



Storytelling 2020

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT
STORYTELLING IN MARKETING



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Welcome to Storytelling 2020.

The Atlanta Chapter of the AMA strives to continually put “Answers into Action” for our members and followers. Our goal is to elevate the field of marketing in our community by producing thought leadership materials and events and by facilitating connections for marketers that provide inspiration, education, direction and leadership.

We are proud to provide the following white paper, which was co-authored by members of our Executive Advisory Board, a group comprised of local CMOs, agency leaders and past AMA presidents. When putting this piece together, we specifically focused on exploring how brands today can create meaningful connections with people, both in the moment and over time.

Despite the increasingly fragmented media landscape, consumers continue to expect seamless, personalized experiences wherever they interact with a brand. The exchange must also be dynamic (real-time engagement, customized content, cross-screen mobility, etc.) Consumers are now in charge, and to succeed, brands must follow their lead. That’s why storytelling plays such a critical role in effective marketing today.

Storytelling enables brands to foster engagement in ways that inspire consumers to take action, whether it be a click, like or purchase. Even more, it creates an evolving narrative that naturally connects with consumers, adding value to – and ultimately becoming part of – their everyday lives.

This white paper examines the various elements of effective brand storytelling, provides examples of these elements in action and offers insights that you can start integrating into your own marketing practice. We hope you enjoy reading what follows and invite you to reach out to our organization if you have any questions or wish to continue the conversation.

Jana Ferguson



JANA FERGUSON
President of AMA Atlanta
Chief Client Officer at
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Roundtable Panelists

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The State of Marketing

Each passing year brings fresh challenges for marketers. Whether your targets are consumers or business people, snagging a morsel of their attention in a highly fragmented media landscape has become a live-action field test.

Even more complicated is the shift in the way people buy and, subsequently, what they expect from brand experiences. It has become more personal. People want to “connect with brands.” But what does that mean, exactly? It really boils down to feeling like their value systems align with the brands they’re choosing. This is where companies have an opportunity to lead with their organizational purpose, foster relationships and craft marketing messages that customers can relate to.

Of course, this isn’t easy.

A profusion of new technology is relentlessly making waves and keeping marketers on their toes.

Augmented reality, virtual reality and conversational marketing (to name a few) have introduced innovative ways to connect with customers — and a challenge to sort out what is or isn’t worth the investment. The story, the technology, the data, the platforms, the people — there are more variables than ever coming into play and they are multiplying by the minute. Yet as they increase, so do the opportunities and rewards they present. The trick for marketers is to know where, when and how to act along the continuum. And that’s why storytelling has become every brand’s number one protagonist.

“We have a fractured media landscape to meet people in — there is no beginning, middle, and end. People can come in at any point in the journey.”

— JEFF HILIMIRE, DRAGON ARMY

“The amount of information people have to deal with is overwhelming at times. In response, people are seeking a sense of purpose— to connect at some level with brands, people, and organizations.”

— DOUWE BERGSMA, GEORGIA PACIFIC

The History of Storytelling

When philosopher Aristotle constructed his seven golden rules of storytelling, times were very different. It was the fourth century BCE. Although capturing one's revelations in writing was already a prolific practice, novels would not arrive for more than a thousand years. And yet we often reference these golden rules in modern storytelling and marketing. Why is that? Because the fundamentals of storytelling are as true today as they were in the Classical era. From eons-old tales told by our ancestors around flickering fires to modern-day, multi-million-dollar stage and film productions, people have always connected to stories.

ARISTOTLE'S SEVEN GOLDEN RULES OF STORYTELLING

1. Plot
2. Character
3. Theme
4. Dialogue
5. Chorus (see: prose, rhythm)
6. Decor
7. Spectacle

Countless studies, articles and books have explored the neurological link — why stories stick with us. The science can be riveting yet, to find the answer, you need look no further than yourself. How often have you listened to someone else's story only to find yourself instinctively relating it to your own experiences? Even certain words, such as those associated with smells and actions, **light up specific parts of our brains**¹. While we hear stories, we search for personal connections that, in turn, trigger any number of emotions. Sensory memories are activated, and we are transported back in time and space.

