

The essential brand persona: storytelling and branding

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Introduction: storytelling and branding

Storytelling is a well known and ancient art form. Fascinating and compelling characters have animated literature around the world from the beginning of the written word. Today, scientific research has laid the foundations for a sound empirical understanding of storytelling as a clear aid to memory, as a means of making sense of the world, as a way to make and strengthen emotional connections, and as a way of recognizing and identifying with brands of any type. Whether you are dealing with product brands or company brands, storytelling is essential to successful branding, since your brand is the sum of all your corporate behaviors and communications that inform your customers' experiences with your product or company.

In particular, persona-focused storytelling is essential to branding. When it comes to creating a powerful brand narrative, the persona – the articulated form of the brand's character and personality – comes first, and all other elements unfold from there. A compelling brand starts with a strong, well-drawn, and quickly recognized persona – the essential connection between what a company says and what it does.

This brand persona creates a long-lasting emotional bond with the audience because it is instantly recognizable and memorable, it is something that people can relate to, and it is consistent. Nike, Disney, FedEx, and McDonald's are all leading examples of brands with personas that fit these criteria. In each case, there is a clear personality associated with the brand. These companies understand that it is their clear articulation of their brand persona and their discipline in placing that persona into stories that work with and help strengthen that brand persona is what makes the difference between strong and weak brand associations.

The brand persona drives the continuity for the overall brand message. It offers a point of reference that audiences relate to, regardless of the specific story or message. Audiences "know" this brand because its persona reflects the audience's understanding of the brand's values and behaviors. These brand personas will appear human to the extent that they possess recognizably human traits, such as imagination, persistence, or courage, which are tied to a clear intention or purpose. In some cases, the brand persona may be signaled by using an actual human or human-like figure who acts as a kind of brand spokesman or icon, such as the Michelin man, the Geico gecko, or the Quaker Oats man. Actual embodiments like this are comparatively uncommon. Most companies signal their brand through a logo, whether it is a symbol like Nike's swoosh or Apple's apple. Often, it is a stylized treatment of the company name or abbreviation. Regardless of how it is done, the graphic element itself should not be mistaken for the brand or the brand persona. Its function is to remind the audience about the brand so that it remains at the forefront of the audience's thoughts.

How do we go about developing a brand persona that is memorable, creative, and stable yet capable of growth? In the end, we need to develop a brand-persona-storytelling vocabulary that artfully combines the best of all these contributing fields:

“When it comes to creating a powerful brand narrative, the persona – the articulated form of the brand’s character and personality – comes first.”

- the rigor and precision of the scientist;
- the inspiration and wonder of the poet;
- the insatiable curiosity of the academic; and
- the clear practicality of the businessperson.

This is achievable and worthwhile, and it starts with building a brand persona that effectively captures the essence of who your brand is.

Persona archetypes

What does persona-based storytelling involve? One of the most important things it involves is quick and easy recognition, and that comes from drawing on archetypal personas whose value is seen through long use and familiarity. For example, when George Lucas was developing the script for *Star Wars*, he did extensive research into folklore, fairy tales, mythology, and classic elements of storytelling to shape a story that could be both breathtakingly fresh and comfortingly recognizable. The freshness came from the science fiction and special effects, but the comforting recognition came from the fact that the story relied on archetypes (personas) that the audience was already familiar with. Lucas drew on works such as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* to insure that the classical motifs were treated consistently, whether it was through major figures like the protagonist, Luke Skywalker, his antagonist, Darth Vader, his mentor, Obi Wan Kenobi, or through minor parts like C-3PO or R2-D2.

To take just one of these as an example, Obi Wan plays a key role as Luke's mentor. He clarifies mysteries, provides guidance and wisdom at key turns, and protects Luke from harm while he is still finding his way. The role of mentor is itself so ancient that it precedes written records. Homer, and generations of poets before him who worked in an exclusively oral tradition, recounted the story of Mentor, the trusted friend of Odysseus, who was placed in charge of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, while Odysseus was gone fighting in the Trojan War. Variations on this theme of experienced teacher, protector, and trusted advisor can be found throughout history, in literature and film in such figures as Gandalf from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or Dumbledore in the Harry Potter series.

