



Story Telling in Marketing

Introduction

In an experiment, two groups were told information about the same marketing situation, but in different ways: the first group was told about the issue and the process; and the second group was told a story about the situation, the people involved, how people were impacted, and how the situation was approached.

Then the two groups were asked to playback their understanding of what they had heard. The first group who had been told about the process could list the process used but had lower recall of the issue and the impact. They were also unsure of how and where to use the process and had less insights about how to apply to the process to other, different situations. The group who had been told the story had better recall of the problem, and deeper insights into the issues and the resolution, and were better able to imagine how they could apply their learnings to other, similar but different situations.

The learning is clear: storytelling can significantly improve the retention and understanding of marketing messages and approaches.

Detail

In our real lives, do we recall facts? Or people, events and stories? In another situation, the alumni from one of the companies I had worked for many years ago met recently for dinner together. Most of the evening was spent telling stories from our time together – we told stories about each other, about the times when everything was going wrong (but we managed to prevail), and about our successes and times we won contracts and provided particular service to customers, and so on. People told stories about the founders, and recalled the unique atmosphere, the energy, the devotion and enthusiasm we all had. **So here the learning is slightly different, but still powerful: storytelling is a key part of culture, of building a team, of building a unique culture and how we communicate and recall. It brings a human aspect to corporate speak. It relates to people. It builds empathy and understanding.**

When communicating with customers, marketing (and sales) have a choice: recount the numbers, the service reliability, the field failure rate, the invoice accuracy, the performance or feature of the product and so on; or, tell a real story.

Here is an example I like from Qualcomm, the semiconductor manufacturer. It's about the heat (thermal) given off by their Snapdragon S4 processor. Heat is a real technical problem in chips, because the hotter they run the less reliable they are likely to be and the shorter their lifetime. In practical terms you can measure the temperature and compare it to other solutions and show this in data sheets and charts.

Or you can reduce it to simple, understandable concepts, and tell a story, like what happens to butter when you put it on the Qualcomm S4 chip? Like they do in this short video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPGVGsQ7LrM>.

Even if you are not into semiconductors, have a look and see what you think!



As well as adding some ‘authenticity’ and maybe a different ‘angle’ to your product or brand, storytelling helps get attention in a market where SOV¹ is increasingly difficult to get. I like the story that **Lulemon (Ilululemon athletica)** tell when you enter their stores – “we were born from a love of daily sweat...”! Its attention getting, suggests ‘authenticity’, and gives a clear differentiation from other sports clothes brands.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A few years ago, the advice on Marcoms may have been something like “why don’t you add in some customer stories or case histories?”. Whilst that’s still good general advice for most companies, the discussion has moved on from ‘include a customer story’ to putting storytelling at the heart of the communication effort.

Google are doing some nice storytelling at the moment. [The link here](#) takes you to one of several stories – this one about how one woman - Chiamaka Nwosu in Ghana - is using Google Maps Platform to transform the trucking industry in Africa. It pretty much meets all the storytelling criteria and transforms what is essentially a pretty boring app into something practical and living.

More importantly, is that it gets away from the technical aspects of the app, and instead ties into current major themes and issues (women empowerment, planet’s limited resources, environment, etc), and brings a human (humanity) element to an otherwise dry and potentially dull promo about mapping apps. And look at the tags! In this short story alone: opportunity, maps, entrepreneurs, small business, Europe, women!

So how do you do storytelling, when, and how often?

Storytelling can liven up and transform dull, boring, facts and feature-driven copy, but its not the solution to all marketing communications challenges, and in the end its only one of the ways that you communicate. If you are in a technical business and you only tell stories, you will quickly antagonise the tech buyers who want facts and hard data. Stories may only be appropriate for perhaps at most 10% of your Marcoms efforts, so like any technique use it appropriately and proportionally.

Simple Structure for storytelling

A simple structure would be to ensure that the story has 3 parts: a beginning, a middle and an end. But the theatre is a better parallel for storytelling, with its Act I, Act II, and Act III or close. (Act 1 - Setting the scene and laying out the problem: Rapunzel grows up, beautiful, with very long blonde hair, but alone trapped in a tower. Act II – exploring and developing the issues and creating tension: a handsome prince passes by on his horse and hears Rapunzel’s beautiful singing – sees her and determines to marry her. Act III – resolution: the prince climbs up her long hair and rescues her. They ride away into the sunset to get married and live happily ever after)

8 Steps for storytelling:

1. Know your audience and think about who would be interested to hear your story?
2. Define a clear core message, and think about the desired outcome (what do you want the recipient to know, think, feel or do as a result?)
3. Decide what kind of story you want to tell (are you going to talk about features, or give it some human and emotional element?)
4. Ensure that your story has a **CTA** (the ‘Call-to-Action’) at the end
5. What media will you use? (Blog, video, advert, something on your own website?)
6. Write your story
7. Then, as with all marcoms, ‘test drive’ it with users to check for reaction
8. Publish it.

Footnote:

¹ Share of Voice

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 lululemon

Who are we? We're an athletic apparel company from Vancouver, Canada. We were born from a love of daily sweat, the desire to innovate technical gear and the appetite to build a community where everyone can live their best life. Whether you're training, practicing yoga, outside or at the gym, we'll be there.

Est. 1998

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