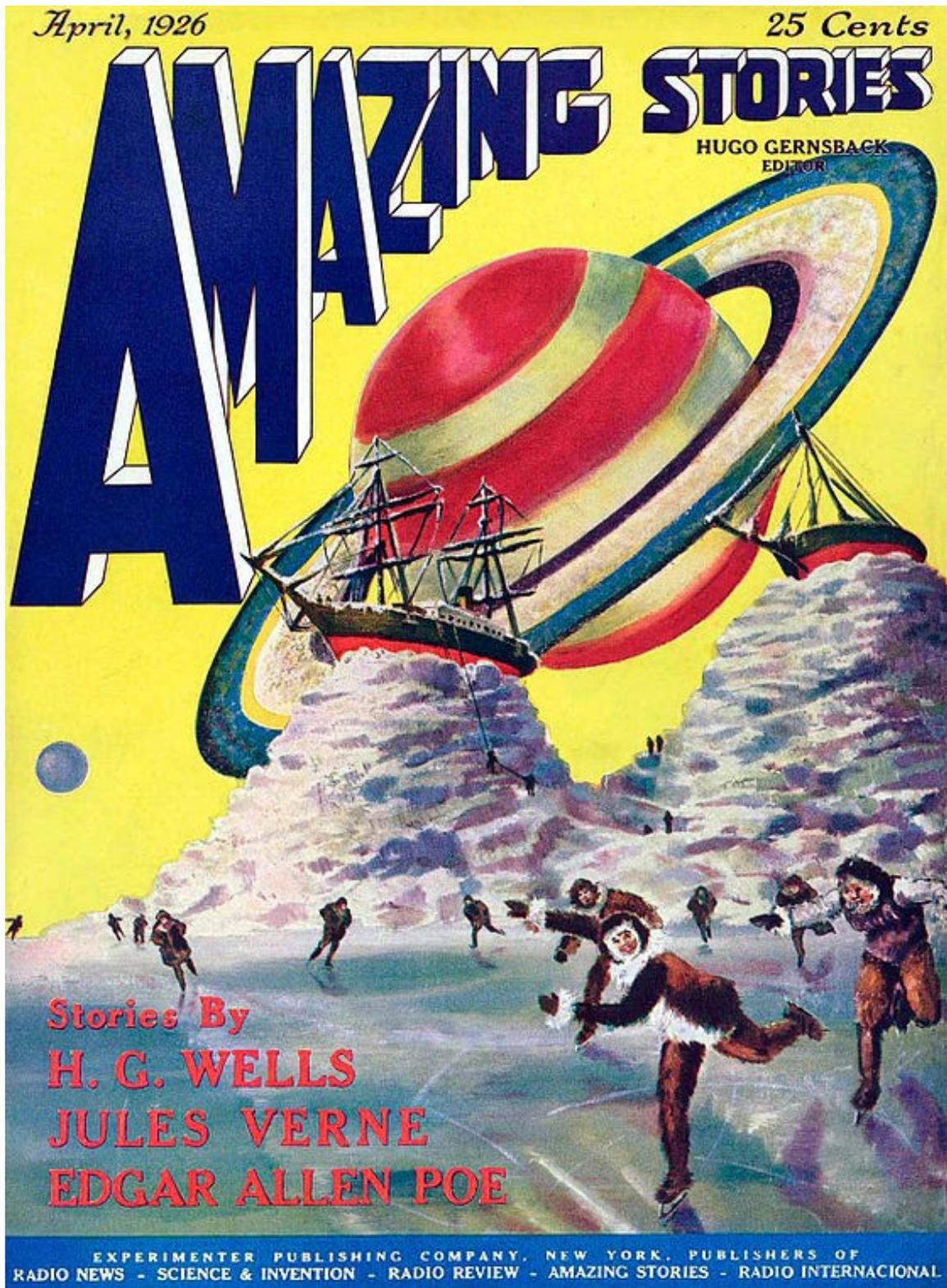


Storyselling: Fiction As Truth In Content Marketing

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Only you can see this message



Storyselling: A Literary Perspective

“Story isn’t a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality.”
Robert McKee. [1]

When trying to sell your brand, products and services, it’s all too easy to present your pitch as a series of lifeless, feature-based pronouncements. Nearly everyone does it. Bland, ineffectual content is everywhere — and business owners and marketers wonder why it doesn’t sell anything.