It is little wonder, then, that the persona of “mentor” – one of the most easily recognizable and powerful personas around – can and does work effectively as a brand persona. Companies that provide goods or services that place them in a role of teacher or guardian with respect to their customers can appropriately use this persona, as in fact happens in fields where trust is an essential element of the relationship (e.g. in healthcare or in financial services). The “mentor” is just one of a number of potentially useful archetypes. The list of possible archetypes can be long; some that might feel familiar to us include such recognizable roles as:

- the “rebel” who stands up to authority;
- “mom” who provides nurturing and safety;
- the “rugged individualist” who listens to the beat of his own drummer;
- the “champion” who battles against opposing forces on a regular or predictable basis; or
- the “underdog,” the tireless and scrappy fighter who takes advantage of the fact that he or she is consistently underestimated.

In the brand world, the rugged individualist has been used by car manufacturers (trucks) and blue jeans, and, perhaps most famously by Marlboro cigarettes, who turned a failing brand around by creating (in their case both strategically and visually) the iconic Marlboro Man. Using the rebel persona as a focal point has been successful for brands like Virgin America airlines.

A brand narrative without a well-defined, recognizable, memorable, and compelling persona can become a series of disconnected adventures, jumping from narrative to narrative in search of something that might resonate with its audiences. This happened with John McCain's failed 2008 presidential campaign, as Robert Draper pointed out in his October 22, 2008 *New York Times Magazine* article analyzing candidate McCain's problems. Draper found that a big part of the blame was to be found in the inconsistent story lines that seemed to feature very different personae, leading to confusion and unease on the part of the electorate.

The strength of persona

While a persona can live and breathe within a variety of different stories, the persona itself has to remain stable so that people can come to know it and appreciate its underlying consistencies and strengths. General Electric, for example, has undergone a number of obvious outward changes over the years, but has retained a stable core persona of the "practical innovator," whether in its initial appearance in 1896 as one of the 12 original companies listed on the Dow Jones Industrial Index, continuing in its long-lived "we bring good things to life" phase, or in its current "imagination at work" incarnation. All of these variations trace the brand back to its roots with its founder, Thomas Edison, and the light bulb. If you think about what a "practical innovator" brand persona might say when asked about what he does, it would very likely be like what Edison himself said:

I never perfected an invention that I did not think about in terms of the service it might provide to others.

That flexible stability has contributed greatly to GE's staying power over the years.

The centrality and strength of the brand persona can be seen in the fact that two brands could exist within strikingly similar types of plot, while the differences in their individual brand personas will be what changes the story and makes each uniquely memorable and ownable. Both GE and Apple, for example, have strong innovation stories, but the personas are so distinct at this point that there is no confusing one story with the other. Their core narratives place them in an innovative intellectual hothouse, whether Edison's lab in Menlo Park or Steve Jobs' garage. Similarly, what they produce is aimed at becoming part of our everyday lives, and not just creating innovation for innovation's sake. But they diverge precisely because their personas are different, with Apple as the hip, counter-culture renegade and GE as the American solid citizen. So while their stories have similar themes, each distinct persona drives the particulars of tone, language, and attitude. Both brands succeed because they tap into well accepted archetypes of innovation and entrepreneurship.

Sometimes, however, brand managers neglect or lose sight of their brand's persona. This is a continual danger that typically comes to a bad end. Take New Coke for example. In 1985, after extensive research into consumer taste preferences, the Coca Cola company introduced a new, sweeter formulation of their flagship product, which came to be known as New Coke. Did all the market testing indicate that people preferred the taste of New Coke over the traditional formula? Yes. Was it a sure-fire winner? Not so fast. The Coke persona is all about tradition and belonging: Coke is a member of your family. How does the "new" part fit it? Would you feel comfortable with a "new mom," or a "new dad"? That could feel scary and upsetting. Regardless of the story you are trying to sell us, the audiences said, I want my old mom and old dad back! They are who I grew up with. I want my family back! Coke had stepped too far from its persona and paid the price.

People naturally connect and identify with a believable and consistent brand persona – one whose words and actions are well matched. Without that essential identification, any action the brand takes will be of little interest to your audience because it will seem disconnected,

out of synch. The brand's actions are compelling when its persona is one that people can recognize, care about and develop a relationship with. An internally consistent brand persona is one that you come to "know" as you would a family member or the beloved character in a favorite novel. While a good brand persona remains true to its core, it is also able to grow with the times and changing situations. As this happens, good brands come to evoke strong emotional responses from their customers, including loyalty, trust, and even devotion.

Implicit trust

Loyalty and trust develop over a long time, and result from hundreds, even thousands of small acts, well performed. If your words and deeds are well matched – which a strong brand persona will make happen – you will create in your customers a crucial, intrinsic, and implicit emotional connection that will form the basis of a long-lasting relationship built on the predictability of the brand's behavior.

