



Apple.
Facebook.
Coca-Cola.
Amazon.
Google.
Oracle.
Tesla.

Look at any list of the world's most valuable, innovative or fastest-growing companies, and you'll learn they share a commonality regardless of size, industry, or age: they know the story of their brand.

THE STORY IS THE STRATEGY

HOW TO WRITE A NARRATIVE THAT
BUILDS—AND GROWS—YOUR BRAND

WOJEN

For many companies, “story” is a buzzword that is relegated to the marketing department, with the understanding that crafting a brand story will create compelling advertising, and a torrent of social media “likes.” Ben Horowitz [puts it best](#):

“The mistake people make is thinking the story is just about marketing. No, the story is the strategy. If you make your story better you make the strategy better.”

Horowitz continues: “You can have a great product, but a compelling story puts the company into motion. If you don’t have a great story it’s hard to get people motivated to join you, to work on the product, and to get people to invest in the product.” A compelling story is not just a driver of marketing campaigns, but rather the engine underneath all successful companies. A core story motivates employees, defines company culture, and provides a vision to attract investors and define future product development.

Woden has worked with over one hundred companies of all sizes and industries to craft these compelling narratives — and this guide will show you how you can do the same for your business.



WHY STORY?

Story is the emotion that makes your company come to life in the eyes of your audience.

The terminology of storytelling has recently [tipped into a marketing cliché](#). We're all admonished to be storytellers, or to have a great story. The art of crafting a core narrative has fallen victim to the buzzword, and it has obscured the importance of the "why" in storytelling.

Storytelling is more than just a sleek veneer on stale marketing and sales strategies. It's an approach [proven over millennia of human history](#) that, thanks to modern technology, has become more relevant than ever.

Most people on the planet grew up during the broadcast era: a time when television, newspapers, mail and radio offered relatively few channels for communicating with mass audiences. This was the dominant method of communication during the 20th century, but the truth is it's an aberration for most of human history. Stretch the timeline out long enough and modern communication methods are dwarfed by the time periods when humans relied primarily on in-person communications.

For most of human history, we communicated through the oral tradition. A person shared something with another person, and if it was interesting enough, they passed it on to a third person. And if it wasn't, the message died then and there. It was survival of the fittest for messages.

In this environment, there's one type of information that passed along most effectively:

stories. Stories are memorable because they are emotionally resonant, and easy to take ownership of. The storyteller adopts the story in their own image, modifying it slightly, and passing it on. Storytelling arose not as a form of entertainment, but rather as a mechanism for communicating deeply held truths across societies. We don't tell stories because we want to - we tell stories because they are essential.

The reason online social sharing, linking, and direct messaging so quickly became a core part of society is because it taps into an ancient need for humans to tell stories to each other, without an intermediary. After a brief period of time where the broadcast era subjected captive audiences to drivel like *Cop Rock*, the Internet has brought a rebirth of the oral tradition. People are once again passing on the information they see as most valuable, and discarding that which is not.

Brands who are looking to attract capital, customers, employees or evangelists need only look to the ancient form of the story to understand how [best to engage audiences today](#). Due to the resurgence of the oral tradition, companies have more opportunities than ever to reach audiences with their core narratives, and fuel incredible growth. Capital, once needed for access to the broadcast markets, has been supplanted by narrative as the essential ingredient to connecting organizations with people, and fueling incredible growth.



IT'S NOT ART, IT'S SCIENCE

The first mistake most people make when they consider crafting a narrative is to assume it's purely an art form. Certainly creativity helps, and following dramatic structures such as Freytag's Pyramid can keep an audience's rapt attention as your tale unfolds. But the real secret to effective storytelling is a framework that underpins virtually every story to ever gain widespread adoption: The Hero's Journey.