People also remember stories better than stats. The London School of Business **studied retention**² by asking groups of people to recall a set of statistics. With just the numbers, people remembered 5-10 percent of what they heard. When a picture was paired with the statistic, it bumped up to 25 percent. But when the set of stats was told with a story, retention jumped to between 65 and 70 percent. This is why it is often suggested that a person trying to memorize a list of things create a story out of them (**The Story Method**)³. Suffice it to say that stories are powerful. Most importantly, they inherently possess what every brand seeks: sticking power.

¹ Annie Murphy Paul, "The Neuroscience of Your Brain on Fiction," The New York Times. March 17, 2012.

² Speaking CPR, "Stories Not Statistics Are Memorable," 2007

³ Lynda.com: "The Story Method"

Brand Storytelling

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Marketers have been using the concept of “story” since the beginning of time. Yet originally, these stories were more focused on promoting specific products. Then, five to ten years ago, the scope of these narratives began to expand beyond the product level to encompass the entire brand, causing marketers and consumers alike to take notice. It was suddenly possible to create affinity for unglamorous products in highly cluttered categories — like toilet tissue, soap, paper towels, toothpaste etc. — by building loyalty for its parent brand. This inspired marketers and, as a result, brand storytelling peaked in interest. But there were few guardrails and, consequently, it fizzled.

Today’s idea of brand storytelling is more grounded, in large part because narratives are entwined with the brands themselves, rather than being led by gimmicks or complex ploys more appropriate for entertainment companies (gaming and movies, for instance). Now a company’s values, purpose and mission define and drive the story. And when customers see their own experiences reflected in that story, they feel connected.

Storytelling also helps to rally an organization’s people by providing a unique yet shared sense of purpose. Employees are motivated by what the brand stands for, giving their work meaning that extends above and beyond the bottom line. Storytelling is also a highly approachable practice. Any size company in almost any industry can find some sense of story that allows it to communicate and connect with customers.

Three Key Themes

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Recently, board members and advisors of the Atlanta chapter of the American Marketing Association got together for a 90-minute roundtable discussion about Storytelling 2020. As they shared their insights, experiences and ideas about the subject, three key themes emerged:

**AUTHENTIC
CONNECTIONS**

**EMERGING
TECHNOLOGY**

**AN EVOLVING
APPROACH TO
MARKETING**



Theme One: Authentic Connections

Many companies are shifting toward identities that demonstrate an authentic connection to their customers. Connection provides brands with a “stickier” footing for communicating with their audience, and for mapping long-term relationships. From the customer’s perspective, once they’ve checked the boxes on what they need, there is a secondary and important driver for purchase: how they feel about the brand. That includes the company’s outspoken values, purpose and story and how they align with the consumer’s own experiences.

Connection is at least part of why people continue to buy name brand products when there are troves of store brands to choose from. When people feel like their value systems and beliefs align with a brand’s, they are more likely to choose it over a nameless competitor.

When discussing the topic, Georgia-Pacific CMO Douwe Bergsma explained that, for his company, finding a story for each brand is a value-guided effort. His team begins by defining a product’s audience and determining what values are shared by the brand and customers. Using these shared values as their guide, they are able to derive a sense of purpose and forge a story arc that connects the brand with its consumers in a meaningful way. Georgia-Pacific’s STAY GIANT™ campaign for Brawny is a good example of this strategy in action.

Case Study: Brawny

Through the STAY GIANT™ campaign, Georgia-Pacific's Brawny® has defined its brand purpose and brought to life its story-framework: to inspire people to overcome life's challenges with strength and resilience. For the past couple of years, Brawny developed one of the campaign pillars, #StrengthHasNoGender, to celebrate Women's History Month. The program consists of a series of videos featuring strong women who overcame gender stereotypes through their steadfast resilience. The brand recently took the program one step further, replacing the Brawny man with a Brawny woman on its packaging to celebrate and inspire strong women everywhere.

The brand's message of strength and resilience has resonated powerfully, garnering over two billion mostly earned impressions and many positive consumer and media responses. This past summer, Brawny took a fresh approach to bringing the brand story to life with a new campaign pillar called "AmeriCAN," which focuses on celebrating the strength, resilience and "Amer-I-Can spirit" of the American people. Activated through a social media campaign, the program encouraged people to submit personal stories that demonstrate the Amer-I-Can spirit. Again, the message was well received and embraced by consumers, reinforcing the notion that a meaningful brand story can forge deep human connections when executed in a way that's relevant and authentic to the brand.

