



YOUR STORY IS YOUR STRATEGY

How to Write a Narrative that Builds—and Grows—Your Brand

WODEN

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

Look at any 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.

“Story” is not just a buzzword applied to the latest and greatest marketing innovation. And, storytelling isn't a tactical skill—it's a strategic discipline which must be applied holistically in an organization to achieve its potential. Ben Horowitz puts it best:

“THE MISTAKE PEOPLE MAKE IS THINKING THE STORY IS JUST ABOUT THE 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 clear strategic narrative is the framework for all successful organizations. A brand story defines purpose, drives internal alignment, makes sales and marketing more efficient, cements connection with customers, and creates growth which transforms organizations.

IT'S NOT ART, IT'S SCIENCE.

Story defines the connection your brand has with customers, prospects, employees, investors, and more.

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.

The 20th century was an aberration in human history: a time when television, newspapers, mail, and radio offered relatively few channels for communicating with mass audiences. While mass media has dominated in the recent past, stretch the timeline out long enough and modern communication methods are dwarfed by the time periods when humans relied primarily on direct communication.

For most of human history, information exclusively passed through oral tradition. A person shared something with another, 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—or was made to be more compelling. It was “survival of the fittest” for messages and ideas.

One type of communication passed along information 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, modifies it slightly, and passes it on, and the next listener does the same. Storytelling arose not as a form of entertainment, but rather as a mechanism for communicating deeply held truths across societies. Humans don't tell stories because they want to—they tell stories because they are essential.

The reason online social sharing, linking, and direct massaging so quickly became the dominant communication method 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, this post-broadcast era has brought a rebirth of oral tradition. People are once again passing on the information they see as most valuable, and discarding that which is not.

Many brands struggle with this new reality, and are seeking some type of innovation to address it. The irony is that the solution to contemporary communication lies not in the future, but in applying the proven approaches of the past woven into the fabric of the human brain—to new technologies. This resurgence of oral tradition provides companies more opportunities than ever to reach audiences and fuel incredible growth. Capital, once required to access the broadcast markets, has been supplanted by narratives as the essential ingredient to connecting organizations with audiences, creating alignment, cementing connection, and fueling growth.

Many people think of crafting a narrative as purely an art form. 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 science.

Every effective story exists to communicate a universal truth: the moral of the story. And virtually every message that has ever gained widespread adoption has followed the same narrative structure, a story arc known as the Hero's Journey. Before a story is told, it must have a message to communicate.

The best stories share a universal truth about the world: something essential which must be passed on and shared with members of a community. This universal truth is the moral of the story, and is the key lesson an audience takes away from the narrative.

The moral of a brand story is the organization's purpose. Customers want to do business with brands who share their beliefs, and a clear understanding of that is essential to a narrative that connects with audiences. Effective morals in a brand story aren't about features or benefits. They are an authentic articulation of why the company exists—image a statement which begins with “We believe...” to describe the most important outcome of the brand.

The Hero's Journey was first outlined by comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell. In his work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, he studied enduring stories across different periods of history and all corners of the globe, and identified a common structure that underpinned stories which endured over time. He codified this narrative arc into 17 distinct stages—it is the same structure used in *Lord of The Rings*, *Harry Potter*, Biblical stories, *Star Wars* (on which George Lucas credits Campbell's influence), and many more. For the purpose of crafting an organization's narrative, there are five most essential components to understand and apply.



THE BROKEN WORLD

All stories take place somewhere: the setting of the story. In a Hero's Journey narrative, the setting is a world that is fundamentally broken. In *Star Wars*, for example, the main character lives on a desert planet, farming moisture, under the oppression of an evil galactic empire. Audiences perceive this broken world, feel its injustice, and the need to rectify it provides the story's forward momentum. The broken world for a business is the challenge it seeks to solve for its customers. A good brand story clearly articulates the problem customers face, and makes it clear this is a fundamental state of disrepair—not a minor inconvenience.



THE HERO

A story needs a protagonist—a hero. This is a powerless outsider who knows so much more is possible in the broken world. They serve as an avatar, compelling the audience to see themselves inside the story. Luke Skywalker, the hero of *Star Wars*, is a teenage orphan who craves adventure away from home—a vulnerability audiences connect with. The same is true of heroes in other popular stories. Brands may not be the hero of their own story, but they have a critical role to play.



THE MENTOR

In a Hero's Journey narrative, the hero encounters an older, wiser character, who reveals how much more is possible within them. This mentor guides the hero forward, and helps them unlock the power within themselves—in the same way that Obi-Wan Kenobi encounters Luke Skywalker, and shares with them the mysteries of the Force. Story-driven organizations do not purport to solve problems for their customers—they are their mentors. They empower 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 inspire them to greatness, and cast them as the hero of the brand story.



