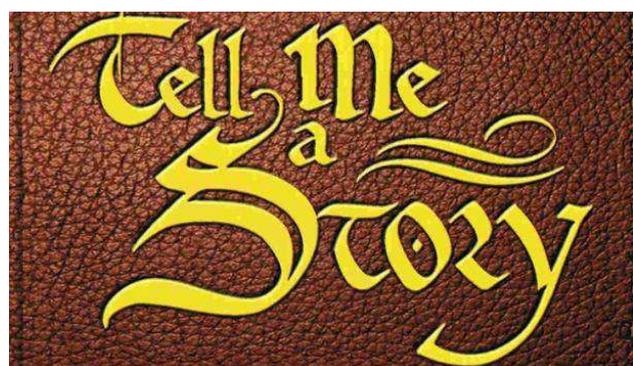




The internet, e-branding and the rebirth of storytelling

21 NOV 2011



Authentic storytelling, in combination with social media and email, should be at the centre of any meaningful customer and prospect communication programme, says John Sadowsky.

Recently, while watching football highlights on the Web, I was presented with an advertisement for 'life opens up', a project sponsored jointly by Crest toothpaste and Oral-B toothbrushes. The advert encourages users to send in their inspirational stories of 'how a healthy, confident mouth helps you engage in your world'.

My encounter with the 'life opens up project' caused me to reflect on the seemingly sudden pervasiveness of storytelling in e-marketing, the 'internet storytelling revival' as I have come to call it. Today, everyone seems to be telling and spreading stories, not only stories of adventure and passion for hot and trendy products, but also stories about the things we use in our daily lives, such as pots and pans, or even toothpaste and toothbrushes.

For the past two years, I have been speaking to a variety of audiences throughout Europe, the US and Latin America, and advising numerous organisations about how they communicate with their customers about their brand, how to build their brand community, and how to grow and spread their brand story. Of course, one of my central themes involves the power of storytelling for today's brands. It is my firm conviction that authentic storytelling, used in combination with the ever-evolving tools of social media and email, should be at the centre of any meaningful customer and prospect communication programme.

As I travel the world and listen to my audiences and clients, I realise that the business community is just starting to discover the possibilities for using storytelling on the internet. We are truly at the beginning of a storytelling revival.

Why is this revival happening now? One reason is certainly the emergence of social media, which is a natural platform for storytelling. Recently, I visited with Facebook in Dublin, where I was invited to speak about storytelling for branding building. It was clear from the questions and remarks in the audience that Facebook is increasingly aware that part of the appeal of their platform is that it can be used as a storytelling engine.

Beyond the current social media trend, though, there is a second important explanation for the current storytelling revival: the increasingly widespread realisation, by everyone from marketers to political speechwriters, that a well-constructed narrative is the most effective way to get one's message across to an audience.

The pendulum swings

For years now, business presenters have put their faith in PowerPoint slides, rational argumentation, numbers and logic to persuade listeners. While none of these things are about to disappear, I am seeing the pendulum swinging back toward the use of more narrative-based discourse.

Why do I say swinging back? A rapid look at history will tell us that, for more than two hundred years, trends in our society and our education have 'de-storied' us.

From the start of language and throughout millennia, story was the primary vehicle for passing on any acquired information and experience. Then, one of the great projects of the 18th century Enlightenment was to replace narrative knowledge with scientific knowledge, which was said to be the only 'legitimate' form of knowledge. With a growing emphasis on science to provide rational and objective analysis of all things, narrative ways of knowing were widely discounted and distrusted. The effort to reduce all knowledge to analytic propositions reached its peak sometime in the late 20th century.

Beginning with the great Enlightenment, we increasingly built our world on the rigors of scientific thinking. We came to believe that analytical proof was good, and that any form of anecdotal evidence was weak and unreliable.

Today, this tide may be turning. A growing number of researchers, particularly in the fields of psychology and neurology, are giving new weight to narrative forms of knowledge, suggesting that people actually think in story form, rather than in logical or rational forms. It is by creating narrative structures and scenarios that human beings learn to think and to organise their world.

Thus, despite all attempts since the Enlightenment to convince us otherwise, recent discoveries are demonstrating that story is the native language of the brain. We may indeed be 'hardwired' to think in story form. As such, we I would say we are rediscovering an age-old truth: storytelling is simply the most persuasive form of discourse known to mankind, and this has been true since the beginning of time.

However, when I make statements such as the one above, I do so with two words of caution. First, not all stories are effective forms of self-expression for an individual or for a brand. When I coach leaders or consult for companies, we work to craft and tell authentic stories of identity, stories that portray our core values. These are the stories that express who we truly are and what we stand for.

And second, 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 underutilised in modern-day communication and that we would do well to rediscover its power.

In any case, I am each day more convinced that the internet storytelling revival is alive and well. As marketers learn new ways to use social media for telling brand stories, I am curious to see where this movement will take us.

*John Sadowsky is a professor, consultant and leadership coach, and is author of **Email, social marketing and the art of storytelling**. For further information on John and his work visit www.johnsadowsky.com*