

2003: IDEAS FROM TRENDS

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Storytelling

SUPPOSE MARKETING STARTED TELLING STORIES...

The Life of Pi is a best-selling, prize-winning novel about a sixteen-year-old Indian boy shipwrecked for 227 days in a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. In an interview, the author, Yann Martel, said:

The theme of the novel can be summarized: Life is a story. You can choose your story.

In *The Power of the Tale*, a new book on storytelling in organizations, the authors claim that stories work their "magic" because their structure is lifelike: they "unfold as our lives unfold."

Both statements point to a reason why storytelling has become one of the most important business trends of the last few years, a trend that will lead both marketing and advertising in new-and radical-directions.

Of course, stories have always been a central part of culture-transmitted orally, codified in myths and legends, gaining huge audiences in films, novels, movies, and television. But until recently they have not been the subject of business books or articles in the *Harvard Business Review*.

The past few years, however, have seen the emergence not only of books and articles, but also of college courses, trainers, and web sites on the value of storytelling for business. The 2003 publication of *The Power of the Tale*; Yannis Gabriel's *Storytelling in Organizations in 2000*; Peg Neiderhauser's *Corporate Legends and Lore: the Power of Storytelling as a Management Tool*; a curriculum on storytelling and business at Emerson College in England; *Storytelling in Organizations*, a company for business people

devoted to training in the art of telling stories; Internet resources such as the American-based web site The Story Net and the UK site www.lilliput.co.uk...all speak to a burgeoning awareness of the power and importance of storytelling.

This white paper, therefore, will explore the power of narrative, trace the spread of storytelling in business and consider the new directions it presents for marketing and advertising.



The Magic of Stories

According to the psychologist James Bruner, human beings are "hard wired to organize experience into narratives." Telling stories, he believes, is built into the way we think (*The Power of the Tale*). An issue of the *Utne Reader* devoted to storytelling claims that "some postulate the existence of a 'narrative module' in the human brain."

Nevertheless, marketing for most of its existence managed to overlook this truth and focused on rational, economic appeals to consumers, trying to make a compelling argument for buying a brand in terms of reasons to believe, attributes and benefits. This approach so dominated marketing and advertising that the natural storytelling of creatives was often subordinated to the demo or the product claim.

Recently, however, there has been a growing recognition in business of the story as a powerful and persuasive means of communication. This power and persuasiveness derives from a number of factors inherent in all stories.

At the most basic level, the human fascination with stories stems from our need to complete the incomplete, to seek resolution, to have things whole. The existence of a plot-a related sequence of events in time-involves us in questions like: "What will happen?" and "How will it all turn out?"

Stories speak to the human desire to make sense of life

The authors of *The Power of the Tale* call this human need "sensemaking." All myths and legends stem from this impulse. And it is, of course, these patterns imposed on events and people that make stories memorable.

Stories are emotionally involving

In an article in the June 2003 *Harvard Business Review*, "Storytelling That Moves People," the screenwriting coach Robert McKee says:

Forget about PowerPoint and statistics. To move people at the deepest level, you need stories.

He goes on to talk about the way that stories evoke emotion:

Stories fulfill a profound human need to grasp the patterns of living-not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience.

Stories stimulate the imagination

Because they contain characters to whom things happen and who react to those events, people can identify with the characters and enter into the story. In fact, one of the ten commandments of the trainers who make up Storytelling in Organizations is: "It's the listener who tells the tale." In this sense, they argue, stories are "like water," in which the listener can see him or herself.

Stories communicate knowledge

Business is turning to stories because they can communicate information, advice or warnings and can transmit values in powerful, persuasive and memorable ways. Yannis Gabriel writes of the ability of stories to "introduce wit and invention, laughter and tears into the information iron cage."

That iron cage can be a prison, and all too often marketing and advertising, in their focus on the rational sell, have locked themselves into that cage. Stories, on the other hand, communicate knowledge but embody it in a compelling, emotionally involving, and imaginatively stimulating narrative.

