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JOHN SADOWSKY

Email,  
social marketing  
and the art  
of storytelling

*Altal Editions*



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**PRAISE FOR *EMAIL, SOCIAL MARKETING AND  
THE ART OF THE STORYTELLING***

*"Email, Social Marketing and the Art of Storytelling is an insightful guide for organizations making the shift from yesterday's approach to branding—a story the firm tells—to what branding is today: an interactive co-creation with the user community."*

**—Stephen Denning, Author of *The Leader's Guide to Radical Management* and *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling***

*"John Sadowsky's book has a lasting message which will be a source of inspiration and motivation for many years to come. He ties together five significant trends in branding and organizational communication highlighting the link between the power of story and organizational success. Sadowsky has emerged as a voice with profound understanding of communication in the 21st century."*

**—Seth Kahan, Author of *Getting Change Right* and Expert Blogger for *Fast Company***

*"This book is a practical guide to using social-media tools to express a brand's true nature. It is powerful, clear, and insightful."*

**—Guy Kawasaki, Author of *Enchantment: The Art of Changing Hearts, Minds, and Actions***

“For the past several years, John Sadowsky has been a driving force in our activities at the Swiss Consulate, helping Swiss entrepreneurs learn to tell their stories of identity. Personally, I have benefited greatly from John’s teaching. He has helped me to better understand how to communicate the essence of the “swissnex” brand, and our diverse set of activities, to our stakeholders. In his latest book, John shows how the art of storytelling applies to modern marketing and branding. It is a masterful, big picture look at modern branding, full of insight, practical advice, and fascinating stories.”

— **Pascal Marmier, Swiss Consul in Boston**

“This book will change the way you approach email and social marketing. John Sadowsky shows you how to gather your customers around your virtual campfire and share stories about your products and brand.”

— **Nick Heys, Founder and CEO, Emailvision**

*“Email, Social Marketing and the Art of Storytelling is a fascinating study of modern marketing, a practical guide for telling a brand story, tying together the timeless lessons of marketing and the emerging technologies of e-commerce. John Sadowsky’s examples and stories give valuable lessons and insight for building a brand in today’s internet age.”*

— **Loïc Le Meur, Founder and CEO of Seismic and LeWeb Conference**



“Once upon a time I thought you could influence people by presenting abstract notions and models of how the world works. This book has stirred me up and made me reconsider my communication style by shining a light on what every human being already knows at some level, but rarely puts to use. Couch your point in a story and you’re ideas will have greater immediate impact. More importantly, people will remember what you said.

*Email, Social Marketing and the Art of Storytelling* is a useful and timely book about modern branding, with wonderful examples and stories to show us the how it should be done.”

—**Pat Brans, author of *Master the Moment: Fifty CEOs Teach You the Secrets of Time Management***

“With true insight and remarkable examples, John Sadowsky shows us how to apply the universal principles of storytelling to the modern world of e-marketing. This is truly a groundbreaking book.”

—**Thierry Grange, Dean of Grenoble Graduate School of Business; Member of AACSB International Board**



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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **Introduction**

## Email, social marketing and the art of storytelling

### HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

I must begin by saying that I never intended to write a book about storytelling, branding, email marketing, and social media. In fact, the idea for this writing project came about from an interesting twist of fate.

When the book *The Seven Rules of Storytelling* (*Les sept règles du storytelling*, Editions Pearson France, with co-author Loïck Roche) was released in Paris in October 2009, it seemed like a good time to catch up with my friends and associates around Paris, to show the book and give away some signed copies. Among those I contacted at that time was Nick Heys, founder and CEO of Emailvision, a fast growing global software company specialized in email and social campaign management.

Nick and I have known each other since 1999. I served as a consultant to him in the start-up phase of his company, around the issues of how an entrepreneur learns to lead and how he begins to build a corporate culture. Since Nick understands quite well my methods of leadership coaching, and since I cite examples from my work with him at several places in the book, I was quite keen to see his reaction.

After a quick read of the *Seven Rules*, Nick turned to me with an unexpected response. "All of this applies really well to the way I see the future of email and social marketing," he said. "Why don't we develop it and share it with our clients?"

Until that moment I had never considered taking on such a project. While I have long recognized the importance

## HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

of storytelling in marketing, and consulted with several companies about telling their brand stories more effectively, my recent research and writing have focused more on leadership than on marketing. It was my intent to continue on that course.

However, as our conversation continued, I was increasingly intrigued by Nick's ideas. Since we first met more than a decade ago, I have considered him a visionary in direct marketing and particularly e-marketing. As we renewed our contact, I was finding his opinions on the subject of storytelling and e-marketing fascinating.

For Nick, storytelling is simply the future of email and social marketing. As he explained, many companies had progressed through two phases in their use of email, and they were now entering a third. The first phase was about learning. Companies needed to figure out how to start using this new marketing channel, in other words, how to build a list, design an email message, and send it out.