Of course, most marketers worth their salt know that using stories is the key to successful sales content — Claude Hopkins has been advising marketers to ‘tell your full story’ since 1923 [2]. But not just any old stories; important, vital, engaging stories that are interwoven with you, your business and the very heart of what you do. As Seth Godin puts it: “Marketing is storytelling. The story of your product, built into your product. The ad might be part of it, the copy might be part of it, but mostly, your product and your service and your people are all part of the story. Tell it on purpose.” [3]

I know what you’re thinking. Easier said than done. If we were all able to write such compelling stories we would all be millionaires. But here’s the thing. If we all tried to tell even just slightly more compelling stories, we may not become rich — but we would certainly become richer. Don’t believe me? Consider the power of product placement in films, where sales are made purely on the basis of association with a lifestyle aspiration.

The classic example is the 1986 Tom Cruise film *Top Gun*. “Navy recruiting shot up between 20 percent and 30 percent following the release of *Top Gun*,” [4] said Ogden Naval Reserve Recruiting Chief Bob Whiteley at the time — leading Ben Settle at Copyblogger to label the film “an extremely profitable sales letter.” [5] Settle went on to note the film’s other major marketing boon; sales of “Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses (the kind Tom Cruise’s character “Maverick” wore) jumped 40%” as well.

There are countless other examples from the corporate world too: “At Nike, senior executives are called ‘corporate storytellers’. The 3M company banned bullet points and replaced them with writing ‘strategic narratives’. Procter & Gamble hired Hollywood directors to teach their executives storytelling techniques. Business schools have storytelling courses in their curriculums.” [6]

So how do we even start thinking about trying to create this irresistible content that engages our target audience? It all begins with the right mind-set, an understanding and acknowledgment that our story — the story of our brand, product or service, can create an essential truth within the psyche of our target audience — helping them to literally buy into what we’re selling. Not because we force them, but because they very much want to. They don’t just want to buy our stuff, they *believe* in it.

In this context, the narrative of our brand and the success stories of our happy clients,

(even though true to us), will at first always be fictions to our prospects. Yet through the engagement of high quality market research and equally top standard content, our stories should quickly create a new ‘truth’ in the minds of our potential customers. A truth in which they walk with us as protagonists in a shared journey, visualising themselves experiencing the same emotions, coming to the same conclusions and taking the same actions as our existing clients — ultimately leading to more sales.

Sounds impressive doesn't it? But I'm not just making this stuff up. Amongst others, we have Samuel Taylor Coleridge to thank for explaining this interaction, with his ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ — where an audience readily accepts the emotive engagement of stories on a deep personal level, creating what Coleridge called ‘poetic faith’. [7]

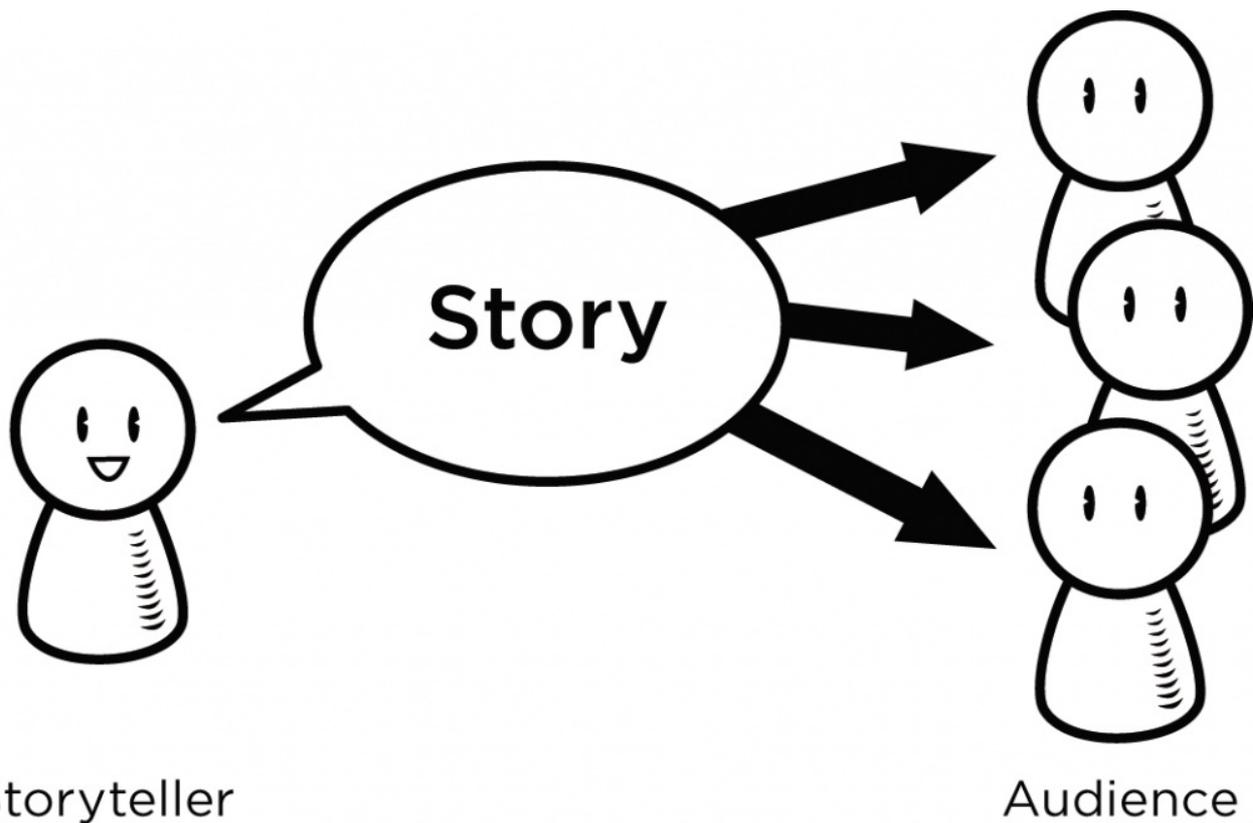
Best selling author Christopher Booker adds to this notion of shared experience, explaining the universality of significance bestowed upon us all by good storytelling: “The real significance of our ability to tell stories is twofold. Firstly, it provides a uniquely revealing mirror to the inner dynamics of human nature. But secondly, by laying bare the unconscious foundations which underlie so much of the way we view the world, this can in turn cast an extraordinarily revealing light on history, politics, religion, philosophy and almost every aspect of human thought and behaviour” [8] — including sales and marketing.