Stories entertain

Professor Barbara B. Stern, of the marketing department at Rutgers University, has written a series of articles that argue for the influence of literary forms-lyric, ballad, epic-and the techniques of literature-metaphor, irony-on advertising. One of her papers, "Pleasure and Persuasion in Advertising," examines the way in which "the universal human desire for entertainment" drives much advertising. What is the goal of advertising, she asks, if not the same goal as literature: "to teach with delight."

Stories build community

Stories create communities, bringing the listener and the storyteller together as well as the community of listeners. Consider, for example, the communities formed around religious or ethnic or national stories.



The Spread of Stories

Given the power of narrative forms of communication, it's no wonder that the business community is increasingly turning to stories. The first question to ask about the growing importance accorded to stories in business is why it is happening now. The answer, in brief, is that traditional marketing and advertising approaches are no longer working as well as they once did.

The growing parity of products and brands in the marketplace is the place to start. When a case cannot be made persuasively for the superiority of one brand's benefits or attributes, marketers turn to other claims to differentiate their brand. The emphasis on creating emotional relationships with consumers is one such differentiation. Stories, above all, embody and evoke emotion.

Closely related is the fact that we live in an attention-deficit economy.

Consumers are faced with a barrage of so many messages daily, so many demands on their attention, that attention itself becomes the scarcest commodity. Personal recording device such as TIVO and Replay Plus that allow people to skip and filter out commercials and take control of what they see and when they see it have exacerbated the attention problem. But people pay attention to a compelling story and so stories become a way to gain attention.

Further, as the authors of *The Power of the Tale* point out, in a time of uncertainty and change such as the current business climate, stories surface because they organize and make sense of experience. Stories are patterns imposed on the chaos of experience. People turn to them as they turn to browsers like Google or Yahoo to help them cope with the complexity of life today.

For all these reasons there is a growing recognition in the marketing and advertising communities of the power and persuasiveness of narratives. Stories, therefore, have emerged as the vehicle of choice to communicate ideas and messages.

Given this recognition of the power of stories, it's no wonder that storytelling is spreading to so many areas of business. There are at least five kinds of stories distinguishable today in business.

The organization story

Organizations were the first to begin to utilize storytelling. In *The Dream Society*, a book that heralds the coming age of emotion and imagination that will supplant the age of information, Rolf Jensen writes: "The storyteller creates corporate culture." In *Leading Minds*, Howard Gardner agrees:

All successful leaders, political, military, religious, academic or industrial, are successful to the extent that they tell and embody persuasive stories about where the institutions they lead should be going and how they will get there.

An article in the *MIT Sloan Management Review of 2002* says decisively, "...storytelling has emerged as the preferred approach for teaching leadership effectiveness in many companies today."

The Power of the Tale is built around seven case studies of organizations that turned to storytelling to build trust, promote dialogue, resolve value conflicts, facilitate change, cope with complexity, expand the company's vision, stimulate pride, loyalty and cohesiveness and offer an outlet for feelings that are normally repressed.

One particular type of storytelling-scenario building-has been accepted by organizations as a way to plan for the future. Creating stories that embody alternative views of the future based on the certainties-and uncertainties-of the present is a way to think about the future, given the limited knowledge we have at the present.

The brand story

This is the age of the brand, and the concern with brand image, brand

character, and brand personality testify to the importance we attach to brands. Recently there has been a focus on the brand story rather than just brand image or character. In a book to be published next year, *Branded Nation: Selling Culture in America*, Professor James Twitchell sees storytelling as the very essence of branding:

What branding really is, is a story attached to a product. When you have a product that's just like another product, there are any number of ways to compete. The stupid way is to lower prices. The smart way is to change the value of the product by telling a story about it. (Quoted in the *Hartford Courant*)

The consumer story

Research and planning has embraced ethnography in recent years, the close observation of consumers' lives to uncover truths about consumers that they, themselves, cannot articulate. Stories are the next step since they involve not only observing consumers but also listening to them. Recognizing the importance of stories means allowing consumers to tell their stories as a way to get at the same goal—the truth about consumer behavior and attitudes.

