Brand Storytelling Done Right

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Telling your brand's story is an important part of your content marketing strategy. However, not everyone knows how to tell stories effectively, and many don't even know where to start.

Together, we'll explore the steps to engage consumers using time-honored storytelling techniques that promote your brand while providing value to your audience.

We've partnered with Tessa Wegert, journalist and media strategist, for tips on the most effective way to craft your brand's story.

What Is Real Brand Storytelling?

Think about your favorite book. Or the TV series you're currently binge watching. Why do you like it? What draws you in to the experience? The answer is usually smart use of the classic storytelling arc, which includes the ingredients of **theme**, **plot**, **character**, **setting**, **conflict** and **resolution**.

The same narrative map also applies to telling the story of your brand. When your product is presented in the context of a narrative rather than a traditional sales pitch (where the primary focus is the hard sell), it takes on new meaning in consumers' minds.

Instead of asking them to process facts and features about your brand, people can identify with a character, making it easier to imagine how your product might fit into their lives. In fact, studies indicate that perception of a brand is almost entirely emotional.[1] It's not about the bells and whistles of your product; the likability associated with what you're selling determines your brand.

Value to the consumer goes hand-in-hand with this emotional engagement. When you share your brand story through various media formats, it can be in the form of entertainment, practical tips or education. Consumers can be drawn into the experience and feel like they've gained something. This can consequently encourage brand discovery and/or continued loyalty.

For example, Friskies capitalized on the popularity of cat videos with its *Dear Kitten* web commercial last summer. As a grown-up cat shows a kitten its new home, the feline mentions that Friskies is the preferred brand of food. This endearing web video generated a high volume of hits on You Tube and social media based on its entertainment and cuteness factor. And, more importantly, it increased the likelihood that consumers would remember the value of that feeling the next time they shopped for cat food.



1 Peter Noel Murray, Psychology Today, *How Emotions Influence What We Buy*, February 2013, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/inside-the-consumer-mind/201302/how-emotions-influence-what-we-buy

The Dos and Don'ts

Before we address the "how-to" of brand storytelling, here are a few tips to keep in mind.

What brand storytelling shouldn't do:

- Appear dry and boring.
- Feel self-centered, as though it's all about what makes the brand great.
- Make a hard sell.

What brand storytelling should do:

- Put the story first and the product second, yet have equal impact.
- Appeal to consumers' interests by being engaging, immersive and memorable — like a good novel or TV series.
- Convey the brand's core tenets and what makes it different from others.
- Chronicle the brand's history, profile people in the company or explain other biographical events of the brand.
- Use media formats that will reach a specified target audience.

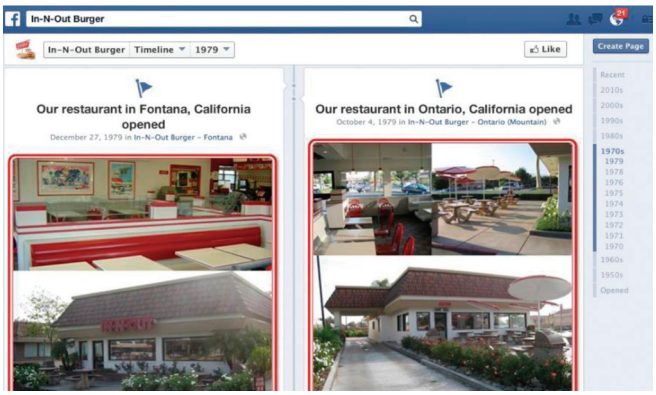
Now that you have an overview of brand storytelling, let's get down to basics and construct a narrative for your brand piece-by-piece.

CHAPTER 1: *Choose a Media Format to Tell Your Brand Story*

The sky's the limit nowadays when it comes to digital formats. There's YouTube, Vine, Pinterest, Facebook, Snapchat — you name it. To determine which media tool is best for you, consider whom your target audience is and what they're using. For example, LEGO posted a short, animated film on YouTube aimed at the parents of young kids. It tells the history of the company and shares the founder's vision of how children should play. The media format and message were a home run with the target audience.



In-N-Out Burger chose a different approach to engage its consumers. The popular southwest food chain created a timeline on its website that includes images from restaurant openings and historic moments dating all the way back to its creation in the 1940s. Its Facebook page follows suit with regular updates featuring photos of their restaurant openings throughout In-N-Out's lifetime. This visual creates a sense of legacy and continuing brand success — and it's a smart way to repurpose the company's archival material.



