

Telling Tales: Using Narrative Psychology in Branding



The most important thing about a point of view is to have one.

In the Beginning

Let me tell you a story. It's a bit about our past. A bit about our future but more importantly, it concerns what is happening right now. It is also a story that nears 2,500 words because our complex world cannot be dumbed down, reduced to a vague tagline, summed in a 140 character tweet, or captured in an oversimplified to-do list. True learning and understanding requires time and effort so heat the kettle or uncork a bottle and enjoy. Lastly, it was a dark and stormy night...

Marketing and advertising agencies call themselves professional storytellers. Methodologies at agencies deliver a brand story as part of engagements. Creative briefs bring the story to life. Agencies pump out papers on the subject and profile case studies where the story is key to client success. Within the industry, marketing conferences make room for storytelling as part of the agenda. Media and publications write on the topic with frequency. Storytelling permeates the profession.

Still, storytelling is constantly examined for relevance and efficacy. Pundits are all over the map. It is viewed broadly as integral, over-used, irrelevant, or even dead. This exploration is a good thing because storytelling is constantly evolving in interesting ways but most businesses do not keep pace. Here are three changes taking place in branding and marketing storytelling that you must be aware of:

They Don't Tell: by its very definition, storytelling is broadcast in nature. We tell a tale. It is 'one-to-many' like the Mad Men era of advertising. We know that no longer works. Stories must now be designed to invite consumers in and let them be both character and storyteller. The goal is to invite participation not passive absorption and to avoid outright rejection.

They Are Organic: the best brand stories take root organically and grow from the actions of people. Then they really evolve. That perceived lack of control scares many traditional marketers. They fear ceding too much to consumers. Still they control context and that is critical element. It is context that provides the story's framework. Granted it is a bit of a wild ride when consumers help build the story but this is what is taking place with Uber and Airbnb and has taken place with Apple and Red Bull.



They Don't End: stories are meant to eventually end. Even Harry Potter ended but maybe not Game of Thrones. After the last page the reader moves on to other things. However, brands are stories never completely told because of the constant interactions between consumers and the brand (and because we do not want the consumer to move on).

This is why brands reinvent and retool with what seems like ever-greater frequency. I have had clients who drastically overhauled their brand three times in ten years. In the past this would be criticized as frivolous, evidence of inaccurate branding in the first place, or just plain wrong. These are now looked at as fresh chapters in the brand's ongoing story.



New Headspace

The best response to this evolution is to borrow liberally from psychology. This is a smart move. Marketing has always been the commercial branch of psychology. Marketers have tried for centuries to figure out people's motivations and behavior. The profession has leaned heavily on brainy theories since the 1950's. One such theory comes from Ted Sarbin (1911–2005), an American psychologist and professor at the University of California. Sarbin found traditional psychological research limiting so he formed and championed narrative psychology.

It is based upon the primacy of stories as a way of understanding human behavior. This is very cool stuff. It looks at how human beings deal with experiences and how they communicate those experiences by constructing stories and listening to the stories of others. This is what marketing should be leveraging.

Narrative psychology is why brands are constructed with values meant to match those of desired consumers, why brands communicate much about who buys them, and why we all share our preferences and desires in conversations online and off. Narrative psychology assumes that our experiences are filled with "meaning" and captured in stories more so than stark logical arguments or strict lawful formulations.


A person wearing a blue jacket is sitting and reading an open book. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

**THE STORY
IS EVERYTHING**

People have a natural affinity for stories. We learn facts better if they are part of a story rather than in a list (unfortunately this has not stopped most blog writers from naming and structuring their pieces as, '7 Ways to Win at Work', and other such vacuous tripe). One study confirmed that legal arguments are far more convincing if they are in narrative form rather than based on litanies of legal precedent.

From my experience, this type of brand storytelling challenges a longstanding assumption in marketing. Historically, marketers have thought it is the objective environment that influences people. This is not true. What does influence us is our own individual constructs of the world. This forces marketers to get inside people's heads and see the world the way they do. You have to look at the kinds of narratives and stories people tell themselves to determine why they're doing what they're doing.

This is not easy stuff because each of us is a bizarre mix of the rational and irrational and our moods swing with frequency. Writer, lecturer, and master of self-improvement, Dale Carnegie, held a clear view on how people behaved. The author of the best-known "how-to" book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, was an expert on human behavior. This extensive experience was summed up when Carnegie observed, "When dealing with people, let us remember we are not dealing with creatures of logic. We are dealing with creatures of emotion, creatures bristling with prejudices and motivated by pride and vanity."