After all, we all construct the story of our life; it is the way we build an identity. The story of our identity is the outcome of such questions as: Who am I? What do I want? Where am I? Where am I going? In *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*, Charles Baxter traces how "we all create the story of ourselves, of who we are supposed to be and how we are supposed to act." It is widely accepted in marketing and advertising that consumers use brands to express who they are and who they wish to be. Listening to consumer stories means exploring the ways in which brands enter into consumer stories.

The advertising story

Copywriters, art directors, and creative directors have always been storytellers. In fact, storytelling trainers use the device of the storyboard, which asks people to think in terms of an opening scene, a challenge scene, a turning point scene and a final scene (*The Power of the Tale*).

An article in the June 2003 issue of *Creativity* focused on the recent upsurge of storytelling and the structure that commercials impose on creatives. All of the creative directors interviewed testified to the power of stories. "Storytelling," said creative director Kinka Usher, "is not a trend. It's human history, from the time guys were sitting around a fire telling tales, to this very moment. It hasn't changed much and it won't."

The story about the story

A new entry in storytelling is the backstory, or the story behind the story. Such stories tend to be highly self-conscious and self-referential—Roseanne Barr doing a television show about Roseanne doing a television show or movie directors making a film about themselves making a film. We are fascinated at this point in culture by backstories. It's too early to tell if this new form of story will cross from popular culture into business culture, but since it's new, it commands attention.



New Directions

Doesn't this qualify us to tell stories?

Given that traditional marketing and advertising aren't working very well and that there is an increasing recognition of the power of stories, business has been turning to storytelling coaches, going to story school, reading how-to-tell-stories books.

But do we need to?

After all, we've been hearing stories all our lives, reading books, watching movies and TV. Don't we know enough about the elements of a story-plot, characters, setting, tone, point of view, theme-and don't we have a fix on what makes a story good-conflict, suspense, relevance? Doesn't this qualify us to tell stories? Why should planners, in effect, go to storytelling school and take account, creative and client with them?

The answer is no, we don't know enough and yes, we could all profit from the books and coaches and training.

First of all, consumers bring expectations to any story, expectations we often ignore. The field of genre criticism explores the conventions behind the stories we tell. It is these conventions that are the sources of consumers' expectations.

An organizational story, for example, most often takes the form of epic adventures-strong, brave leaders, struggling against great odds, ultimately triumphing over adversaries. These are very different from the conventions of the soap opera/romance/domestic novel genre that are behind much package goods advertising. As Barbara Stern analyzes in her article, "Literary Analysis of an Advertisement: the Commercial as Soap Opera," consumers come to these stories with expectations that the woman/mother will be patient, nurturing, caring, good humored and tactful and that the man/husband/father will exhibit "commitment, fidelity and open articulation of feelings." They expect to find the values of traditionalism, marriage and matriarchy celebrated in such commercials. The more we're aware of the genre behind the stories we tell, then, the more understanding we'll have of the expectations consumers will bring to that story.

Further, the plots and themes of all stories, whether in novels, movies, TV, or the stories we tell about ourselves, our families or our friends, follow a number of identifiable arcs. There is, for example, the great theme of expectations and reality or the theme of the journey, both literal or the coming-of-age journey. In the *HBR* interview, Robert McKee claims that we tell stories "to help us deal with the dread of life and the struggle to survive." In 1987, the social commentator Don Michael identified six stories that were most compelling to the world at that time and, with some slight modification, continue to be: the Progress story, the Christian values story, the Islamic story, the Marxist story, the Green story and the New Paradigm story, which heralds technology.