Because on a subconscious, primordial level we all want to listen to stories, we want to believe them as a form of universalised ‘truth’. We cannot help devouring new stories, old stories, any stories — we need them in order to make sense of the world around us. We instinctively need to buy into aspirations, inspirations, desires, visions, hopes, fears, loves and lives through the power of stories — but only through the evocation of our own insight. It must be through choice.

In marketing terms, we all hate being sold to — but if we can hold our prospects’ hands on a journey they voluntarily take ownership of with their own emotive imagination — once they really believe in the personal manifestation of the universal truth at first set before them as fiction, but then made real — you would then find it hard, if not impossible, to convince them NOT to buy what you're offering.

In short, the literary history of storyselling tells us stories really are that powerful to the marketer. If we create a compelling brand story, we engage our audience on an emotional and empathetic level so potently — they themselves create a certain veracity, a certain truth from our ‘fiction’. This in turn takes away the last layer of resistance — the final emotional objection before making a sale.

However, perhaps a word of warning: ‘with great power comes great responsibility’ (as I think Obi Wan Kenobi tells Luke Skywalker in Star Wars). We can't abuse this level of trust the reader's empathy bestows upon us. What the hell does that mean Loz?! It means we must always offer great value. Be honest and use your stories to sell stuff you'd be happy to sell to your own mother. Respect your audience and respect your customer.



Storyselling: A Scientific Perspective

The science and psychology behind creating empathy in the subject through storytelling is well documented. Researchers have found that fiction simulates real life events and as such has an all too real effect on the reader. “Often when someone reads a fictional story, identification with the characters and emotional involvement in the story causes the reader to sympathize with the characters, and perhaps even experience the events in the story as if the reader experiences the events him/herself. Consequently, the reader practices being empathic while reading a fictional story.” [9]

So when we empathize with the themes, narratives and characters of a story, we are in a sense anchoring our real self in the actions and events of fictional people in order to make sense of our own reality. “The simulation of real-world experiences in fiction might be associated with processes that people use in daily life to comprehend what happens in the world. Consequently, through this sensemaking process, people gain a better understanding of the world and how they should interact with other people.” [10]

It is also argued by psychologists “that fiction experiences enhance imaginative thinking,” [11] meaning we can use empathy and imagination to literally put ourselves in the shoes of the story’s protagonist — suspending disbelief through ‘poetic faith’ to almost completely ‘live’ the events we are reading about, hearing or watching.

