The Art and Science of Storytelling

By Suzy Bashford

This sentence, the one you're reading right now, is the most important one in this entire feature. I have to draw you in – fast – or I'll lose you, perhaps to another article in this magazine, or Facebook, or a cat on a skateboard on YouTube.

"Brand storytelling" is currently the biggest buzz trend in marketing. Stories are coming to the fore because brands today have to grab the attention of consumers.

Since time immemorial, storytellers have been honing the art of creating compelling content that immediately hooks people in. Neuroscience now confirms what prophets, minstrels and jesters knew instinctively: if you relay information through narrative, people are more likely to emotionally connect with it and remember the details.

We're all storytellers now. Social networks have become the virtual campfires we sit around to tell our tales. Some of us, however, are better than others at spinning yarns and holding an audience's attention, and it's the same with brands. Brands can become more adept at telling stories, but not many can be bothered to put in the hard graft necessary to excel, experts believe.

"Storytelling is in vogue, and there are a lot of people saying, 'We have to tell stories and be on all platforms,'" says John Sadowsky, author of *Email, Social Marketing and the Art of Storytelling*. "Few brands are doing it well or authentically. Good storytelling is more about listening than people think. To tell a good story and involve your community takes a lot of groundwork, which many brands aren't willing to do. They just throw things out there. That is dangerous."

One marketer who has worked hard to master the craft is Giles Lury, executive chairman of strategic brand consultancy The Value Engineers and author of *The Prisoner & the Penguin*, a study of the art of storytelling in marketing.

Lury and Sadowsky advocate that brands should go through a rigorous process to identify why and how they want to use storytelling. What they describe sounds more akin to an exercise in soul-searching than marketing, involving questions such as: who are you? Where have you come from? What do you stand for? Why do you want to tell your story? How? Will anyone care? Sadowsky cites IKEA as a brand that is sure of its story; Lury points to Virgin Atlantic.

If you haven't nailed these questions before you start telling your story, it may not make sense or resonate, or it will be boringly "beige". "As brands take up storytelling, there are lots of

Seven uses for brand storytelling

The brand narrative

This is a means of presenting the organisation/brand as a character and its role as a story. Virgin, for example, has positioned itself as the "white knight" riding to save the damsel (consumer) in distress. There are overlaps with brand as archetypes.

Did you know…

This is when brands build emotional engagement by telling the little (true) stories about themselves – how the brand started, the origin of its name. These can be used to build emotional engagement.

Inspiring and cautionary tales

The use of stories about brands as a training tool, to provide inspiration and/or instruction for the marketing team or broader organisation. They can be used to show how employees should act, as a means of helping your organisation consider how it might perform better, or to encourage people to think in different ways.

Up close and personal

The telling of personal stories is another means of gaining emotional engagement. The parallels between the personal and the business situation is then highlighted to make a specific point – a technique used by CEOs and politicians worldwide.

Going metaphorical

Here a (fictional) story is created that can act as a metaphor for what has happened, or needs to happen, or as an entertaining expression of what your brand is doing. The recent Chipotle "Scarecrow" film is a good example of this.

Meet your customer

Stories, fictional, but based on a true customer, are being used more frequently to personalise target segments and their beliefs and behaviours. They are a powerful way to bring to life target segments and touchpoints along any customer journey.

The "story-tation"

When did a PowerPoint slide last make you cry? Writing a presentation as a story is one way to try to avoid "death by PowerPoint". Using a narrative arc allows speakers to communicate points in a more engaging and memorable way.

By Giles Lury, The Value Engineers

little stories about families and people appearing on TV that are quite engaging," says Lury. "The danger is that so many of them are not distinctive. They haven't found the grit in the oyster. There are thousands of stories behind every brand. The art is finding the right one, the one that isn't just a 'nice' story, but makes a point about a value you rate highly, or a principle you hold dear."

It's not about shoehorning a story into a multimillion-pound TV ad, either. Small stories can be very powerful communication tools. Lury gives the example of Bassett's using its packaging to explain how, in 1899, a company sales representative, Charlie Thompson, dropped a tray of samples, inspiring the idea for Liquorice Allsorts.

When Andrew Cullis, marketing director at Hyundai UK, decided he was serious about storytelling, he looked for an agency to deliver his vision.

"What was interesting," he says, "is that, although there is a lot of talk, lots of marketing agencies don't always get what storytelling really is." For that reason, he hired Red Bee, formerly the BBC's in-house agency, which has a heritage steeped in broadcast media.