Getting Bang for Your Buck

In addition to distinguishing your target audience, your company's size and budget clearly matter when creating a brand story. Do you have the resources to hire a crew to shoot a commercial or short film? Or are you a smaller operation that's trying to generate interest? For any size company — but especially useful for smaller to mid-sized brands — media formats like Vine, Instagram, Twitter and blogs can be an inexpensive and easy way to market your brand.

For example, yogurt brand Stonyfield enlisted their partner farmers to contribute to a blog that lives on the company website. Each post gives readers interesting, first-hand accounts of what goes into producing the milk, fruit and maple syrup for the brand. The stories are not only snackable and fun to read, they create a positive perception that Stonyfield has a strong work ethic and wholesome, natural ingredients.

Going a step beyond snackable posts, recent studies have shown that long-form content measuring around 2,000 words actually receives more shares than short-form content.[2] So if you have a lot to say for your brand story, consider testing this approach.

Lastly, here's an affordable option that works for any company size: Leverage current social media trends. For example, dive into your company's archival photos and video (like In-N-Out Burger) for Throwback Thursday on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. It'll allow you to reach a wide field of consumers without spending money on generating new content.

2 Noah Kagan, BuzzSumo via The Huffington Post, *Why Content Goes Viral: What Analyzing 100 Million Articles Taught Us*, September 2014 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/noah-kagan/why-content-goes-viral-wh_b_5492767.html

Chapter 2: *Find Your Theme and Plot*

What's the mission statement, or philosophy, behind your brand? This will help determine the type of story to tell.

Start by writing out a short synopsis, just like writers do for TV and film. Once you clarify the overarching idea of your story, it'll be easier to find your theme and plot, stay on track with your mission statement and share the most important features of your brand. These things can get lost if you simply dive straight into creating a short commercial or blog entry — there won't be a clear beginning, middle or end to your brand story.

Determine a Theme

With your synopsis in hand, it's now time to choose a theme. Here are the seven most popular themes in traditional storytelling:

1. Fate
2. Ambition
3. Sacrifice
4. Transformation
5. Love
6. Vengeance
7. Resurrection

Although it may not seem obvious at first, these themes are also key to brand storytelling. Each one is recognizable to consumers, which means they're useful for marketers. When viewers see a familiar story theme, they're more likely to home in on the message you're trying to send and have an emotional response.

Plot the Plot

Once you've secured a theme, it's time to find the plot of your brand story. These are the seven traditional plot techniques along with familiar examples of each:

1. Overcoming the Monster — *Dracula*
2. Rags to Riches — *Cinderella*
3. The Quest — *The Lord of the Rings*
4. Voyage and Return — *Alice in Wonderland*
5. Comedy — *Bridget Jones's Diary*
6. Tragedy — *Macbeth*
7. Rebirth — *Beauty and the Beast*

According to Christopher Booker's popular writing guide, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, every narrative conforms to one of these plotlines or a combination of them. They can also collide with different themes. For example, Rags to Riches and Ambition. Or Comedy and Love.

Marry the Theme and Plot

Here are some examples that easily demonstrate what theme and plot look like in a brand story:

The Scarecrow

Chipotle's most viewed marketing campaign to date is this short animation featuring a scarecrow as the main character. Posted on YouTube, the theme is Transformation and the plot is Overcoming the Monster. The story takes place in a dystopian fantasy world where all food production is controlled by a faceless giant called Crow Foods, which represents Chipotle's competition. In the end, the scarecrow's world is transformed through the discovery of fresh, natural food.



This short film encourages consumers to think about the downside of automated food production, where the focus is quantity versus quality. It also asks the audience to consider what makes Chipotle different from its competitors.

Miracle Stain

Tide aired this humorous TV commercial during the 2013 Super Bowl to a strong reception. Using a Comedy theme and Rags to Riches plot, we watch as a 49ers superfan stains his favorite jersey, discovers the mark looks like quarterback Joe Montana, and is suddenly showered with fame and wealth. That is, until his wife uses Tide to wash the stain away — demonstrating the power of the detergent.





The Beauty Inside

This unique web series from Toshiba is comprised of five-to-ten-minute episodes. The theme is Love and the plot is Rebirth. It's the story of a man who wakes up each day in a completely different body. He uses his laptop to document this strange journey and to connect with the woman he loves — who won't recognize him each morning. It's an entertaining and surprising approach to storytelling and, at the same time, demonstrates the Toshiba brand's features in a subtle way.