Because strong feelings like these are typically unconscious or not articulated, they do not show up in standard surveys or focus groups, which tend to measure and record "top of mind" thoughts, things that people can readily articulate. Traditional branding research that focuses on such explicit measures is disappointing, not because it is wrong, but because it is incomplete. People are seldom truly candid in focus groups or interviews (there are various pressures to fit one's expressed views to suit the situation). Storytelling that starts with the persona allows us to tap into these deeper recesses, where the influence of attitudes and emotions is greater. Loyalty and trust are found there, not in the "top of mind" recollection of taglines or features.

That long-lasting and implicit trust is what distinguishes the great brands, like J&J or GE, from the rest of the pack. It will also protect the brand when it makes a misstep. Nike, for example, has a strong brand persona that is all about performance and winning. Their long-used tagline, "Just do it," is instantly recognizable as is their logo, the swoosh.

In 2006, Nike teamed up with skier Bode Miller, which seemed like a good idea at the time. After all, he had won two silver medals at the Olympics in 2002, four gold medals and a silver medal at the World Championship in 2003, and in 2005, he became the first American in 22 years to win the World Cup title. His performance trajectory was clear. If anything, it seemed that the difficulty would be in finding words to match his expected performance.

There was no shortage of words: in TV spots for the 2006 Winter Olympics, Miller was shown talking about performance, talking about his attitude, and talking some more. But there was not much "doing" – he fell short in all five medal attempts. Worse, he did not even seem concerned with winning, an attitude that did not match well with the Nike brand persona. This created a disconnect between the audience and the brand, since the fit between Bode and Nike clearly was not right.

A weaker brand might have suffered lasting harm because the plot went off course. Nike's persona was not built on the achievement of a single athlete, however. Instead it draws on a heritage of performance and winning that started with Ilie Nastase and Steve Prefontaine, that grew to include Carl Lewis and Jackie Joyner-Kersey, that reached new heights with Michael Jordan, and that continued with Serena Williams, among other top performers. It is the combined effect of these champion performers that has contributed to the impressive loyalty Nike enjoys from its customers. In the end, Nike succeeds not because its taglines and logo are memorable, but because it forms enduring associations between its products

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and the aura of successful performance that surrounds those who use them, whether top athletes or weekend warriors. The Nike persona, and its various success stories, is built on thousands of victories, large and small.

The importance of this kind of association, so key to the brand persona and the art of storytelling, can also be seen in the fact that it is an observable and measurable phenomenon, a fact that has been explored by neuroscientists and other researchers.

A brain for branding

Brain studies have shown some very dramatic effects of branding. In one famous study, researchers used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to see how subjects' brains responded when they were given Coke or Pepsi. Some of the subjects were given the soda without knowing which brand it was, and were asked to give their preference on taste alone. Others were given the soda and then an image of Coke or Pepsi was flashed at them before they took a sip.

The result? The blinded tasting resulted in no preference for one brand over the other in the group – some preferred Pepsi, others preferred Coke, but they did not know which was which, so the overall results were what you would expect in two chemically and physically similar drinks. The unblinded tasting was something else altogether. While there was no influence of brand knowledge for people who thought they were drinking Pepsi, there was a very strong brand influence when they were shown an image of Coke. Their belief that they were drinking Coke actually altered their experience to the point where some areas of the brain lit up only when they believed it was a Coke that they were drinking. Clearly, branding is a real, measurable effect. Coke lit up the hippocampus and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, areas of the brain related to memory, control of action, and self-image. Our brains love Coke even more than our taste buds do.

How did that happen? A lot of it has to do with the fact that Coke has been telling a good story, using an exciting yet accessible brand persona that people easily relate to. Storytelling has been engaging listeners and readers for millennia, and Coke figured out how to make that work to their advantage. Researchers have shown that storytelling strengthens the connections consumers have to brands, so that to a great extent, "what a brand means to a consumer is based . . . on the narratives he or she has constructed that incorporate the brand."

We may want to apply storytelling to branding, we may even have a good story for doing so, but how sound is the rationale for using stories, and specifically for using the persona as a way to improve your brand? The underlying rationale has been in place for many years, and each year seems to produce even more evidence to support this connection. In fact, the idea of brain localization is pretty easy to understand, maybe too easy to understand. For this reason it has often been exaggerated, oversimplified, and misused.