Research also shows the effects of commercialized non-fiction messages simply wear off

over time — but audiences being influenced by fictional stories react and behave in a very different way. In this regard, “a fictional narrative is more likely to be read with a willing construction of disbelief: the reader accepts assertions from a fictional narrative unless they are highly motivated to reject the assertion based on available knowledge. Hence, the possible effects of stories on empathy are expected to be greater for fiction readers than for non-fiction readers.” [12]

Further to this, psychologists have also documented three specific emotions that help stories evoke such empathy in readers. These are “identification, sympathy and autobiographical memory.” [13] These processes act in combination to create the powerful feelings of empathy that can often cause real-life behavioural changes in the reader or viewer — such as joining the US Air Force after watching Top Gun.

So what does all this mean for the sales process? In short, studies have reinforced that when readers or viewers “become transported into a narrative, personal change is more likely to occur.” [14] This psychological process of ‘transportation’ is therefore at the heart of what gets your prospects to buy when utilizing storyselling techniques. As touched upon, there is also evidence that the effect of fictional stories lasts much longer than non-fiction narratives such as newspaper reports, because of the way our brain stores and organizes fictional information. This ‘sleeper effect’ [15] means our prospects may act on the stories we tell them days or weeks after they first empathize with the story — making the effect even more powerful and full of potential for the marketer.

However, there is one cautionary note. Research also shows that for an audience to experience such strong empathetic effects, they must totally buy into the story we are telling. If they are only transported half-heartedly, then studies highlight that levels of empathy actually decrease. [16] This means as marketers we must completely understand our target audience and conduct thorough market research before writing our sales stories — otherwise as with other forms of advertising they will simply miss the mark.



Storyselling: A Business Perspective

“The proliferation of information in late Capitalism leads not to a ‘decline of the value of experience (but rather) to a massive process of turning information into experience, of signifiers into signifieds, through the medium of stories.” [17] Such organisational use of stories to sell brands, ways of working, lifestyles, products and services — is now commonplace amongst successful marketers.

As business expert Phil Johnson comments on Forbes.com, “the hottest trend in marketing today just might be the ancient art of storytelling.” He continues, “I’d make the case that there’s a direct link between the Internet, social networks, content marketing, and storytelling” — and Johnson concludes: “In an environment where you don’t stand a chance to win anybody’s attention without some magic, a good story might save you and your brand from oblivion. [18]

Yet, if not to save ourselves from oblivion, how do we go about actually using stories more effectively to connect with our prospects and make more sales? A great starting point for your overall approach comes from marketing expert Alexander Jutkowitz: “A content marketer has to think like a journalist about crafting a narrative and providing either a thought-provoking idea or accurate, timely information that helps people to better navigate the world. But like a public-relations professional, he or she has to think

strategically about the organization's larger goals and the audience it wants to reach. Like an advertiser, the successful content marketer has to know how to tell these stories visually and tap an emotional vein." [19]

More specifically, Phil Johnson gives us a great set of guidelines for creating compelling stories about our brand, products and services:

- "If your story does not reveal something personal and unknown about the person or brand, it's going to be boring.
- If your story does not tap into a specific emotion — whether it be fear, desire, anger, or happiness — it will not move people to action.
- If your story does not take people on a journey where there is a transformation between the beginning, middle, and the end, it's not a story." [20]

Further to this, Brandon Yanofsky at Copyblogger recommends a "protagonist, antagonist, plot and moral" [21] led approach to crafting your sales stories, while going back to Ben Settle at the same site, we see a case made for "personal, historical and 'meet the guru'" [22] type stories. All of these approaches can be highly effective, as can the "positive, empowered, hero-in-the-waiting" [23] approach highlighted by marketer Laurie Bennett in The Guardian.

Yet when it comes to writing stories for your own brand, you do really have to work harder than just creating archetypes. It all comes down to performing detailed market research, constructing an ideal avatar to communicate with, and crafting a personalised story about your company, products and services that really resonates with the people who are precisely positioned to buy into them.

This then becomes a question of transparency, as Joanna Lord writes on Entrepreneur.com: "In a lot of ways, people don't buy products anymore — they buy your business's story. One of the best things a company can do is be transparent about why it is doing what it does. My favourite model to help brands push past the 'what' and 'how' of their story and find their 'why' is Simon Sinek's Golden Circle Theory [24]. This theory focuses on 'Why do you wake up in the morning?' and 'Why are you so passionate about this?' [25]

If you're not sure how to find the 'why' of your business, Lord suggests reaching out to your customers and employees for feedback, or engaging with online communities (by Googling yourself), such as forums and social media sites where real people are discussing your brand. Furthermore, Lord also recommends extending the transparency of your brand story to your prime online real estate platforms such as your homepage, social media profiles and company blog. [26] It seems that one paragraph on the 'About us' page simply won't cut it anymore.