Chapter 3: *The People and the Place*

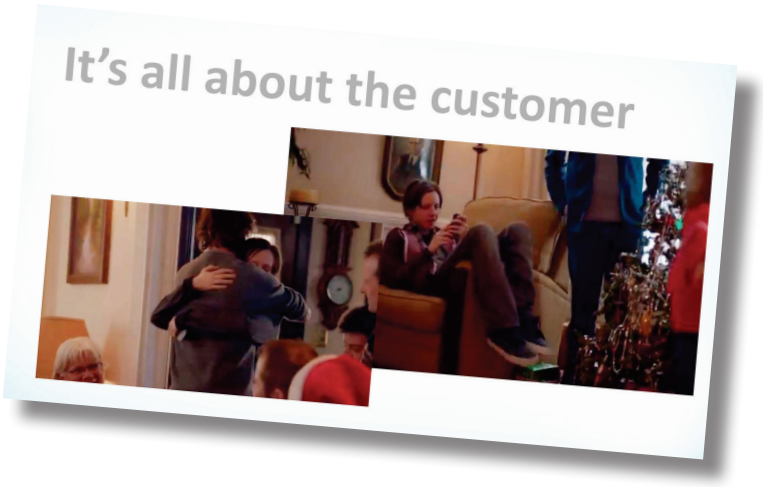
Choose Your Hero Character

Now it's time to find the hero character of your brand story. Just like in the previous examples, this is someone your audience can identify with or root for in some way — be it a dairy farmer for Stonyfield or a 49ers superfan who's no match for Tide. If you're a B2C company, the hero would be your consumers. If you're B2B, it would be either your client or your client's end-user, depending on the product.

The most crucial factor when identifying your hero character is to place them correctly in your story. Remember, they are not your brand; they are your consumer. Just take a lesson from Apple, who misplaced the hero within its widely-panned *Our Signature* campaign. The TV commercial shows random people — sometimes even from behind — using Apple products. A voiceover says its brand is "what matters" and "means everything." In this case, the hero of the story is the brand and its consumers are merely an afterthought.



Realizing its mistake, Apple did a turnaround with its Misunderstood commercial. At first a boy appears to be ignoring his family during a holiday celebration while he plays with his iPhone. Then, in a clever twist, this seemingly misplaced hero shares a heartwarming video he's created for everyone. Instead of the story being about the Apple product like before, it's now about the boy using the brand to be a hero.



German airline Lufthansa used a more straightforward placement of its hero character in a recent brand story — although in a very surprising way. As part of a campaign to promote less-travelled flight routes from Stockholm and Berlin, the company held a contest to win an all-expenses-paid year living in Berlin. The catch? Participants had to legally change their name to Klaus-Heidi. Each of the 42 contestants who changed their moniker became the heroes of Lufthansa's brand story. They embodied the airline's "Nonstop You" slogan and the image of travel and adventure. The Klaus-Heidi contest also became a main driver to Lufthansa's website and sparked consumers' interest in living and traveling to Berlin.

Find a Setting That Makes Sense

Along with character, it also helps your brand story to use settings that are appropriate for the products you're selling. Tide's *Miracle Stain* commercial, for example, takes place in a home where the product would be used. Lufthansa's Klaus-Heidi campaign centers on Berlin, where the story's hero-contestants want to live for free. Even Stonyfield's blog entries are set on the farms where its brand story characters harvest the ingredients for the popular yogurt.

Chapter 4: *Identify Your Conflict and Resolution*

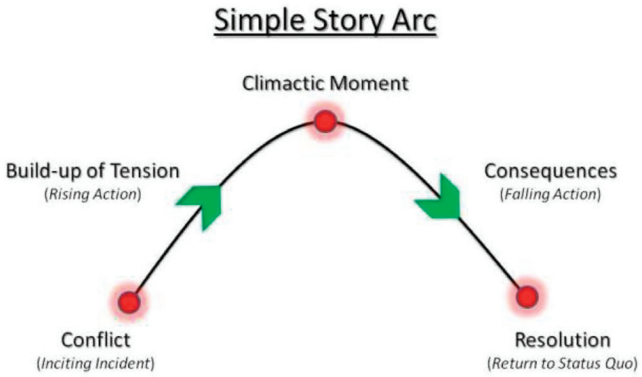
Every great story ever told has a conflict and a resolution. Otherwise, why care about the characters? The same rings true with telling your brand story. By establishing a conflict, you can keep consumers on the edge of their seats wondering what's going to happen next. Then the resolution gives you the opportunity to make your brand shine.