The collaboration has taught him that storytelling requires a very different approach from traditional advertising. Most importantly, the client needs to be more flexible.

For instance, during the shoot for the short film "Feel like a man", which aims to convey the product specifications of Hyundai's Sante Fe car model in a comedic way, the main actor went completely off script at one point. But this ad lib turned out to be the "icing on the cake", says Cullis, and gave the film the all-important attention-grabbing first line: "I stand naked in front of my wife, and I feel like a small child."

> *"We subconsciously see our own lives as one big, unfolding story"*

"We learnt that you should never be too rigid. You should let the creative process and talent add something," explains Cullis. "We don't stand over their shoulders saying, 'That's too risky.' We push the boundaries and show it to our president. If he says it's gone too far, we can bring it back."

Hyundai's approach also demonstrates that brand storytellers must take account of the art and science of the discipline. Marketers ultimately want emotional engagement to translate into profit, so the story needs to be told commercially as well as creatively.

In Hyundai's case, Cullis gave Red Bee free rein to follow its artistic instincts and make the script "as engaging as possible". The science was applied later when the client team considered the details, such as whether the main character should clearly say that he wanted the car. (Hyundai concluded that he should, the only line that the client changed.) This freer approach is going to become more important, says Cullis, as it gets harder for brands to grab audiences' attention.

The fact that Cullis talks about audiences rather than consumers shows, according to Red Bee's business development director, Michael Reeves, that he has already made the vital psychological shift essential for good brand storytelling. "It requires a new way of thinking," says Reeves. "Clients must treat the people they're talking to as an audience, not consumers. People don't choose to spend time with brands. They choose to spend time with content that moves, entertains or compels them to do something."

Understandably, this scares many marketers, who crave reassurance and numbers to back up their creativity. That's why Millward Brown's neuromarketing practice, led by global director Sarah Walker, is doing more testing on stories using facial coding to read consumers' raw, real, emotional response.

"Stories are very good at capturing attention," says Walker. "Stories have a protagonist, and we care about characters. That's inherently human. Because we care, we are more likely to remember. So stories require a lot less thinking to process information and facts. Stories also have cues, such as a setting, which help us remember this information. The more 'hooks', the more likely it is that you will recall it. So brands can think of stories as vehicles for delivering messages. They can be really personal and relevant in a way brand information often isn't."

David Brennan, founder of consultancy Media Native, who has carried out in-depth research on the use of storytelling in advertising, adds: "The power of storytelling can be clearly inferred from brain mapping. Many experts believe the brain architecture is such that we experience life via the medium of storytelling and subconsciously see our own lives and experiences as one big, unfolding story."

Walker emphasises the delicate balance between art and science. Marketers use stories because of their emotional resonance. If you overdo the emotion, however, you may turn your audiences off. She cites "Dove onslaught", a short film about the damaging effects of the beauty industry on young girls, as an example. "It was a great ad, but often when a story is so hard-hitting, people look away from the screen. Even if they don't, there's often an 'attentional blink', which shows they are having difficulty processing the tough content."

"Dove onslaught" breaks another rule of neuroscience. The company is credited only at the end of the film, leaving the viewer to make the link between the story and the brand. "That takes a bit of effort," says Walker. "If you can describe what happens in your story without mentioning your brand, the brand isn't well enough integrated."

In his book *Hegarty on Creativity*, BBH co-founder Sir John Hegarty asserts that there are no rules in the art of storytelling. The best creative work, he says, is often born of "practitioners putting a little bit of themselves into their work".

Both these "Hegartyisms" are demonstrated by the film "The kiss", made for Vodafone by the creative agency Grey London. The brief for this global ad was to tell a story about a product benefit – unlimited texts – without using spoken words.

"Rather than write a beautiful story, then yank in this deal, we started off thinking about what goes on forever," says Grey London's executive creative director, Nils Leonard. "We got to that truth, which is love. Then we asked: how are we going to tell this story in an interesting way? Where is the tinder? It's not enough to write a story you think is good. Write one you can imagine people remarking on. We call that tinder."

The "tinder" in "The kiss" is a scene where an old couple, still madly in love, kiss passionately on a bed. Only after this is Vodafone credited. To date,

"The kiss" has been shared more than 144,725 times, making it the world's most-shared romantic ad.

