

Storytelling: Out of the Campfire and Into Your Marketing Campaign

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Date : April 18, 2016



Ah, the campfire... it conjures up fond memories of toasting marshmallows, strumming guitars, and, of course, telling stories. Today, stories have gone far beyond the realms of campsites and fiction; they are at the core of what creates powerful **marketing** campaigns. Without them, campaigns languish, off to the side and in the dark, unnoticed by consumers seeking warmth and illumination.

Stories are an essential part of **marketing** today because consumer attention spans are shorter than ever before. The human of 2015 has an attention span of eight seconds, shorter than that of a goldfish, [according to](#) a recent Microsoft study. That's because consumers are now bombarded by **marketing** and **advertising**.

Carrying a mobile device means receiving messaging when you are in bed, in the bathroom, at work, or on a weekend getaway. There is no escape, and consumers are growing increasingly frustrated by and uninterested in **advertising**. Millennials in particular do not trust content that does not seem "authentic," and they are more interested in more genuine relationships with **brands**.

For all those reasons and more, stories have become a vital component of **marketing**. Stories help **brands** cultivate a personality and convey authenticity. They also grab—and, more important, hold—people's attention. The content becomes no longer a nuisance but instead fits into all the other content that a user is consuming, such as news articles, photos on **Instagram**, or **YouTube** videos.

Smart marketers are now channeling storytelling as a powerful tool to create the most authentic connections possible with customers.

Images and user-generated content are a couple of the best ways to create that emotional and personal connection with customers, so let's take a look at how marketers can optimize their storytelling, particularly via visual media.

1. Tell an actual story

Stories tend to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. A story is structured around a narrative arc that introduces the consumer to the subject, creates tension or progression, and then concludes with a resolution. For customers to feel that they are a part of the journey, it's important that you connect the dots.

That is just as true for written stories as it is for videos and photographs.

For example, if you are writing a blog post, you start by introducing the theme, you explore and unpack it with supporting points, and then you provide a clear takeaway. In the case of an explanatory video, perhaps you introduce a product and then show it in action. This approach allows potential users to insert themselves into the narrative and understand how the product would benefit their own lives.

A photograph may be a snapshot of one moment, but in a good photograph, the beginning and ending can be inferred: For example, a table laden with dishes, with a view of the kitchen sink in the background, could imply a vibrant family meal... and the impending cleanup.

2. Invite people into the story

Again, content is at its most powerful when it draws the consumer in. Millennial consumers demand authenticity and steers clear of **marketing** or **advertising** that seems too manufactured. They have to see something of themselves in the content for it to feel relevant: It turns out that seeing a supermodel wearing a piece of clothing is not as intriguing as seeing someone who looks "normal" wearing it.

In the modern era of **social** media, marketers have a veritable goldmine of great content at their disposal. As people buy new jackets, go on vacations, eat at restaurants, and generally go about their lives, they document and share all that with their mobile phones. By embracing user-generated content, marketers can raise the profile of their **brand's** personality and authenticity, as well as cultivate a feeling of membership.

Moreover, drawing on user-generated content demonstrates that a **brand** is receptive, so customers feel that they are actually part of that **brand's** story. The fact that user-generated content is highly affordable and easy to scale doesn't hurt either.

3. Make an emotional appeal

In addition to being inviting and "real," the stories with the most impact are those that appeal to the emotions—which dictate what we respond to, what sticks with us, our likes and dislikes, and the way we make decisions.

In writing, the best way to elicit emotions is by showing rather than telling. Rather than saying someone felt frustrated, craft a scene that helps the reader feel that sense of frustration. Vocabulary and word choice are key. With visual content, the choice of colors, images, styles, words, and iconography all serve to connect with human emotions.

Professor [Robert Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions](#) identifies eight primary emotions and assigns each with varying dimensions and colors to reflect their intensity, as well as how to evoke them. For example, both ecstasy and serenity are associated with the color yellow, but ecstasy is a far more vibrant hue. Colors are tools that marketers can use to give their content a stronger narrative punch.

4. Cater to the senses

Creating sensory impact also gives content a stronger punch. The more senses you call on with stories, the stronger the impression you will make. Think about a drawing of a cookie that is two-dimensional and black and white, versus a photograph in which you can see every detail—or in which a baker is sniffing a cookie tray, or is about to take a bite, with an ecstatic look on his face.

Sight, smell, taste, and touch are all activated with the latter, and you begin to crave a cookie. Your mouth starts to water, you imagine the scent of freshly baked cookies, and you run out to buy some.

Videos can be even more powerful than photographs because they involve sound as well.

Catering to the senses cultivates empathy, and empathy forges a meaningful connection.

5. Embrace the seven dimensions of wellness

As Buddha tells it, humans are bundles of desires. It is human nature to aspire and to seek equilibrium and wellness. Wellness can be divided into seven dimensions: **social**, emotional, spiritual, environmental, occupational, intellectual, and physical. Marketers can engage their customers by engaging their desire to be better, and to progress or to improve in some way.

For example, you can appeal to the desire for **social** wellness with an image of friends laughing and spending time together. You can appeal to intellectual wellness with an article that cites academic research and asks big questions. Want to appeal to physical wellness? Consider a video of someone smiling as they pedal in a spin class.

Telling a story that activates an aspirational goal in the consumer motivates them to pay attention to and act on what they see. It gives them something to strive for and leaves a lasting impression.

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Incorporating each of those five elements into your **brand's** storytelling efforts will supercharge the impact and appeal of your **brand**.

However, it's important not to undermine your hard work by a lack of consistency and balance. Even with all the emotional and sensory components and a compelling narrative arc, a story filled with distractions or an ambiguous message just won't connect the way you want it to. You

have to balance simplicity and complexity; and the trendy and the relevant with the timeless.

When you do, your stories will be just as appealing as freshly made s'mores.

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