerker. It may just make people think, or it may make them laugh. Either way there has to be emotion.

Act III: The resolution

We have a winner. After the rollercoaster of act two, the last-chance gamble pays off. Somehow, despite the odds a solution is found and our hero has conquered the challenge. This is the time to show how our hero has changed in their outlook, from what they learned in the conflict to how that greater knowledge is relevant to the audience. It's a case of showing if you can survive this ordeal and come out fighting fit and wiser too – you can certainly do something for your customer.

Top tips

The resolution must include a takeaway message for the audience – the one key thing you want them to have learnt from hearing your story.

Try to tie the ending back into the beginning so there is a circular feel.

Key takeaways

By now you'll hopefully have some ideas for your stories and will be beginning to think about how to tell them. In summary, these key learning points should help you find the way.

- Choose your story type.
- Target a specific worldview and frame your story.
- Use the five Ws to find the facts.
- Structure the plot into three acts.
- Build in plenty of surprises.
- Talk about failure as much as success.
- Show your hero is human.
- Detail the challenges faced and explore the emotion of failure.
- Introduce the guru who shows the way.
- Reflect on what you have learned.
- Find a punchy headline.
- Share your story.

Stories alone won't build a business, but they'll certainly help. I hope you'll see the power of storytelling to help bring your brand to life.

Be creative, and have fun.



Author biography

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Strategic marketing consultant

Joshua Morse is a strategic marketing consultant who loves to help businesses grow.

A Chartered Marketer and Watertight Marketing Accredited Consultant, he has extensive experience in marketing management and product innovation with brands including Mira Showers and Brintons Carpets.

Joshua Morse Marketing helps small and medium-sized businesses, which are often owner-managed and aiming for transformational growth. From marketing audits and plans, all the way through to implementation, Joshua and his team consistently encourage their clients to use the stories behind their brands to gain more customers.

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About B2B Marketing



B2B Marketing

B2B Marketing is the comprehensive information resource for B2B marketers. Its mission is to provide practitioners with the information they need to perform better and achieve more, whatever sector of the B2B space they are operating in.

Launched in 2004 as *B2B Marketing* magazine, it has since evolved into a multi-faceted resource, delivering a broad range of content in a variety of different forms and formats.

Its key products are:

- Online community
- Magazine
- Awards
- Research and reports
- Training
- Events
- Membership

For more information on any of these products or services go to b2bmarketing.net or call +44 (0)20 7014 4920

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