THE MAGICAL GIFT

The mentor provides the story's hero with a magical gift of some kind, which they can use on their journey to defeat the source of their world's troubles—the lightsaber, for example which Obi-Wan gifts upon Luke. In a brand story, this gift is the organization's product or service, and it should feel just as powerful and magical to audiences as those in fictional stories.



THE MENDED WORLD

After the hero defeats the source of evil in the world with her mentor's guidance and gift, she returns home, where she lives "happily every after." This resolution is mirrored in a brand's story, and should illustrate the returns that come to a customer by doing business with the organization.

WHY STORY WORKS

Story does more than tug on an audience's heartstrings—it actually changes the brain.

Campbell defined the Hero's Journey structure (also called the Monomyth) through analysis of historical and folk stories passed through time. But, more recently, work has been done to prove how the human brain is hardwired to respond to stories told in this way.

Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist at Claremont McKenna College, studies the connection between brain chemistry and economics. His research has shown that the release of a chemical, oxytocin, during interpersonal experiences creates trust, and corresponds with economic transactions. Oxytocin release can be used to “hack” the brain.

Effective interpersonal experiences are rooted in shared purpose and empathy, and nothing creates that connection more powerfully than story.

Zak's research has shown that oxytocin is released during the climax phase of a story with appropriate

audience interest: It's why audiences feel a rush when the main character defeats his mortal enemy in a movie—the audience cares, and feels the victory as their own.

Brand stories constructed using the Hero's Journey have the same effect. Customers instinctively connect with and understand the arc of the hero. They become emotionally invested in the narrative's outcome, and easily see themselves playing the same role. As their emotional investment increases, they feel the catharsis of the story, leading to an oxytocin release, emotional connection, and a level of trust that might otherwise take decades to build. They have become an evangelist for the brand.

Brands such as Tom's Shoes, Warby Parker, and yes, Apple, have transformed through their ability to align audiences with their purpose. All of these organizations have authentic purposes, which they communicate in the Hero's Journey structure.

A company that does this profoundly well is Dove. Unlike other beauty product companies, Dove's messaging does not exclusively tout softer skin or a smoother complexion. Dove's story is "You are more beautiful than you think;" the company exists to empower people to love themselves as they are. They frame this purpose 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 Dove's 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." Dove has remained relevant by evolving its message to align with compelling storytelling, and the contrast with its legacy approaches (and its effectiveness) is clear.

Shared purpose is what aligns the hero and the mentor. In a narrative, brands do the same, and effectively cement their role as a mentor.

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 customers transform their world.

Crafting a clear, compelling narrative is a strategic, foundational step for any organization. Implementing it 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.

The best story-driven organizations embrace the brand story holistically. It is owned and driven by the founders and c-suite, and they embrace a role as the brand's chief storytellers.

The story itself must be woven into everything the organization does: from customer experience, to the product roadmap, and into the day-to-day experience of working in the culture. Companies must go “all in”—but the rewards they reap are significant, and transformative.

A well-crafted brand story makes the sales and marketing funnel more efficient, and ensures an investor pitch resonates. Most importantly, however,

it provides a framework for growth and a valuable tool to scale the organization's impact, all while inculcating its most closely-held truths and most valuable beliefs. The right brand story attracts the talent an organization needs, empowers them to advance it forward, and provides them a daily reason to complete its arc.

START TELLING YOURS TODAY.

A PROVEN APPROACH TO BRAND STORYTELLING

Woden helps organizations craft a clear, compelling strategic story—and align all they do behind that narrative.

Hundreds of companies on six continents and in dozens of industries have used Woden's propriety process to clarify why they matter, and why employees, customers, and investors should care. Woden's engagements deliver both an effective message that connects with customers, and a comprehensive blueprint for how to implement it—unlocking an organization's potential for growth.

Whether a firm engages with Woden, or works to craft their story themselves, it is important to put a customer-centered narrative structure in place.

To start building an organization's story:

- Identify the key components of the Hero's Journey narrative
- Consider, and carefully define the purpose of the organization
- Combine those elements into a compelling narrative
- Codify it and share it with everyone in the organization
- Outline how and where the brand must be aligned with the narrative

MOST IMPORTANTLY, EMBRACE THE PROCESS.

A great story can't be rushed, but once it's unleashed, the impact is nothing short of transformative.

A group of people are sitting around a campfire in a cornfield at night. The sky is dark and filled with stars. The people are illuminated by the warm light of the fire. The corn stalks are visible in the background, creating a dark silhouette against the night sky.

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

WODENWORKS.COM
1520 LOCUST ST | FIFTH FLOOR | PHILADELPHIA, PA | 19102