“Storytelling is the essential human activity. The harder the situation, the more essential it is.” Tim O'Brien

Narratives Drive Action

Why I favour this approach over traditional storytelling is that it motivates action. We all know the vast majority of marketing and advertising is quite poor. Yet, even campaigns that win awards, gain media attention and generate water cooler chatter fall short in the most desired result. They have told a story and probably entertained but have not prompted action or changed behavior.



The Taco Bell talking dog was ubiquitous and became a part of pop culture but sales actually declined during the campaign. The famous Alka-Seltzer commercial in the 1970's with the still quoted line, "That's a spicy meat-a-ball!", succeeded only in selling more spaghetti sauce than the intended stomach relief medicine. This is why David Ogilvy lamented, "Ninety-nine percent of advertising doesn't sell much of anything."

These advertising campaigns are fun and entertain but they don't necessarily sell, motivate or incite change. As Theresa Fowler said, "The history of storytelling isn't one of simply entertaining the masses but of also advising, instructing, challenging the status quo." Every powerful movement that has impacted our world has been shaped and energized by a potent narrative. A narrative that invites participation, grows organically through interaction, and never ends in the conventional sense.



The Odorono Story

Let me provide an example of an amazing brand narrative that took place over one hundred years ago. It was so effective that it has dominated the entire deodorant and antiperspirant industry ever since. Edna Murphey, a high school student, initially struggled to get people interested in a brand new innovation concocted by her father. Dr. Murphey was a surgeon who devised a liquid to keep his hands free of sweat in the operating room. To her credit young Edna sensed a winning consumer product and believed people would see the benefits of retarding perspiration and arresting certain hygiene issues.

The problem was in 1912 perspiring was not discussed in upright society. So the product cleverly named Odorono (Odor Oh No!), languished and like many entrepreneurs Edna was forced to reevaluate. She reached out to James Webb Young of J. Walter Thompson, an advertising agency that already enjoyed an enviable creative reputation. Young was a fresh-faced copywriter who had once sold Bibles door-to-door. This made him well versed in the power of words, good storytelling, and the need for persistence.

Young was just beginning his career but would go on to lead J. Walter Thompson globally and be inducted into the Creative Hall of Fame and the Advertising Hall of Fame. His solution for Odorono was to address head-on commonly held beliefs regarding perspiration. Chief among them was the idea that preventing perspiration was unhealthy. This was a time when men were expected to have a husky scent and women were not to address the topic publicly or privately. Most people chose instead to wash regularly, layer on perfume and employ clothing shields.

Young focused the message on the product's medicinal origins positioning Odorono as a pharmaceutical solution. This invited attention and people began to take it seriously. Sales took off vindicating Edna Murphey's efforts while launching Young's illustrious advertising career. Within a few years Young was brought back to lift the flagging sales of Odorono. Revenues had begun dropping by 1919 because people were no longer motivated by the fear factor he had first instilled.



ODO-RONO
THE TOILET WATER FOR
EXCESSIVE PERSPIRATION

Corrects excessive perspiration of the armpits, making shields unnecessary. It is also used for perspiring feet or hands. One application is effective for several days in preventing both odor and moisture. Odo-ro-no is used and recommended by leading physicians and skin specialists. Guaranteed harmless.

50c—\$1.00—trial size 25c

THE ODORONO COMPANY
Cincinnati, Ohio



They never have the slightest perspiration annoyance!

THOUSANDS and thousands of women—busier now than they have ever been before—have found that they can be as sweet and dainty, as free from the annoyance of perspiration at the end of the most hurried day, as when they stepped fresh from their morning baths. What Odorono has done for these women it will do for every man or woman, no matter how greatly they suffer from excessive perspiration. Profuse perspiration in any one

part of the body is not healthy. Odorono, a toilet water formulated by a physician corrects it completely. It is quick and easy to use—and while the ordinary deodorant merely covers perspiration odor for a few hours at best—Odorono, applied once, keeps the skin dry and odorless for three days! Used two or three times a week, your under-arms, feet, hands, remain always cool and sweet. Daily baths do not lessen the effect of Odorono at all.

ODO-RONO

Registered Trade Mark.