Naturally, not all companies are in the ideal position of driving their current state toward stories. Some still need to find their voice. If your company is in this position, you can start by laying the groundwork. The first step is defining your vision, mission and values. Most companies have created at least a couple of these statements at some point. Few, however, revise them routinely to ensure relevancy. Even fewer operationalize them. When vision, mission and values are clearly outlined, so too is the framework of a company's narrative. It becomes much easier to see the story, unite people throughout your organization and — the ultimate goal — create meaningful connections with consumers.

Theme Two: Emerging Technology

When marketers hear the words “emerging technology,” there can be a sort of collective disquiet. While exciting, new technology surfaces rapidly and regularly, and budgets for such things are scarce. If there is money, it’s tough to know where to allocate it. Some innovations take off, while others fall flat. As a result, it can be tempting to just watch and wait. Yet the reality is that you don’t have to: brand storytelling presents a number of viable technologies, right now.

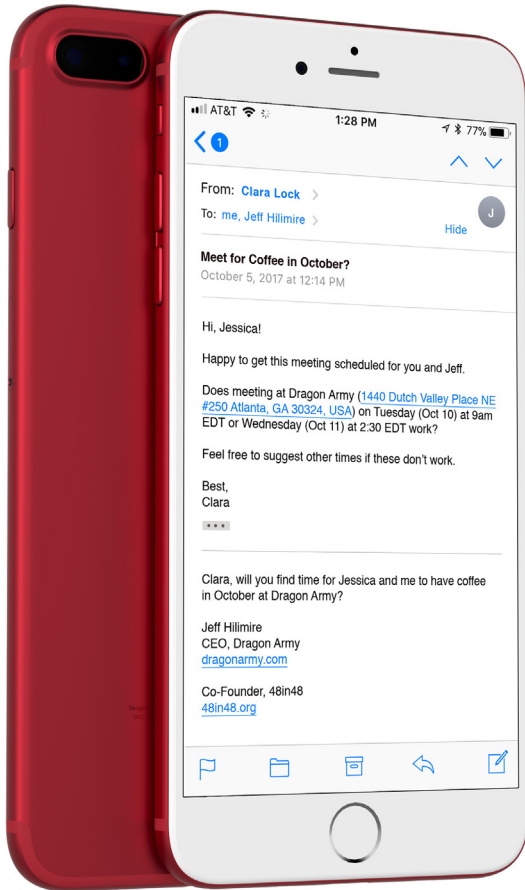
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

In 2016, the first ever TV advertisement was created using Artificial Intelligence (AI). It was the work of advertising agency McCann in Japan. And, to be clear, it was a bit of a stunt. The Creative Director was sourced by AI, rather than the actual work product (that was still created by humans). Yet what it did demonstrate is the interest, the pace and the capability of AI.

Later, IBM announced that “Watson” (the company’s infamous supercomputer) had put together the first AI-made movie trailer. Spoiler: it wasn’t terrible. While this trend of “AI Creating Things” may feel like pomp now, the power and potential of AI are tough to ignore. When something artificial can drive a story (or at least its development), it is worth paying attention to.



McCann Japan's advertisement, developed with Creative Direction from AI



Dragon Army's Jeff Hilimire has an assistant. Her name is Clara, and she isn't real. But you'd never know that if you schedule an appointment with him. While this isn't storytelling strictly speaking, her interaction does feel very, very human.

In the future, marketers can look to AI as a way to infiltrate our fragmented landscape — to help press a storyline into the right places and reach audiences better.

Here are just a handful ways marketers can leverage AI for storytelling:

PERSONALIZATION & RELEVANCY. Using AI as a tool for personalizing information that is shared with users is a great way to bolster brand storytelling. For instance, a customer can be served customized or relevant experiences when you already know his/her preferences and interests. AI can also be used in customer support chat services to help mitigate common problems and escalate more complex issues to human responders.

CUSTOMER SERVICE. Many companies are already leveraging propensity modeling, which is AI-driven, to help anticipate behaviors and reach customers with a future need — or to stave off undesirable outcomes that don't align with the brand story.

NATURAL LANGUAGE PROCESSING (NLP). This budding field of data and language science explores the use of AI and human speech. NLP can auto tag web content, summarize text and even run sentiment analysis.

