



The Power of a Good Brand Story

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Call it cavalier, but my first question to Fortune 500 CEO's and start-up entrepreneurs alike is, "What's your story?"

What strikes me is not how different, nor how similar, the answers are; but how hard it is for nearly everyone to answer the question in the first place. Before reading any further, and before casting any stones, pause for a moment and ask yourself the question...you see, it's not so easy, is it?

Well into the age of the soundbite, we're still hard-pressed to summon the elusive 60 second description of what it is we do, what our brand provides to those we serve, and why it matters.

And, this of course, is only the tip of the iceberg. Our fixation with the "elevator speech" (or martini-monologue) derives from the need to "sum it all up" for audiences with notoriously short attention spans. But, before we can sum it all up, we need to have thought it all through. Like the concert pianist who makes Chopin seem easy, there's a whole lot of unseen effort that goes into the public performance.

So, when I ask people "what's your story," and see their eyes glaze over and their fingers start to fidget and their throats sprout frogs, I know that someone has not been practicing. Someone has not learned to read the music, to hit the right notes, to make the instrument of communication sing. I know too, that no matter what it is I've been called in to do (write a brochure, craft web content, create a name) there's a deeper need, a more significant bit of work to be done.

For fifteen years, I have been helping companies in a wide range of industries develop a better understanding of who they are, who they serve, and what it is that binds them together in lasting and profitable relationships. During the course of this work, I've had the privilege of partnering with many of the largest branding and marketing firms in the world. Each has its own perspective on branding: Some say a brand is a promise. Others say that it's your reputation. Still others, that it's a unique and compelling idea. And, guess what – they're all right. But, there's more to the story.

I came to branding from anthropology, armed with the understanding that one of the primary ways we make sense of our world and our place in it, is through stories. The same is true of brands. Brands are the stories that unite us all in a common purpose within an enterprise, and connect us with the people we serve on the outside. These brand stories give meaning to who we are and what we do. They're a special kind of story – they're strategic, they build on themselves

chapter by chapter over time, they grow as they respond to changing customers and changing markets.

Brand stories are what drive our critical interactions with our customers and stakeholders: To use a common marketing formula, they are what propel Awareness, Consideration, Trial and Buying. They are also what ensure the repetition of this process – the virtuous cycle that produces growth and profitability.

This is what makes brand stories so important – far from being window dressing, they are key business drivers. The more coherent and compelling your brand story, the more it will power the success of your enterprise.

So, how *does* one craft a strong brand story, one that drives key business decisions as well as marketing communications? The watchwords of a strong brand story are Clarity, Consistency and Character.

Clarity: First, make sure you know what you wish to say. This is the content of your brand; who you are, what you do, who you do it for, why it matters to them, and how it's different from anyone else in the marketplace.

Consistency: Then, make sure you say it (and show it) in the same way, wherever and with whomever you do business. This is how all your communications, actions and accomplishments start to work together, building up into the unity that is your brand presence in the marketplace.

Character: Finally, give it a little oomph, panache, flair. This is where your personality shines through. It's what brings you to life at an emotional level. It's what makes people want to connect with you. It's what turns necessity into desire. For example, it's what turns the statement, "I *need* a new cell phone," into "I *want that* new cell phone."

To a large degree, crafting a good brand story is about applying the lessons we've always known. Remember the tales we used to love as children? At the end of them, we were often asked by a parent or teacher, "What's the moral of the story?" Like so many of life's fundamental lessons, this one endures throughout all that we do, including business. The moral of a story is the core idea or truth that the story expresses. Your brand story works in a similar way; it defines and expresses the core truth about who you are as an enterprise. It's the rationale behind your most fundamental decisions. It's the meaning at the heart of all your messages.

Ultimately, it is your brand story that helps you answer that most fundamental of all questions, "why?" Why do you decide to make one decision and not another? Why do your customers need you? Why is it that you're better able to meet their needs than anyone else? Why does your logo look this way? Why do your press releases read the way they do? And most important to marketers and managers alike: Why would someone make that critical decision to use your products and services over those of anyone else?



Once you have answered these questions, you can go on to create important communications tools – the key messages that keep your people on point, the speeches and corporate communications that rally investors, the copy and design that accurately and powerfully convey your identity to consumers. But, until you've defined your brand story – no matter how fancy your communications program – you've got nothing to say.

So, what's your story?

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