The second phase was about leveraging new campaign management technology for performance. Businesses became progressively more concerned with deliverability optimization, testing, targeting, and automated messages. They also learned to measure the results of their campaigns and to track customer behavior.

The third phase, according to Nick, is all about relevance. In an age when consumers are inundated with email, Twitter, Facebook and other online marketing messages, how can we craft messages that cut through the clutter, for example an email newsletter or Twitter link that the

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recipient will open and take the time to read? That's where storytelling comes in. The best way to write messages that engage recipients and hold their attention is to tell compelling stories. And, the more we engage our target audience, the more we build trust. This leads to long term customer retention and profitability.

As I listened to this explanation, I was intrigued enough to want to explore the matter further. Nick and I had several more conversations, over coffee or lunch, where we spoke of the growing worldwide fascination with social media, the future of email, and our shared belief in the power of storytelling. My desire to study the links between storytelling and e-marketing grew out of these meetings.

In early 2010, Nick asked if I would speak publicly with him at industry conferences and seminars, to tell of my work with storytelling as it relates to brands, and how we could learn to tell better stories with email and social media. By the time of his offer to work together again, I had gained enough knowledge and curiosity to be a willing participant, and I readily accepted. Then, in the process of preparing and presenting the initial conferences, I made several discoveries that would lead me to write this book.

My first discovery was simply that the subject – “email, social marketing, and the art of storytelling” – is indeed fascinating. I learned a great deal from the speaking at the various venues, from the reading, research and interviews I did to prepare, and from interacting with the audiences. Often, I listened as participants talked about their e-marketing strategies, their successes and failures, and their plans for the coming months and years.



## HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

These interactions convinced me that forward-thinking companies will create the future of e-marketing, with innovative combinations of email, social media and storytelling.

As I found myself further taken by the topic, and as I began speaking in a variety of settings, my second discovery was that the role of storytelling in email and social marketing is truly a pertinent theme for today's audiences. Time after time, event organizers commented that "storytelling" was an unusual topic, and that it was difficult to predict levels of interest or attendance. And time after time, the turnout was far larger than anyone had anticipated. Today, my sense is that many professionals feel that the telling of authentic and poignant brand stories is a missing element in their communication, and they are ready to listen and learn about it.

While I am encouraged that the marketplace seems increasingly ready to embrace the notion of storytelling, my third discovery was that there is a true need for this book. At my conferences, the most frequent comment from individuals and companies is that they find "all this stuff" to be of great interest and at the same time difficult. In particular, they can see that value of integrating storytelling into their email and social marketing activities, but they are struggling to do it, and looking for help. My hope is that this book will provide them some insight.

## Email, social marketing and the art of storytelling

### WHAT THIS BOOK IS... AND WHAT IT IS NOT INTENDED TO BE

*Email, social marketing and the art of storytelling* is not meant to be a description of the “state of the art”, for this would be impossible. I am quite cognizant of the fact that even before its date of publication, this book will already be outdated, since the world of social media and email marketing is moving quickly and transforming itself every day. To give a small example, as I am writing this chapter in late November 2010, LinkedIn has recently announced their new Company Pages program, and the press and bloggers are already predicting a significant impact on social media marketing.

Nor is this book intended to be a portrayal of best practices. My purpose is not to write about the extraordinary accomplishments of star companies, but rather to show some of the everyday practices of companies that we can all relate to. It is my hope that this book will stimulate thought and discussion about how any organization can strengthen its brand and build its community through intelligent use of email, social media and storytelling.

In fact, as this project progressed, one of the essential objectives that emerged was to write a straightforward book accessible to everyone, to tell stories in which readers could “see” themselves and their organizations. I would like people to read and think, “We could do things like that.” To this end, I have chosen numerous illustrations from businesses whose products or services we might use in the activities of daily life.

## WHAT THIS BOOK IS

Most of the organizations I cite as extended examples have neither enormous notoriety nor vast marketing resources. They would certainly not be considered hot, trendy or sexy. Nonetheless, quite a few of them have achieved remarkable results by combining storytelling and digital media. They serve as proof that the practices I describe for building brands and organizing brand communities can be utilized by anybody.

## CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER STRUCTURE

**Chapter 1** is this introduction.

**Chapter 2**, “The power of story”, is a general explanation of some of the reasons why storytelling is such a powerful communication tool.

**Chapter 3**, “Leadership and branding: the similarities”, explains how the principles I have developed in my leadership coaching also apply very well to marketing and branding.

**Chapter 4**, “The current state of branding: some trends”, enumerates five trends that are changing the world of marketing in general, and internet marketing in particular.

**Chapter 5**, “Managing the community”, provides ideas about how any organization can use the powerful combination of email, social media and storytelling for interaction with its brand community.

