Socialise the story

People love to share stories and leveraging the power of a social network is an effective way to develop and spread a brand narrative

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This article addresses two basic questions. First, why is storytelling effective for communicating and building a positive brand image? And, second, what are some of the best practices of organisations that are using e-marketing to spread their stories?

As such, I will present four concepts about the power and effectiveness of storytelling, each one followed by an industry example.

1 A story is more credible than other types of communication

When presenters try to convince us with concepts and theory, we often look for flaws in their reasoning. On the other hand, when a speaker tells a personal story, we tend to relax, to let it in and accept it. Because stories enter our minds naturally and without resistance, we embrace them more easily than any other form of discourse.

Imagine yourself as part of the audience at a presentation. The lecturer is making a point about the reliability of a product;

for example, Honda cars. He shows a slide presentation with graphs and statistics about customer satisfaction, maintenance records and comparisons with other car-makers. Then, he asks those present for questions or comments. One member of the audience stands up and says: "You know, my mother bought a Honda when I was a teenager and drove it for eight years and over 400,000 kilometers. We never touched the engine except to bring it in for an oil change. There were just never any problems. We thought that thing would run forever."

How do we react in the audience? When the presenter shows his numbers, graphs and charts, we may wonder about what his 'angle' is. We may question whether the information in front of us is completely reliable. We might ask ourselves if the speaker is showing the entire picture, or shading the information to promote his point of view. It is simply a

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natural human tendency. When a speaker tries to convince us with logic and rational argument, we look for flaws, and we argue with him in our minds.

Then, when we hear one authentic story about the product, we tend to let the information in, to accept and embrace it more readily. As we will see in the examples in this article, forward-thinking companies are using storytelling, and particularly user-generated stories, to increase the effectiveness of their e-marketing programmes.

Best Practice: Find and use the stories in the user community. One company that has been using storytelling for many years is a small US-based manufacturer of folding bicycles called Bike Friday. Rather than sing the praises of their products, they ask users to send in tales of 'what they do on a Friday'. They circulate the best stories in their email newsletter each month. Such testimonials, in the form of user-generated stories, are by far the company's most powerful marketing vehicle.

2 **Stories are effective communication devices because they enter the mind naturally and completely, touching both reason and emotion**
Narrative is common to all the cultures of humanity. We embrace story easily for a simple reason: our lives are stories. Every life contains characters, plots, scripts, and all the ingredients found in a good story. Stories enter our minds naturally because we live them, tell them, listen to them, and repeat them every day.

Consider this: It is only through storytelling that we can touch the entire brain – the left (feeling) hemisphere as well as the right (logical and rational) hemisphere, the subconscious as well as the conscious. Since stories reach both our emotional and our rational sides, they allow the listeners to see and feel information, as opposed to merely understanding it.

Best Practice: Identify and leverage user passion points. Since stories engage us on an emotional level, they elicit passion. Innovative e-marketers are finding creative ways to tap into the passion of their user communities. Leveraging user passion is easier than one might think, and I have seen numerous examples of companies with mundane, everyday products that manage to excite user passion and inspire storytelling in their communities.

One such enterprise is Filofax, the British company known for the quality of its personal organisers. Filofax users are passionate about living organised lives, and they often grow quite attached to their Filofax as a way to consolidate their personal information in an easy-to-carry format. One way the company stimulates storytelling among its clients is by asking questions and launching contests by email or on Facebook. For example, it has asked users for stories about how they acquired their first Filofax, or the drama of losing one and how it made them feel. Company officials told me that these storytelling contests were highly successful in generating traffic, and that even the employees of the company were surprised by the volume and emotion of the user responses.

3 **Storytelling is effective in building a brand image because human beings love to share their stories**
In today's world, viral marketing has come a long way. Before the internet era, companies would make commercials and hope that

consumers would find them 'cool' enough to talk about with their friends. Today, companies try to create viral effects by planting videos on their websites or on social sites. Better yet, they make videos and encourage their communities of friends and fans to take them viral. And better still, they prod their clients to make the videos that the community of users then makes viral.

Before the internet era, it took months or years to create an extensive viral buzz throughout the world. In our time, simple videos such as the one where 'scientists' mix Diet Coke and Menthos to create explosions can get over one million views in less than a month. That story went around the globe simply by virtue of friends telling friends.