Rolf Jensen, in *The Dream Society*, also identifies stories that resonate most strongly with people today: the adventure story; the togetherness, friendship and love story; the who-am-I story; the quest-for-peace-of-mind story; and the search-for-convictions story. *The Dream Society* traces the way in which a consumer culture like ours tells stories "through the products we buy: clothes, transportation, leisure products, vacations, homes." Jensen foresees a time when "the product itself (its content or utility value) will become secondary-the product itself will become an appendix, the main purpose of which is to embody whatever story is being told." He writes: "In the Dream Society, our work will be driven by stories and emotions...."

Robert McKee traces an even more basic pattern:

Essentially a story expresses how and why life changes. It begins with a situation in which life is relatively in balance.... Then there's an event-in screenwriting, we call it the 'inciting incident'-that throws life out of balance.... The story goes on to describe how, in an effort to restore balance, the protagonist's subjective expectations crash into an uncooperative reality.

And in *The Stories We Live By*, Dan P. McAdams writes that the desire for power or for love are the two basic themes of every story.

So the more we understand the great themes and story arcs through which people have tried to make sense of their world, the more we'll be able to inform our stories-organization, brand, advertising stories-with these patterns.

Finally, another reason to apprentice to storytelling is that we've been listeners, not tellers of tales, in our business lives and in much of our personal lives. To the extent that we can lose ourselves in a story, we suspend our critical faculties. But the new emphasis on stories demands that we become the tellers of the tales. We need to learn how to think in our work lives in terms of those narrative patterns that delight us in our personal lives.

In a memo, P&G drew a distinction between creating a story-strategy work-and telling a story-executional work. While it is a valuable distinction, both functions demand familiarity with narrative structure and themes.

What does incorporating the value of stories into marketing and advertising mean for us? What new directions does the belief in stories point to?

Letting Go

· Recognizing the power of stories to communicate ideas and to evoke emotion means learning to let go of many of the assumptions about marketing and advertising that still hold sway. It means focusing on stories that engage, involve, entertain as well as communicate. Unless we do this, marketing and advertising will remain "in the iron cage of information" in a world that increasingly tunes information out.

Re-education

· Learning to let go involves a process of re-education, however we choose to pursue it. We need to incorporate criteria different from the usual in the creation of advertising.

- Is the idea we want to communicate embedded in a narrative?
- Have we thought in terms of narrative structure: conflict, struggle, obstacles, resolution?
- Have we evaluated the story in terms of how entertaining and emotionally involving it is as well as how clearly it communicates?

Conventions and Codes

· Serving an apprenticeship in storytelling also means exploring the expectations consumers bring to advertising based on their familiarity with different narrative genres. It also means keeping the themes each genre deals with before us as we create stories. To the extent that we link our stories to culturally relevant themes, appropriate to the genre, they will resonate with consumers.

Your Story and My Story

· We also need to explore which stories are important to our various targets today, for example:

- Gen X women, as well as men, in pursuit of balance in their lives present opportunities for heroic adventure narratives of conflict and struggle
- The Boomers' spiritual search for meaning in life suggests quest narratives
- Young men's coming-of-age journeys involve not only adventure but also the conflict between expectations and reality

Consumers Talking

· Letting go also involves letting go of traditional means of understanding consumers in favor of listening to their stories. As Yannis Gabriel says:

Researchers who want to use stories as a research instrument...must rid themselves of the assumption that quality data are objective, reliable, accurate etc. and must be prepared to engage with the emotions and the meanings...
(quoted in *The Power of the Tale*).

The Sweet Spot

· The focus on the brand story involves a shift to a less static, more fluid conception of brands than before. It makes room for conflict, opposition, resolution and growth—all elements of narrative. Clearly the most valuable brand stories will come from that place where the consumer's story and the brand story meet.

Blogs and MUDs

· Some of the most experimental forms of narrative are taking place on the Internet: web diaries, confessional narratives, Blogs, MUDs (multiple role-playing in fictional worlds in real time), hypertext. We need to explore these new touch points of storytelling for consumers.