There are two types of conflict: external and internal. The first is about an outside threat to your brand story's hero. In Chipotle's *The Scarecrow,* for example, the character is fighting against mass production and poor-quality food.

The second kind of conflict — internal — is the hero's battle against some aspect of himself or herself. In 2005, Nike ran its *Reincarnate* campaign in Australia. One of these commercials featured a runner on a dusty country road struggling to keep moving. Speaking aloud, he depicts an emotional inner battle between his desire to give up and his desire to persevere. For the resolution, he pushes ahead and leaves the unmotivated part of himself behind — solidifying the message that Nike brand users have the drive to succeed.



On a lighter and more comical note, Volvo Trucks earned a spot in pop culture history with *The Epic Split*, which demonstrates conquering both an external and internal conflict. Actor and martial artist Jean-Claude Van Damme is



seen in close up and, as the camera pans out, it's revealed that his legs are spread in a wide split between two tractor trailers traveling steadily in reverse. Not only has the hero of this story conquered both the internal and external conflicts of being a human being doing an epic split between two moving vehicles (with the help of CGI), Volvo has resolved an external conflict for trucks by introducing amazing directional stability.

This brand story was such a hit that it spawned a Christmas parody from Hungarian animation firm Delov Digital. The web video features Chuck Norris doing an epic split between two airplanes with nearly a dozen airmen balanced in a tree formation on his head — complete with holiday lights.



Chapter 5: Tips to Develop Better Storytelling Skills

Now that we've covered how to build your brand story using the classic narrative arc and the current media formats out there, it's time to get cracking with your own brand's story. The more often you create these, the easier they'll become.



You can also train yourself to be a better storyteller by paying attention to how your competition goes about it. Make note of what works and what doesn't. Additionally, look for inspiration from TV, films and books (especially young adult novels, which often have an easily identifiable structure to them). How do these writers approach storytelling? Are there elements that appeal to you and could be replicated using your chosen media formats? Jot down any ideas that arise and keep them in one place so they are easy to reference when you're planning your next brand story.

Onwards and Upwards with Brand Storytelling

In conclusion, there can be no doubt about it: brand storytelling is the way of the future. Gone are the days of the hard sell.

But as a type of content marketing, brand storytelling can be tricky to track. You might now be wondering how to measure the success of your stories. Should it be by metrics that track the time spent on a website to reflect the level of engagement? The number of clicks and shares on social media? It all comes down to preference and goals. Some brands need immediate hard data they can use to help plan the next storytelling campaign. Others are more concerned with building brand loyalty. They want consumers to spend more time with their products in order to build a strong relationship that contributes to future success.

However you choose to measure success, the most important thing is to tell your brand story the right way — one that provides value to your consumers so they'll keep coming back.

For more information, view our on-demand webinar: http://learn.citrix.com/022415-NA-G2W-MKT-Wegert-WBRARC-S

Use the following template to help you write your own brand's story. Or analyze a story you currently have to help determine if it's as effective as it can be.

- What is the **mission statement or philosophy** of your brand that you would like to portray through this story?

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- Which **theme** best supports this goal?
  - ☐ Fate
  - ☐ Ambition
  - ☐ Sacrifice
  - ☐ Transformation
  - ☐ Love
  - ☐ Vengeance
  - ☐ Resurrection

- Which **plot technique** will help you achieve your goal?
  - ☐ Overcoming the Monster — *Dracula*
  - ☐ Rags to Riches — *Cinderella*
  - ☐ The Quest — *The Lord of the Rings*
  - ☐ Voyage and Return — *Alice in Wonderland*
  - ☐ Comedy — *Bridget Jones's Diary*
  - ☐ Tragedy — *Macbeth*
  - ☐ Rebirth — *Beauty and the Beast*

- Who are the **heroes** of your story? Are there additional characters?

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- **Setting**: Where does your story take place?

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- What is the **conflict**? Is it internal or external?

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- How does the hero **resolve** the conflict?

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- Who is your **target audience**? What is the best **format(s)** to reach them that also supports the telling of your story?
  - ☐ Social (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine, Pinterest, etc.)
  - ☐ YouTube
  - ☐ Television
  - ☐ Blog
  - ☐ Brand website
  - ☐ Special microsite
  - ☐ Print
  - ☐ Other

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About Tessa Wegert

Tessa Wegert is a Canadian writer and former media strategist. She writes business articles with a focus on digital and social media, and stories that run the gamut from suspense to science thrillers and speculative fiction. Tessa's interested in technology, zoology, new media, and books of all kinds. She lives near New York City with her family and is counting the days until her next Montreal poutine.

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