VIRTUAL REALITY

VR makes better sense for some companies than others. While a business-to-business software company may find less value in VR, product and experience companies are primed for it. When used in the context of storytelling, the possibilities are that much more tangible.

Porsche announced at the beginning of last year that it would begin rolling out a **VR test drive**⁴, with the idea that, if successful, it could be launched to high-end customers interested in customization. In this way, Porsche is able to extend the luxury aspects of its persona, embed them within the sales channel and stay true to the brand.

Nissan, in a splashier showing, rolled out a VR experience in partnership with Star Wars. Timed in conjunction with both the LA Auto Show and the release of Star Wars Rogue One, the VR app is an immersive experience that places users in a Nissan Rogue as a “battle test” virtual simulator.

Even though these two applications of VR are vastly different, it is easy to see how both Porsche and Nissan have leveraged VR in ways that feel right and relevant for their stories and their audiences.

VOICE

Gartner predicts⁵ that by 2020, “30 percent of web browsing sessions will be done without a screen.” That’s a big number. Although brands may feel the waters muddy when it comes to voice, the opportunities are there.

Because the space is fairly nascent, the occasions to tailor messages and selling opportunities may at first glance appear limited. Anyone with a voice-driven device, such as Amazon’s Alexa, knows that you can order toilet paper on the fly, but there is less room for choice — certainly nothing like browsing aisles of goods in a grocery store or scrolling through pages of products online.

However, earlier this year, Amazon announced the launch of an **online hub**⁶, which is something like a “call for brands” to get involved in Amazon’s voice platform. Now Alexa can speak up for your brand, too. And it doesn’t stop at Amazon. Apple announced its entrance to the voice market with the HomePod. As is the case with the vibrant Apple Store, one can anticipate brand relationships will be top of mind.

⁴ CRN.com: “Porsche Explores Whether It Can Sell Cars Through Virtual Reality,” January 12, 2017

⁵ Gartner Research: “Gartner Reveals Top Predictions for IT Organizations and Users in 2017 and Beyond,” October 18, 2016

⁶ Amazon.com Developer



Theme Three: An Evolving Approach to Marketing

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Pace of technology, changing buying habits, diversified channels — you name it, it’s changing the approach to marketing every year. Five years ago, we were all saying the “medium is the message” — that the channel we choose to deliver our message holds a certain value, and our messages are guided by that. But that’s beginning to change. As Ken Bernhardt put it: “Now, it is about the story.”

Heirloomed’s Ashley Schoenith explained that, while there is still truth in “the medium is the message,” she finds herself working harder on how to tell a cohesive and relevant story that drives her business goals. This effort is key for Schoenith, as her handmade and designer kitchen and home goods company is very much driven by story.

“For us, figuring out how to best leverage storytelling platforms like Instagram Stories, Facebook Live and video clips is hugely important as we drive our brand story,” Schoenith explained. “We pay super-close attention to what is performing and extract ‘why’ so we can make it repeatable.”

PRODUCTION

Many brands today are investing in new mediums and formats, particularly video and television advertisements. Yet traditions can hold strong, especially for large organizations where there is still a rote way of going to market with campaigns. Often this involves large budgets and a handful of recut versions.

But like any good story, how it is told depends on the audience and the venue; and with so many platforms, that is getting more difficult to predict. The creative that sticks can vary wildly between formats. What appeals on TV may have a different reaction on Snapchat, for example.

“You don’t need to do the same thing on every medium,” says United Way of Atlanta’s Elizabeth Ward. **“Today, you can use each medium for its strength. It makes our jobs interesting, but a whole lot harder.”**

The need to reinvent the way stories are told on various mediums led Georgia-Pacific to shift its approach dramatically. The company worked to drive production costs down so it could do directed version testing. For instance, VaynerMedia shot three different videos for STAINMASTER™ Carpet Cleaners, all based on the same “story” – i.e., the brand’s conflict, meaning and shared values with customers.

These different videos were launched as an online test on social media. Based on the resulting data, Georgia-Pacific was able to determine which video would be expanded nationally for television, how to cut it for other mediums (longer and shorter) and which of the videos would be most successful in other social media platforms. The result for just one brand was five versions of video, each tailored to a specific purpose yet still connected to the universal brand story.