Get a bottle and begin to-day to know what a delightful feeling of daintiness the use of Odorono can give you. Obtainable at all high-class chemists and stores. Price 25c, 50c and 75c. If you have any difficulty in obtaining it, write, giving name and address of your chemist, enclosing postal order, and we will see you are supplied. **THE AMERICAN DRUG SUPPLY CO., 6, Northumberland Avenue, London, W.C.2.** For France to The Agence Americaine, 38, Avenue de l'Opera, Paris.





There isn't a girl who can't have the irresistible, appealing loveliness of perfect daintiness.

Within the Curve of a Woman's Arm

A frank discussion of a subject too often avoided

A woman's arm! Poets have sung of it, great artists have painted its beauty.

It should be the daintiest, sweetest thing in the world. And yet, unfortunately, it isn't, always.

There's an old offender in this quest for perfect daintiness—an offender of which we ourselves may be ever so unconscious, but which is just as truly present.

Shall we discuss it frankly?

May a woman who says, "No, I am never annoyed by perspiration," not know the facts—does not realize how much sweeter and daintier she would be if she were entirely free from it.

Of course, we aren't to blame because nature has so made us that the perspiration glands under the arms are more active than anywhere else. Nor are we to blame because the perspiration which oozes under the arm does not evaporate readily as from other parts of the body. The curve of the arm and the constant wearing of clothing have made normal evaporation there impossible.

Would you be absolutely sure of your daintiness?

It is the chemicals of the body, not uncleanliness, that cause odor. And even though there is no active perspiration—no apparent moisture—there may be under the arms an odor unnoticed by ourselves, but distinctly noticeable to

others. For it is a physiological fact that persons troubled with perspiration-odor seldom can detect it themselves.

Fastidious women who want to be absolutely sure of their daintiness have found that they could not trust to their own consciences; they have felt the need of a toilet water which would insure them against any of this kind of underarm unpleasantness, either moisture or odor.

To meet this need, a physician formulated Odorono—a perfectly harmless and delightful toilet water. With particular women Odorono has become a toilet necessity which they use regularly two or three times a week.

So simple, so easy, so sure

No matter how much the perspiration glands may be excited by exertion, nervousness, or weather conditions, Odorono will keep your underarms always sweet and naturally dry. You then can dismiss all anxiety as to your freshness, your perfect daintiness.

The right time to use Odorono is at night before retiring. Put it on the underarms with a bit of absorbent cotton, only two or three times a

week. Then a little talcum dusted on and you can forget all about that worst of all embarrassments—perspiration-odor or moisture. Daily baths do not lessen the effect of Odorono at all.

Does excessive perspiration ruin your prettiest dresses?

Are you one of the many women who are troubled with excessive perspiration, which ruins all your prettiest blouses and dresses? To endure this condition is so unnecessary! Why, you need never spoil a dress with perspiration! For this severer trouble Odorono is just as effective as it is for the more subtle form of perspiration annoyance. Try it tonight and notice how exquisitely fresh and sweet you will feel.

If you are troubled in any unusual way or have had any difficulty in finding relief, let us help you solve your problem. We shall be so glad to do so. Address Ruth Miller, The Odorono Co., 719 Blair Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio.

At all toilet counters in the United States and Canada, 60c and \$1.00. Trial size, 25c. By mail postpaid if your dealer hasn't it.

Address mail orders or requests as follows: For Canada to The Arthur Hebe Co., 41 Adelaide St., East, Toronto, Ont. For France to The Agence Americaine, 28 Avenue de l'Opera, Paris. For Switzerland to The Agence Americaine, 17 Boulevard Helvetique, Geneva. For England to The American Drug Supply Co., 4 Northumberland Ave., London, W. C. 2. For Mexico to H. E. Geller & Co., 24 Calle de Mexico City. For U. S. A. to The Odorono Co., 719 Blair Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Dr. Lewis B. Allen, head of the famous Woodfield Laboratories, Woodfield, Massachusetts, says:

"Experimental and practical tests show that Odorono is harmless, economical and effective when required as directed, and will require neither use after nor the health."

Young's carefully selected words form an engrossing mix of inference and lecture.

Young took up the new challenge choosing to commission a survey using the relatively new practice of market research. The study revealed that two-thirds of the target market, that being women, found no use for deodorant. This provided Young with a "fresh" insight and it completely changed the perspiration conversation. Sarah Everts writing for *The Smithsonian* detailed the new direction, "Young decided to present perspiration as a social faux pas that nobody would directly tell you was responsible for your unpopularity, but which they were happy to gossip behind your back about." This created a new motive and narrative replacing the medicinal angle with a potentially embarrassing social one.