Another great strategy to help you articulate your brand story more effectively, is simply to look at how other people are doing it. This fantastic infographic I found on Content Bridge shows how to use storytelling techniques in creating your content:

Storytelling Techniques

How to tell an engaging and entertaining story in your content marketing pieces using best practices in storytelling.



Describe what happens at each plot point:

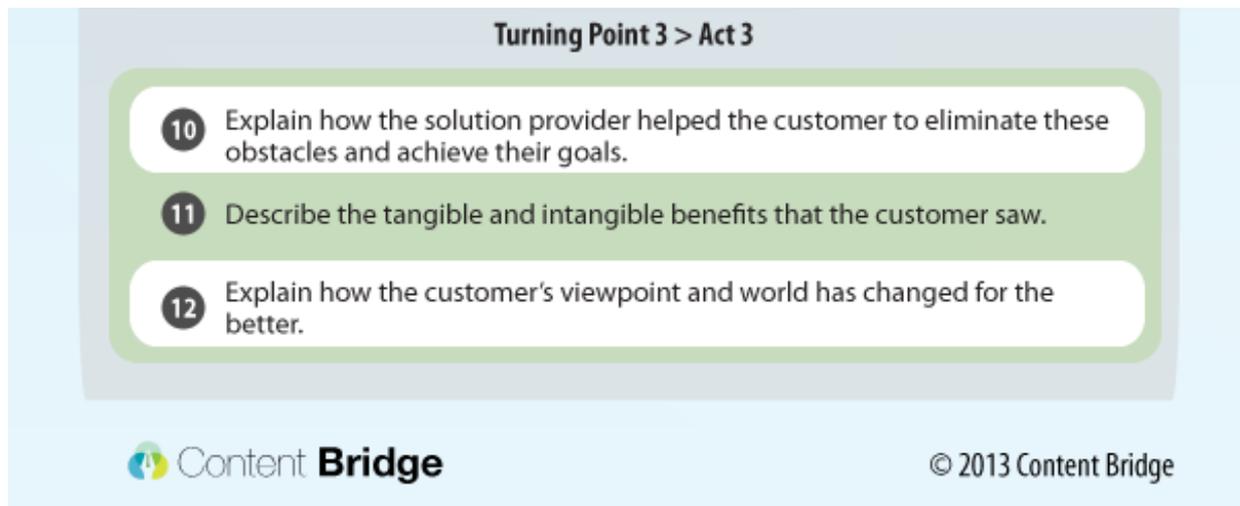
- 1 Introduce the customer (i.e. hero), time and setting of the story.
- 2 Describe the customer's mission and their goals towards that mission.
- 3 Explain what triggered the customer to take action towards these goals at this point in time. What made that day different than the day before?

Turning Point 1 > Act 2

- 4 List the obstacles that were preventing the customer from attaining their goals and how they felt.
- 5 Describe what the customer did to try to eliminate or minimize these obstacles the first time around.
- 6 Explain why the customer failed and how they felt.

Turning Point 2 > Middle of Act 2

- 7 Describe what new problems or risks the failed attempts introduced and what was now at stake.
- 8 Explain what the customer realized with regards to what kind of solution they would need.
- 9 State which solution provider (i.e. guardian) the customer turned to for help and why they chose that particular solution provider.



Infographic courtesy of: [Content Bridge](#)

Storyselling: In Conclusion

If the Charity Water example above doesn't get your creative juices flowing on how to use stories to sell a brand whilst simultaneously respecting your audience — then perhaps you're in the wrong business

Storyselling is not about using fiction to pull the wool over the eyes of your audience, it's about creating powerful empathetic realities that help open the eyes of your audience.

So if you're not making enough sales or connecting effectively with your customers, take a step back and ask yourself 'why am I so passionate about my business or brand?' If you can't answer the question, or worse still, don't believe in your brand enough to completely buy into it — then how can you expect anyone else to?

Your brand story doesn't have to be long, complicated or delivered through technologically advanced media — it merely has to be transparent and honest about what you're trying to deliver to all your stakeholders, including management, staff and customers. If you take time to craft your story from the beginning, through the middle and right to the end — you'll find that storyselling can transform your business, not only in terms of your bottom line — but also in helping you get out of bed in the morning with a smile on your face.

Tell me the story of your business and help me believe in what you do...

Sources

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[3] [Seth Godin: All Marketers Are Liars](#)

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