The Hero's Journey structure was first outlined by comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell in his work [*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*](#). It is the structure used in many Biblical stories, Star Wars (on which George Lucas credits Campbell's influence), today's Marvel movies and many more. Campbell divides the narrative arc into 17 different stages. For the purposes of crafting your own business's narrative, it's important to hyper-focus on four:



Here is how each of these components work together to build the perfect narrative for your organization:

A BROKEN WORLD

All stories take place somewhere – the setting of the story. In a Hero's Journey narrative, the world in which the story exists is fundamentally broken. In Star Wars, for example, an evil empire oppresses the people of the galaxy. The need to repair this problem provides the impetus for the story itself.





The broken world for your business is the problem it seeks to solve for your customers. What is it that your users or clients fundamentally could not achieve before your firm came along? It's essential to paint a picture of a world that is incomplete and in disrepair without your organization.

THE HERO

A story needs a hero protagonist. Effective heroes are powerless outsiders who wish for more; they serve as an avatar for the audience, compelling the audience to see themselves inside the story. Luke Skywalker, an orphaned farm boy, is the ideal hero for audiences to connect with.

Many brands make the mistake of framing themselves as the hero of the story. They tell people how they are so great, and about all the amazing things their product or service can do. Great organizations make their customers the hero. This approach squarely puts the needs and wants of the customer at the root of everything across the organization.

So, if your company is not the hero, who are you?

THEIR MENTOR

Since Obi-Wan Kenobi is the best character in all of Star Wars, so this is great news for your brand. The mentor is a person who encounters the hero early in their journey. They guide them on their path, and help them unlock a latent power within – as Obi-Wan helps Luke discover the force.

Great organizations do not solve problems for their customers. They empower their customers to solve their own problems, and provide the support and guidance to do that. This sentiment spurs evangelism: people love to spread the word about companies that spur them to greatness, and cast them as the hero in their own story.

A MAGICAL GIFT

After encountering the mentor, the hero receives a magical gift that aids them on their journey (such as a lightsaber). This gift is used to help defeat the source of the world's problems. The gift for your customers is your product or service.





The journey ends with the hero returning home, using the gift to repair the broken world and ensure that the community can live happily ever after.

Campbell assembled this structure (also called the monomyth) through analysis of the stories commonly passed via the oral tradition, and his approach has since been refined by others, [such as Christopher Volger](#). But, even more recently, work has been done to prove how the human brain is hardwired to respond to stories told in this structure.

Paul Zak is a neuroeconomist who studies the release of the chemical oxytocin in the brain. His work has shown that the release of this chemical during interpersonal experiences is a major factor in creating trust. These chemical releases [correspond with economic transactions](#) and attraction, and they can be used to “hack” the brain.

His research has also shown that oxytocin is [released during the climax phase of a story with appropriate audience interest](#). It is why people feel a rush when the main character defeats his mortal enemy in a movie — the audience cares, and feels that victory as their own.

Brand stories constructed using the Hero’s Journey have the same effect. Heroes who elicit empathy from the audience increase their emotional investment, and when the hero defeats the source of their broken world with the support of your business, the audience associates that oxytocin release with the brand, and establish a level of trust that might otherwise take decades to build.



PURPOSE, NOT PRODUCT

You now have the pieces in place to tell your company's story. But, a great narrative is more than just the sum of its parts.

The earliest stories were [used to communicate universal truths](#): explanations of the natural world, or important rules for organizing society. Brand stories are the same way: they must have a higher purpose if they are going to truly engage audiences.

Human decision-making is based in the limbic system, the oldest part of our brain. It's separate from the part of our brain that controls rational thought, and it's why so many brands with compelling features and benefits have absolutely failed to persuade their audiences to purchase (remember Betamax?). What the limbic system does control, though, is emotion.

This is why people make gut decisions, or why they fall into the same decision-making habits over and over again: it feels good. If a brand can connect with its potential audience over their shared values and purpose, customers will consider features and benefits secondarily. They become more accepting of additional services, and more likely to embrace their role as the hero in the brand's story.