In mid-July 2010, Old Spice and actor Isaiah Mustafa collaborated to seed various social networks with invitations to ask questions of Mustafa's character, a handsome shirtless man of supreme confidence and humour. The ensuing internet buzz was nothing short of spectacular.

Throughout the day, responses were tracked. Users who contributed interesting questions or were high-profile people on social networks received direct and personalised responses, nearly in real-time, in the form of quick and humorous YouTube videos.

Even to individuals who did not receive the direct responses, the stories created in this initiative felt so rapid and custom-made that many watched for hours, fascinated by this internet 'happening'. They were transfixed by the event, as it evolved into an ongoing saga produced right before their eyes.

Blogs began commenting that the Old Spice endeavour was dominating online and water-cooler conversations everywhere, causing the buzz to escalate further. On the following day, influential bloggers were in awe, calling the effort spectacular, even stating that anyone connected to the internet could not help but notice.

The simple and elegant genius of the Old Spice incident is how they engaged viewers to tell and spread the stories, creating the viral effect. In fact, they are merely using the age-old power of storytelling, in combination with the modern-day power of the internet for story sharing. There is no better way to encourage the spreading of a message than to allow users to watch themselves, or people like them, become heroes in their own story.

Best Practice: In branding today, the most important stories are not the ones we

tell, but those we can spawn in the mind of the listeners. When we stimulate stories in the minds of others, they will want to share them, and there is even a chance that some of the stories will become viral.

An incident such as the Old Spice one is successful because of people's desire for belonging and sharing. The individuals who participated simply wanted to be part of the 'community' that was having fun with this event. And, the way to 'belong' on that day was to leap in and share the stories. Since participants wanted to join in the fun and belong to the group, and since they could 'see' themselves or others like them taking part, they were happy to ask their questions and contribute their stories.

While the Old Spice event was orchestrated by a big company with significant marketing resources, I always like to emphasise that any company can use the power of storytelling for building its brand image. In the research and interviews for my recent book, I encountered numerous companies such as Filofax, Bike Friday, or Mathon (cited in the example below), who have been able to stimulate user-generated stories, all on limited budgets.

4 **Story is the basis for shaping and uniting any community. Social media is a natural platform for storytelling, since it is a modern way of creating community**.
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.

One might define a community as a group of individuals who share the same stories, and who find meaning in these stories. In ancient times, the natural medium for sharing stories of identity was the tribal campfire. Stories shared around the fire defined the group, its values and passions, and its concept of who belongs and who does not.

In the world of modern technology, groups and tribes still come together and delineate themselves around the stories they share. What is a Facebook group, if not a virtual community that shares stories and finds

those stories meaningful? Today, we create our "tribes" and communities online; social media is our virtual campfire.

Best practice: Focus on our communities more than on our brands. Brands no longer shape people's ideas, and the days when companies could tell end users what to believe through creative TV ads are long gone. Increasingly, modern consumers are influenced by the comments of Facebook friends, by blogs or by online chatter, far more than by any messages they might be hearing from companies.

From the perspective of the company, our brand used to be what we told people it was. Through our corporate communication, we played the dominant role in shaping people's opinions about our products. Today, a brand is what the community decides it is. Our brand is, at best, an interactive co-creation with our user community.

In the days of unidirectional communication, we told stories of our brand as hero. In the age of internet marketing, we should want the members of the community to feel like the heroes. Our focus should switch from managing our brand message to managing our relationship with the brand community.

French kitchenware maker Mathon is a surprising company. Yoann Le Berrigaud, director of e-commerce, describes his enterprise simply: "We sell pots and pans". So, one might wonder how a business that makes its living selling such everyday products can develop a Facebook page buzzing with activity, and with some 45,000 fans.

In fact, they have done it not by shouting their marketing messages, but by focusing on the interests of their brand community. They provide clients and prospects with a forum for expressing themselves and their passion. Fans interact with each other and with the company by sending in stories of their cooking exploits, their recipes, photos of their "creations", and their reactions to the recipes and stories of others.

Mathon is an example of a company creating an environment where the user can become the hero. As Le Berrigaud puts it: "I see myself as an organiser and facilitator of the community around the brand." Modern companies should seek to facilitate, rather than dominate, the brand conversation.

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