Nevertheless, we know that for most people, in general, the right side of the brain is dominant for processing the emotional content of language, for things like rhythm and intonation in language, and for understanding the context of speech. The left side of the brain is dominant for processing the literal sense of language, and also for processing grammar and vocabulary. What is especially important here is that regardless of whether a function is more closely associated with the right hemisphere or the left, the articulation of the result is a left-hemisphere activity for most people. In this way, the left hemisphere acts as the brain's "spokesperson."

For branding, the significance of recent discoveries in neuroscience is that physiological findings are consistent with findings in business research and with ordinary experience. Whether we study physical structures, physiological processes, or behavioral outcomes, we can point to a sound empirical foundation for using a strong persona in brand storytelling.

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Character traits

One pitfall that companies commonly experience is when they focus on plot before persona in brand storytelling. This can easily happen when the cleverness of an ad campaign overshadows the persona of the brand. How often have we seen commercials that have a cute premise and a surprising punch line, only to forget completely what they were selling? They lost sight of who they were. Marketing communications that start by focusing on persona, on the other hand, will always be memorable, regardless of the different plots that are involved. Those approaches that help us to know our brand better now will be particularly valuable during times of crises and sudden change. This is where understanding the brand persona pays off, because it lets us know how the brand will behave in different circumstances.

The persona includes attributes such as courage, decisiveness, determination, work ethic, honesty, flexibility, responsibility, and curiosity. Your audience will attribute those traits to your brand persona by comparing what you say about yourself with what your actions say about you. You may say you are courageous and cool in the face of risk, but if your actions prove otherwise, your brand persona will suffer.

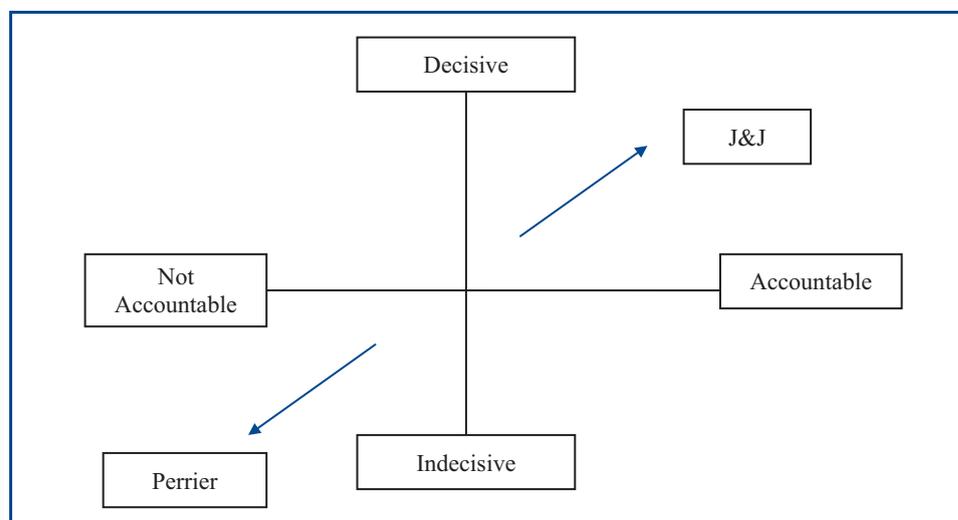
The world of commerce provides plenty of things for companies to respond to as well, and the way they respond reveals the company’s strength of character, as the following two examples illustrate. In 1982, bottles of Extra-Strength Tylenol laced with potassium cyanide caused the deaths of a number of people in the Chicago area. Tylenol sales plunged. The manufacturer, Johnson & Johnson, responded quickly by recalling 31 million bottles of Tylenol and suspending advertising for the product. When it did reintroduce the product, it did so using a newly developed triple-sealed package, underscoring its commitment to consumer safety. Both the product, Tylenol, and the company, J&J, recovered nicely because what the company did matched up with what the company said, which in effect was, “You can trust us.”

On the other hand, when benzene, a carcinogen, was found in bottles of Perrier in North Carolina in 1990, the company responded by saying it was just a local problem. But soon, benzene was found in Perrier bottles in Denmark and The Netherlands. To make matters worse, investigators also uncovered the awkward fact that Perrier was artificially carbonating its supposedly “naturally carbonated” water. In the end, Perrier suffered because its hesitant and confused actions didn’t match its words – that they were all about the purity of their sources. Neither the company nor its product has fully recovered.