For Bergsma, this change in their production approach meant breaking many habitual marketing behaviors. “As a traditional marketer, I had to reinvent myself in many ways,” he explained. It might sound cliché, but Bergsma found himself looking at smaller entrepreneurial organizations. “These guys know how to do more with less, and they tend to be really creative in their approach.”

“When advertising is too formulaic, it doesn’t work.”

**— ALEX GONZALEZ
HIGHWIRE**

THE LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH DATA

What is one of the most universal challenges in marketing? Data. And it’s becoming even more challenging with the evolution and expansion of the consumer landscape.

As channels and methods of engagement increase, so too does the difficulty in gathering and interpreting data. In fact, many organizations have a treasure trove of data yet struggle or fail to unpack it for its value in content and storytelling.

“There is very little going on in terms of what message is really being received, and how the brand is perceived.”

— KEN BERNHARDT, MARKETING CONSULTANT AND REGENTS PROFESSOR OF MARKETING EMERITUS AT GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

CPG is fortunate in terms of numbers, given they tend to have more ready access to data through stores. The common challenge, however, is being able to tie up marketing success as it relates to brand storytelling. In other words, how the message has been received. Getting a true measure of storytelling success means isolating the work being done in storytelling versus other initiatives.

To combat this challenge, companies can focus on studies and analytics that capture sales data in conjunction with engagement, loyalty, share of voice and sentiment. By the nature of the source, some of this will be numbers driven and some of it will be anecdotal. What is important is how a company interprets this data — i.e., the hard work that is put into understanding what is happening on the other side of the story.

“In today’s connected world, marketers are dealing with an overabundance of data. To be successful, brands must be able to pull meaningful insights from the sea of figures and use that understanding to drive engaging experiences.”

— MIKE POPOWSKI, DAGGER

For many companies, there is a people question that stems from the data discussion. When it comes to making data actionable, who exactly is responsible? For many years, data roles have been separate from marketing roles. But as data and marketing converge, it is becoming clear that the days of splitting roles — where brand marketing and analytics were distinct responsibilities — is fading. It is increasingly important that the people doing this work live in both worlds.

ENGAGING WITH CUSTOMERS

Companies who are focused on storytelling often employ certain strategies to ensure they are true to their brand story. One such strategy is evident in social media and involves having a vetted “framework” — something that creates purpose, rationale and direction within the construct of the brand story, mission or purpose. In social media, this includes prepping for various social responses. But, in general, a storytelling framework can set individuals up to understand how they should be doing their work in the brand’s voice. This in turn means that anyone with that framework can be “in character” when it comes to storytelling activities in social, digital or elsewhere — be they internal teams and people or third-party agencies.

Key Takeaways: Storytelling Guidelines

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BE AUTHENTIC.

Success in brand storytelling demands that you know who you are as a brand. If you haven’t done the work already, look inward and get a handle on your vision, mission and values or pinpoint your brand’s or product’s core values. Success also demands you know your customer. Spend time unpacking your data to learn the behaviors, habits and expectations of your audience. Consider creating a customer journey map to have a more solid understanding of the journey your customers take when they interact with your brand. This will help you better understand where storytelling can be used to amplify and support your marketing messages.

BUILD A FRAMEWORK.

Stay true to your brand story by creating a framework or a charter that your internal and external teams can use when acting as the voice of the brand. This will ensure that your narrative stays authentic and consistent across your brand’s entire marketing ecosystem.



EMBRACE EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES.

There are a number of new technologies than can be used to extend and evolve your brand story. Consider allocating a portion of your budget to new technology and innovation testing. Supporting testing encourages teams to put analysis into the things they are interested in. It also gives your audience a say, which is important when you're seeking a connection with customers.

REWARD FAILURE.

Brands that embrace emerging technology must also change the culture of "failing" within their organizations. Team members need to be shown that taking small, calculated risks is key to creating new experiences, and the only true way to learn.

CONSULT THE EXPERTS.

There are many digital agencies and consultancies that are already working successfully in this space and, as a result, know and understand the opportunities and hazards of things like emerging technology. Lean on their expertise to help push boundaries, assess risks and think creatively.

DEVELOP A PLAN FOR MEASUREMENT.

Be prepared to isolate the data that matters to your storytelling efforts. Then analyze what messages had an impact, which ones didn't and where there is room for optimization. Also, leverage this data to get a better picture of your customer and where there are opportunities to extend the relationship to create stronger, even lifelong, connections.