A 1919 edition of the *Ladies Home Journal* launched the new narrative and it may have caused people to perspire because of the outrage it generated. The advertisement featured a sketch of a young couple resembling characters from *The Great Gatsby*. The two are positioned in a near embrace that was close to scandalous but the consumer reaction came more from the copy within the advertisement. The headline waxed lyrically, "Within the curve of a women's arm. A frank discussion of a subject too often avoided."

Young's carefully selected words formed an engrossing mix of inference and lecture. It went on to provide product information countering any objections to the use of deodorant while offering valuable dating and relationship advice. The advertisement continues, "A woman's arm! Poets have sung of it, great artists have painted its beauty. It should be the daintiest, sweetest thing in the world. And yet, unfortunately, it isn't always."

The marketing industry today talks about content marketing ad nauseam while contributing precious few examples any good storytelling. We need to look back one hundred years to see fabulous examples of how to do it. Young's fine prose was oddly blunt. It produced indignant outcry from women but the business results spoke volumes.

According to J. Walter Thompson's archives, sales rose one hundred and twelve percent. The narrative built around the social embarrassment motive has forever dominated deodorant communications. Subsequently, men-only deodorants hit the market in the early 1930's. The following years saw the launch of many new brands for both genders. The names of these deodorants reveal their adherence to the social faux pas motive. Marketing professionals stuck with the shaming script, choosing to name their products Shun, Hush, Veto, Dainty Dry and Perstop.

I have shared the Odorono story often at conferences and schools. The discussions that result often suggest that Young created a problem when it did not previously exist. I counter by saying it has long been a marketer's job to educate people and to get them to change their behavior. A sweeter smelling populace was not an evil goal.

At the end of the day, each and every consumer can choose to buy or not. Young presented people with a narrative and it was up to them to see if they were part of the story. The marketing campaign succeeded because it gave people enough information to determine if deodorant was relevant to them. It was effective because it told people what problem the product solved. And the narrative provided post-purchase rationalization. It was also very good business. Today the deodorant industry is worth more than 19 billion dollars annually.



Selling Stories

In a more recent example for an insurance client I learned a great deal about linking people's motives with relevant prompts seeded into the brand story. When I was called in I found that the client was using the common insurance industry strategy of scaring the consumer into action. In this case it was poorly executed. When this fear motive was communicated through a marketing campaign it backfired. It initially succeeded in creating awareness but sent customers scurrying to competitors who came across as more friendly and compassionate when it came to fire, accidents and death.

Now the entire insurance industry attempts to communicate its serious stuff through approachable and often humorous means. Leading insurers have employed a duck, a quirky saleswoman, a knowledgeable but gruff professor, and a character called "Mayhem". Allstate used Mayhem as a mischievous metaphor for potential disasters. While Mayhem initiates scary scenarios, the irreverence of the approach tempers the fear association even when meant to place consumers in that situation. As a strategy it makes sense on paper but in execution these efforts are little more than pseudo sitcoms rather than great storytelling.

Storytelling's evolution is taking place in all mediums. In early 2013 the company Dropbox acquired a technology startup named Mailbox for one hundred million dollars. What made this purchase extraordinary was the fact that Mailbox was a relatively simple application that to that point had no revenue. What made Mailbox so attractive was a video they had produced. It shows a young woman dressed casually but well who is taking the afternoon off to go for a pleasant hike in the country.

"Storytelling is fine as long as you can encourage people to act on the stories."