Simon Sinek calls this purpose the [brand's "why."](#) Discovering it is the hardest part of crafting your brand narrative – it's like a North Star that provides direction to everything the organization does. Once it's established, it is very hard to change, and putting it in place requires careful thought, consideration, and reflection. When done right, however, it transcends everything.



Brands like Tom's Shoes, Warby Parker, and, yes, Apple, have grown on their ability to align customers and partners with their purpose. Most essentially, all of these organizations have authentic purposes – for one of the world's most valuable corporations, it's simply the belief that technology should be beautifully designed and easy to use.

It's not a coincidence they communicate that message in the Hero's Journey structure.

A company that does this profoundly well is Dove. Unlike other beauty product companies, you won't find messaging from Dove that touts softer skin or a smoother complexion. Dove's "why" is "You are more beautiful than you think;" the company exists to empower people to love themselves as they are. They frame this message in a perfect Hero's Journey narrative: the broken world is a place where people feel they need to present as someone they're not to be accepted or seen as beautiful.

The hero is that outsider: a person who is beautiful and wonderful just as they are. Dove products exist not to fundamentally change the customer, but rather to bring out the beauty that's already within: empowering them to present their true, confident self to the world.

Compare today's Dove messaging with the classic Ogilvy slogan they levered at the height of the broadcast era: "One-quarter cleansing cream. Dove creams your skin while you wash." Finding their "why" and repositioning their story has been vital to keeping Dove relevant.

Shared purpose is what aligns the Hero and the Mentor. Luke and Obi-Wan both want to defeat the Empire, and build their relationship around that. Brands can do the same, and effectively cement their role as the mentor. But doing so requires discarding product-focused messaging that extols features and benefits in favor of a story that portrays how the brand will help their customer transform the world.

The structure of the Hero's Journey is the science of story. An effective "why" is the art: the creative element that ties the message together and separates it from competitors and imitators alike.



STORY IS HOLISTIC

Crafting an effective narrative is an important, foundational step for an organization. Implementing it effectively is even more vital, and required to unlock the true power of storytelling. The applications for stories in marketing and sales are obvious to most people, and in many organizations, it becomes the domain of the marketing department to serve as chief storytellers.

This is a disservice to every stakeholder: customers, employees, partners, and investors alike. Great organizations see each interaction as an opportunity to communicate and advance their story.

You may have heard the mantra “hire for culture, train for skills.” Company culture and story are synonymous. There are often going to be countless people available with the skills and experience for any role in your organization. The key is attracting the people who believe what you believe, so you can empower them to advance the organization.

As the company grows, leadership has direct interaction with a smaller and smaller percentage of employees. Adherence to the story provides the framework for knowing everyone is moving in the same direction, and that the company culture is customer-focused. When the story isn't defined, others step in to fill that vacuum with often disastrous results.

And the story exists to reinforce the brand promise made to customers. When they hear the story in marketing or sales, they rightly expect it will be fulfilled in their relationship. Companies like Amazon use customer service interactions as an opportunity to subtly reinforce the story, and affirm brand loyalty.

Even partnerships, from fundraising to strategic, are driven by the story. Partners want to know a company's vision and values are compatible with their own mission – story provides that in a way that is emotionally compelling and easy to understand.

Once your organization crafts its story, work diligently to break it out of the marketing box. Let employees use it as a framework for crafting their own company stories, and align everything from job descriptions to the guidelines for customer service around the story.



START TELLING IT TODAY

Woden's expertise is in helping brands discover their purpose, craft it into a compelling narrative, and develop the right strategy for implementing it across their organization. But every brand should take the time to consider their story, even if they develop it themselves.

To start building your organization's story:

- Identify the key components of your Hero's Journey arc
- Consider, and carefully define the "why" behind your organization
- Combine those elements into a compelling narrative that engages your audience
- Codify and share it with everyone in your business
- Outline how and where it can be aligned with each part of the organization

And most importantly: take your time, and embrace the process. A great story can not be rushed, but once it is unleashed, the impact is nothing short of transformative.



WHAT'S YOUR STORY?



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