Would it have been as effective if Vodafone had been guided more by the science and less by Grey London's artistic passion for telling an uninterrupted story? Leonard certainly doesn't think so.

Indeed, Brennan believes that marketers take "too much of a scientific approach to marketing effectiveness, in terms of digital accountability, big data, auditing and procurement. [This] can't easily account for the impact of long-term branding benefits, which the best storytelling creates". He contends that brands should be brave and back one strong story that builds over years rather than "going from one campaign to another". "Legacy media can create these massive storytelling arcs that provoke much more emotion than special offers or the announcement of a new store opening," adds Brennan. He points to Comparethemarket.com, Virgin Atlantic and John Lewis as doing this well.

Walker agrees, welcoming the fact that clients now demand insight into the best way to tell one consistent story, looking at options from an ongoing saga to having the same plot played out in different situations.

"Take the meerkats," she says. "The minute you see them, you know what they're advertising. The story does a great job of minimising the emotional and mental effort you have to put in. It's like Daz in the 90s, the Nescafé romance or the BT family story. The repeated characters give instant meaning and an emotional connection. But, in general, brand strategies get changed before they wear out as stories. It's a lot to do with ego and a desire for something new, rather than a desire to continue stories that might be beneficial for brands, because there's much to be said for regularity and repetition."

One reason that so many brand stories fall into the "beige" rather than "brave" camp is that marketers are terrified the tale will end in a flop rather than a kiss. The best-case scenario – a marriage of art and science – is credibly integrating a universal human truth with a product truth.

Google does this well. For example, in its "Dear Hollie" execution, it touchingly showed a father using its products and the web to share memories with his daughter as she grows up.

Indy Saha, EMEA director of strategy at Google Creative Lab, is rolling out "Google stories",

The artist's view

by Katrice Horsley, National Storytelling Laureate

"Once upon a time" is a phrase that starts many stories. The tale is told in the past tense and ranges from the past to the present and the future. It is told in the here and now, involving the storyteller and the listener.

When a storyteller begins a tale, they are inviting the listener to go on a shared and personal journey. Every person in the audience will hear the same story, but all will experience it in a different way, depending on their personal history. It is the skill of the storyteller to ensure that the audience feels safe enough to surrender willingly to that journey. They use a range of techniques to this end.

Many storytellers chat to the audience before starting the story. They start to develop a relationship with the audience, their voice is heard and people relax and become open to receiving the story. The audience feels they know the storyteller a little.

This is where storytelling and acting differ. Storytelling is about the relationship between the storyteller, the story and the listener. There is no pretence on the storyteller's part in being a "character". They are themselves, telling you a story. It is very intimate, a shared world; their mouths, your ears.

Storytellers often create the story "over" the listeners: the way they point their hands, or gaze into the distance, as if they are seeing the story behind or above the audience. The audience starts to experience themselves as being within the tale, not just witnessing it in front of them on the stage. Often the audience will look behind them, expecting to see a person or image there, so powerful is that sense of immersion.

The strongest tool the storyteller has is the ability to be emotionally authentic, as though they are reporting back from somewhere. It is the true sharing of emotion that enables full communication and connection. It leaves people feeling that their story has been told. Many people can surrender better within a traditional tale that contains the emotional truth of their own real experiences. A real-life tale may contain too much incidental truth, which might make the story uncomfortable to hear, too near the bone.

The main instrument of the storyteller is their voice – an amazing tool. Storytellers will use cadences and rhythms, whines and arches, depth and lightness, richness and sharpness to dexterously evoke images and feelings. The words "entranced" and "enchanted" are often used by audiences, put into a trance by the chant and beat of the words.

"The strongest tool the storyteller has is to be emotionally authentic"

The voice is then supported by the physicality of the storyteller. Some are deft, making small, graceful, captivating movements. Others are large and dynamic, their bodies attached to their words, or vice versa. Either way, the audience is "conducted" into the story through the movements of the storyteller.

Some storytellers are very restrained and see little or no movement as a way of making their words more potent and powerful. Their stillness is their tool. In the same way that the pauses in music are important to the melody, so is stillness in the telling. Even the most dynamic storytellers will use it, to enable the audience to reflect, digest and prepare themselves for the next stage of the shared journey.

And then the end, the letting-go, the wakening from the dream. The storyteller saying goodbye and the audience walking away, changed. Such is the power of words, such is the power of the storyteller.