Karen Armstrong



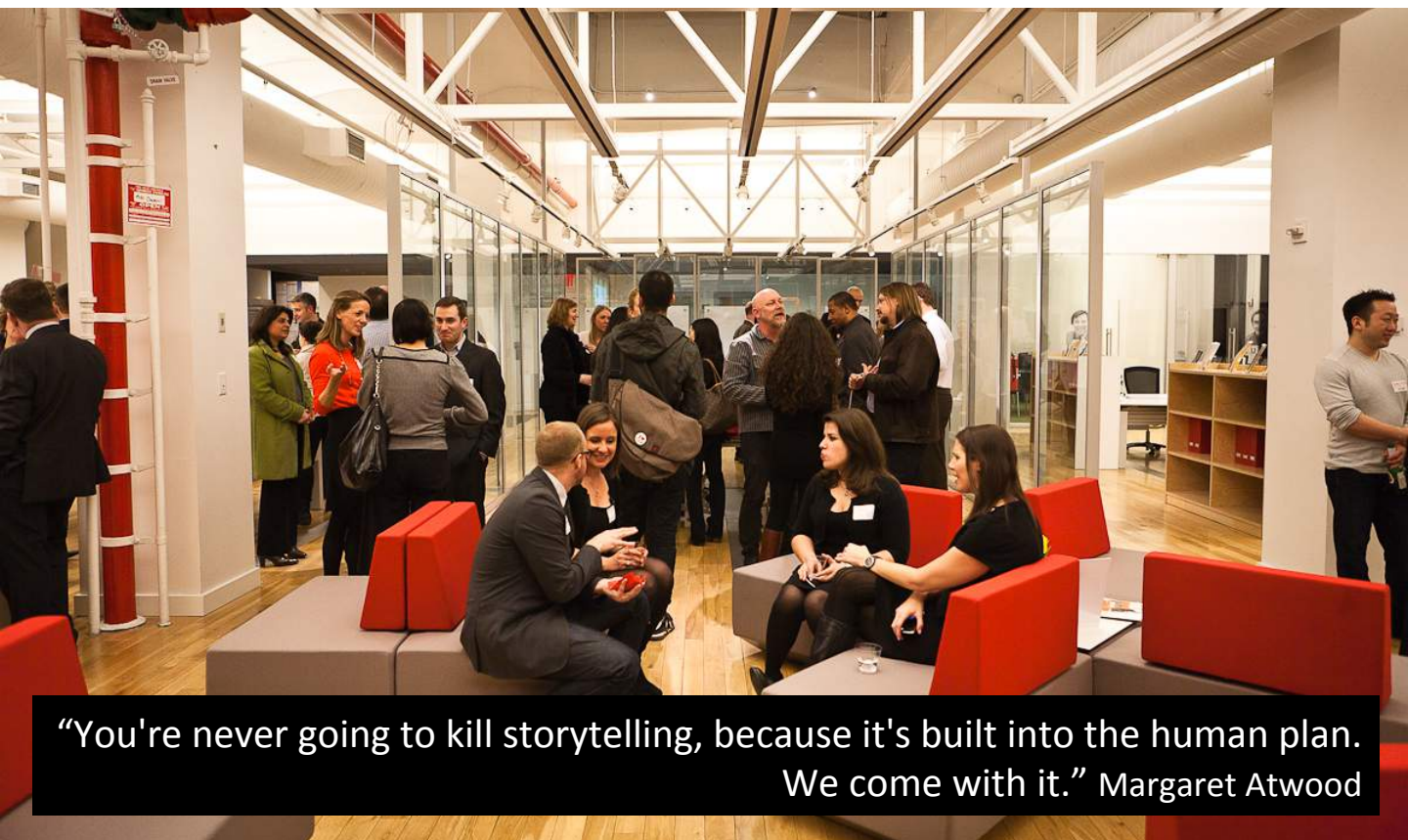
This does not mean she is untethered from the world, technology or responsibilities so thankfully the Mailbox app is on her smartphone. It enables her to stay in touch, set meetings and plan projects. She arranges her life in one quick minute and when finished the phone is turned off and tucked into the back pocket of her jeans. Then she sets off light as air knowing she can thoroughly enjoy her hike. The video has no dialogue or copy. The viewer simply watches the woman arrange her online world so she can experience the real one. It is wonderfully creative storytelling and proves that how we tell the stories about ourselves is as important as the content.

Bernadette Jiwa, author of *Difference*, provides a succinct view of a brand story claiming it is "more than a narrative. It is much more than the copy on your website, the words in a brochure, or the sales presentation used to gain customers. Your story isn't only what you tell people. It is what people believe about you based on the signals your brand sends and the interactions they have with the brand. The story is one of many parts that add up to a complete picture comprised of facts, feelings, and interpretations, which nowadays means that part of the brand story isn't even told by you."

The End?

Stories drive everything we do. From how we position our past, seek connection with others, and define our personalities. This is why they are indispensable in marketing. The most effective marketing tells a story because as I learned long ago, people buy stories not products and they enjoy inserting themselves into the narrative if allowed.

The profession needs to move beyond entertaining sound bites and really get into consumers heads to build and share great stories. Stories that influence the way people feel, think, act, and behave. Stories that compel people to change. Storytelling based on narrative psychology does this well. It may seem basic and elemental in theory but it is complex and challenging in application. That is what makes it incredibly valuable.



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SWYSTUN COMMUNICATIONS