**Chapter 6**, “The Case of Filofax” is an interview with Jessica Stephens, Group Marketing Manager, a conversation that touches on many of the book’s major topics.



**CHAPTER 2**  
**The power  
of story**

## Email, social **marketing** and the art of **storytelling**

### MY JOURNEY TO STORY

People often ask me how I came to believe so much in the power of story and storytelling. On the one hand, the answer is straightforward. As a coach of leaders and entrepreneurs, I came to believe in it because it works. Leaders inspire and teach with their stories of identity. Brands do as well.

On the other hand, if the concept of storytelling has taken center stage in much of the work I do today, my own path to discovering it was somewhat circuitous.

As I look back, I think that even as a schoolboy I observed my teachers and coaches with a certain fascination for how leaders communicate. Why are some individuals so effective at motivating those around them with their words?

This interest in how leaders motivate continued into my adult years. When choosing a subject for my doctoral thesis in business administration, I decided to explore the question of a leader's discourse and the elements that make it effective. My research led me unequivocally to the conclusion that the most powerful and inspirational forms of communication are story-based.

Simultaneously, my early practice as a teacher and as a coach of business leaders was lending similar insights. As I began prodding others to find and tell their stories of identity, I discovered along with my clients and students the true power of personal narrative.

## MY JOURNEY TO STORY

Today, with nearly 15 years of experience in the field and with an ever-growing interest in self-expression, I observe with increased attention and awareness what works best in the speeches or presentations of business and political figures. Time and again I am led to the same conclusion: Outstanding leaders weave their life experience into personal stories that they use to teach, motivate and influence others.

When I listen to the speeches of inspirational leaders, I see again and again the impact of storytelling on an audience. Barack Obama, for example, is a masterful storyteller who relied on his personal stories of identity virtually every day of his campaign for the American presidency.

At the same time, storytelling is not just for politicians and CEOs. It is an increasingly important skill in today's world, whenever convincing and inspiring others is the goal. I am convinced that storytelling – when it is personal and authentic – is the most effective way to present ideas in many contexts: sharing knowledge with one's employees and colleagues, presenting to venture capitalists, selling one's product or service, or making public statements.

Through my work with several business clients in recent years, I have come to the realization that one can apply similar approaches to branding and corporate communication. As we will see in a subsequent chapter, both leaders and brands can improve the effectiveness and relevance of their messages by emphasizing their authentic stories of identity.

When I was doing the research and interviews for this book, one of the trends that emerged clearly was an increased

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awareness of the importance of telling and sharing stories among members of a brand community. This phenomenon is certainly not surprising. Since the beginning of time, humans have loved to share their stories. Today, the internet in general – and social media and email in particular – provide vehicles for spreading stories as never before.

This chapter explores briefly some of the conclusions of my personal experiments with story. I explain some of the reasons why storytelling is such an effective form of communication.

One word of caution: With the concepts I present in this chapter, and with the many arguments in favor of story-based discourse, I do not wish to imply that we should abandon abstract analysis and present everything in story form. Rather, storytelling and rational argument should complement each other. What I do mean to say is that story is underutilized in modern-day communication, and that we would do well to rediscover its power.



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**“God made man because he loves stories.”**

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

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**“There is a general story to human existence:  
It is the story of how we use story.”**

Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind*

”

**STORIES ARE UNIVERSAL, UBIQUITOUS  
AND CENTRAL TO ALL HUMAN CULTURE**

Anthropologists tell us that the narrative impulse is as old as civilization itself. The more one studies human civilization, the more one becomes convinced that stories have been around since the beginning, and that they were man's earliest form of communication, distraction and entertainment. Since cave dwellers first drew on their walls, storytelling has been there to help human beings navigate through life.

As Danish author Karen Blixen once proclaimed: "In the beginning was the story."

Stories seem to touch something primal in the human psyche. As schoolchildren, we learn that all of history's great civilizations are characterized by their tendency to create mythic stories. In fact, every culture ever studied has used story as the primary method of teaching group norms and codes of conduct.

All cultures have their traditional keepers of the values, and they are always master storytellers. The Native American shaman, the European troubadour or raconteur, the West African griot, the Hindu pundit, or the Celtic bard never speak to their partisans with logic and fact. Their most powerful communication tool is the universal language of story.

The great French literary theorist Roland Barthes is both eloquent and categorical about the role of narrative in history: "The narratives of the world are without number... the narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all

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societies; the history of narrative begins with the history of mankind; there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives.”

For Ursula Le Guin, feminist spokeswoman and author of *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, the storytelling impulse is common to the entire human race, transcending differences of race, culture and religion: “In the tale, in the telling, we are all one blood.”

Stories have the power to unite and inspire us because they have universal appeal. Human fascination with stories and storytelling transcends the barriers of age, culture and time.

“

**“Man is at all times a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others; he sees everything that happens to him through them, and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.”**

Jean-Paul Sartre, French philosopher (1905-1980)

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