The scientist's view

by Professor Nick Chater FBA, head of the Behavioural Science Group at Warwick Business School and co-founder of research consultancy Decision Technology

Marketers are used to wondering what it is that other people want or how to make people want something that they are trying to promote. But how do we know what we want?

The past few decades of psychological research have revealed that even our most basic intuitions about what we really want are astonishingly unstable and arise from "improvised stories" invented on the spot. We want to make coherent sense of how we think and act, but these stories we tell ourselves can't always be trusted. The implications for understanding customers are alarming.

Let's begin with a classic study. In 1974, Donald Dutton and Arthur Aron, psychologists at the University of British Columbia, looked at the oldest story of them all: the basis of romantic attraction.

"We create stories to help us decide what we want and how we feel"

Female experimenters were stationed at the end of two bridges on the University of British Columbia campus: one bridge was a solid, low-altitude crossing; the other a high, and apparently rather flimsy, suspension bridge. The experimenters asked male and female bridge-crossers to do a small and, as it happens, irrelevant task. The bridge-crossers were told they could follow up by phone call later if they had any further questions. The female experimenters, apparently rather rashly, but crucially, handed out their phone numbers.

Not surprisingly, the male bridge-crossers phoned in with a lot more questions than female bridge-crossers. But here's the real shocker: the male bridge-crossers who phoned in most of all were the ones who had just crossed the high bridge. Why? When you have just crossed the high bridge, you are, of course, full of adrenaline. You then meet an attractive person at the other end of the bridge. You notice the adrenaline and you tell yourself the "obvious" story: that this must be someone you really like.

Having formed this (erroneous) conclusion, the hapless male bridge-crossers then phone the female experimenters later, hoping that the conversation might lead somewhere.

The terrible truth is that we don't know directly what, or who, we like: we have to figure it out from whatever clues are available. We are continually inventing stories about ourselves and what we want, and we're not very good at this.

In a recent study, my collaborators and I asked people which pair of faces they preferred. We presented them with lots of pairs of faces and, deviously, in a few cases, we gave them the false impression that they chose the face that they actually rejected.

Then they were given the same choices again, and they also had to rate the faces for attractiveness. It turns out that if we are told we like a face, when we see it again, we are more likely to choose it and rate it as more attractive.

Dutton and Aron's subjects invented a story to explain their adrenaline rush; our subjects invented a story to make sense of what they thought they just did.

We understand ourselves through creating stories that make sense of our behaviour. These stories help us decide what we want and how we feel. These stories might not be reliable, but the ability to find order and reason when there is none is something we can't turn off. We have to have a story.

This has two implications for marketers. First, we crave stories. We want to hear them and be part of them. Without a narrative structure, we can't understand the world around us.

Second, we should be sceptical of just asking people what they want, through surveys or focus groups. The real trick in understanding what people will do next is understanding what they did before. The stories that make sense of our past will guide our future. A combination of big data and large-scale online experiments may, we hope, be a starting point for uncovering the narratives underlying customer choice.

continuing this idea that people are heroes and Google is making a difference to their lives. For example, production company B-Reel created a film about a photographer rising from obscurity to the world stage.

Saha has a growing interest in telling non-linear stories, where he provides the components and encourages the consumer to fill in the gaps. His "Web Lab" campaign, created with B-Reel, comprised a year-long exhibition at the Science Museum, a website and YouTube videos. It told the story of how the web works and what Google does.

"When you're talking to people whose digital behaviours are split across lots of different platforms, the linear story is not the only answer," says Saha. "With 'Web Lab', we want people to get together around the components we've put out there and create a movement or community."

Working for a brand that was born in the digital age, Saha isn't worried about handing control to the consumer. "You define where you'd like to go, " he says. "You do your best to help communicate that to the audience by putting the right platforms out there and remaining consistent to your core mission." Most brands, by contrast, are terrified of the risk of misinterpretation, negative parodying or creating a story that polarises.

They shouldn't be, argues agency RPM's managing director, Dom Robertson. "As long as your true north is there, it's brilliant if people misinterpret your story, because that story becomes a conversation," he says. "You can reinterpret it yourselves and together."

So, if this feature were a story, what would the moral be? Perhaps to not lose your head in numbers, but be brave, not beige. If you want to excel in storytelling, you have to boldly go where no brand has gone before. If you need inspiration, look no further than Lego, fresh from making its own movie about an ordinary mini-figure trying to save the universe. **M**