In our work, we have found that mapping a brand persona according to select traits can help clarify our understanding of how the persona works, and what its potential strengths or weaknesses are. In Figure 1, for example, we have taken two of these character-trait axes (decisive vs indecisive; and accountable vs not accountable) to illustrate the key differences between J&J and Perrier with respect to persona. These particular axes relate most clearly to the type of situation that these two companies found themselves in, one in which some sort of flaw, error, or unacceptable state of affairs came to pass. This state of affairs presented the company with an opportunity to make decisions and also to own up to its role in the situation. We can best understand how the stories played out as they did by understanding the persona of each of the companies. On the one hand, J&J’s persona was decisive, accountable, and steadfast (trustworthy), while Perrier presented a persona that was indecisive and, by its actions, not accountable.

These two examples illustrate the importance of persona. In the case of Perrier, the occasion of a serious test showed the weakness of the company’s character and their ultimate lack of

Figure 1 Johnson & Johnson and Perrier: the character of company decision-making



commitment to it. Spokespeople for the company shaded the truth, tried to downplay or obscure the facts, and it showed the Perrier brand to be lacking in what strong brands need, namely, greatness of character. J&J, on the other hand, recognized that it was responsible for its product, even if it had done nothing to cause the situation that occurred. Having acknowledged its responsibility, taking decisive action was a natural step.

In both cases the plot of the story – a happy ending for J&J; a sadder ending for Perrier – flowed from the strength or weakness of brand's persona.

How to make storytelling persona work for your branding efforts

Given all this, should not persona-based storytelling be the gold standard for branding? After all, many businesses say they want to use the best approaches that are available for communicating to their audiences, regardless of whether they involve quantitative or qualitative measures.

What they do, on the other hand is different – since they typically default to addressing explicit customer needs or explicit features and benefits. Why? Probably because of habit and comfort. For one thing, business schools, business majors, business programs, and business training all stress quantitative skills. People are measured by numbers and are rewarded with numbers (of dollars). Furthermore, there are many well established quantitative skills and techniques that remain necessary and popular in business, including surveys, focus groups, and quantified illustrations in the form of charts, graphs, tables, and formulas. They are all part of a properly rigorous and quantitative way of understanding and dealing with business problems. As these common aspects of business become acquired habits, they become more comfortable.

On the other hand, creative language skills in general and storytelling in particular have not traditionally occupied as important a role in most business curricula. Storytelling, like advertising copy, taglines, photography, or graphic design, is typically carved out to some “creative” type when the need is identified. But this suggests that the need is occasional, when in reality it is continual, and that creativity is a specialized function, when it is in fact something that everybody possesses to a greater or lesser extent. Everybody has a brain with two sides, and they both need to be engaged and involved and connected.

Storytelling is a commonly taught skill that can be practiced, learned and improved. In fact, it is already done informally all the time, from parents to children, from friend to friend and peer to peer, from teachers to students, around the water cooler, at the bar, around the campfire, and on and on. It is an integral part of popular culture and entertainment, as TV, movies, and

books all show. And there are plenty of people who have formal training in this area, though many of them probably might not have recognized it as such.

Conclusions

When it comes to understanding and developing your brand, you need to focus on brand persona before placing the brand in a story. Key character traits, such as honesty, curiosity, flexibility or determination, are those that come into play when important decisions are made. The strength of your brand will come from the strength of its persona and your commitment to its behavioral implications. Your audience will be interested in the brand story and its actions because they understand the persona. The emotional connection that the brand persona creates with your audiences is based on its ability to address deeply felt, though often poorly articulated, implicit needs and attitudes.

Keywords:
Brands,
Storytelling,
Management strategy,
Attitudes

Brand storytelling and Web 2.0

For brand storytelling, the implications of Web 2.0 may be huge, if still only vaguely understood. In Web 1.0 and earlier eras of communicating the brand story, the company was the primary or even sole source for a brand's message.

Today, however, in an increasingly networked Web 2.0 environment, the company and its communication arms are less and less the sole or even primary source for the audience to get the brand message. More and more of that communication is from consumer to consumer, rather than from company to consumer.

As a result, more and more companies are monitoring forums and chat rooms for consumers who might be talking about their brands. That is because those places reveal how the brand persona is truly perceived in the target audience, and because negative comments or reviews from actual consumers carry much more weight, pound for pound, than any company's attempts to create a positive image.

A strong brand persona will be even more important in such an environment where your voice is only one among many, and may not be the most trusted among them – unless you adapt and develop a reputation for addressing brand issues in a direct, very timely, straightforward, and humble way.

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