

Why do brands need narratives?

And how do you give a tangible narrative to an intangible product?

Simply, brands need narratives because our brains are wired to look for them. We were able to evolve from a chaos of noises, opportunities, over-stimulation and predators only because we could spot patterns among that chaos. When we can spot and understand a recurring pattern, we can make decisions which will nourish and protect us, build our family, and let us become who we should be.

But in a world where a brand can have no physical product or its 'superior offering' is often way more than we need, the narrative might need to reach higher to engage people.

What is a brand narrative?

Brand narrative isn't 'brand strategy by telling stories'. Instead, the narrative is a consistent plotting out of the brand's purpose and offerings into an intuitively understood pattern, in a way which acknowledges (explicitly or implicitly) the consumer's interests. More than a one-dimensional statement, the narrative is a complex description that aligns the brand's and the consumer's Need, Objective and Opposition.

Classic storytelling, in which there's a *conscious* conquering hero can be the vehicle which is used to plot out the brand narrative, but it is not essential. What's important is that whenever the brand communicates with the consumer, the three elements and their interaction are clear.

The 3 elements of a brand narrative

"Need" – what is the life-threatening* or regularly recurring (emotional/physical) challenge?

"Objective" – how can I answer that Need?

"Opponent" – what stops me reaching my objective/ what provoked the need in the first place?

It's the acknowledgement and arrangement of these three objects into a recognisable pattern that constitutes a brand narrative.

*(in the sense of 'changing life as we know it')

When a brand's narrative needs re-writing, go carefully.

It may or may not be true that there are only 6 basic stories, but in our work we have identified 6 distinct narrative models used by brands. Each is rooted in a particular Psychological Need and consequently each has a different Objective and its own type of Opposing Entity. The 6 different models are seen in classical literature and they pervade modern culture. For these reasons, they provide a readily understandable shorthand for brands to adopt.

The models are: the **Challenger** (eliminating the opposition), the **Foundation Model** (explaining why the brand had to be invented), the **Historical Model** (explaining how the brand was involved in the invention of the 'world'), the **Rebirth Model** (often used to bring us back to a once mighty empire), the **Creation Model** (letting us believe we are entering a new world or era) and the **Comedy Model** (where we are helped to see the ridiculousness of our situation). Problems arise when one of the key elements in a brand's narrative needs to change, perhaps because the world or the brand's category has moved on. If the brand is to remain coherent, its narrative model must change.

The signs that a brand's narrative needs updating are: a discrepancy between share of market and share of mind, a new entrant taking share in the category, or a lack of traction from a new ad campaign.

By using linguistic theory with brand insight and creative writing, a new brand narrative can be developed which once again unifies the brand's purpose with the consumer's need and its product category.

How the smartest brands of the late 20th Century recognised the need for a higher-reaching narrative.

In the late 20th Century, a product's 'What?' and 'How?' could be quickly copied. Suddenly, a brand's Why? became its distinguishing truth. If the Why? is clear, *anything* is possible (e.g. Ryanair).

But civilisation ascends Maslow's Pyramid, increasingly craving life's intangibles. The smartest brands now strive for a higher-reaching 'Why?'.

IBM acknowledges the chaos that surrounds us and now sells us the need for A Smarter Planet, not smarter computers. Google gives staff 20% of their week to develop new ideas because they're on a mission to master the world's information. Apple, the world's most valuable brand, venerates our need for creativity.

Brand Narrative is essential inside the company as well.

The worker's experience in the 20th Century has matched the consumer's: we have more choices of the work we can do, where we can do it, we can expect to have more money than we need to survive... so how do we choose where to work (or even to work at all)?

A coherent brand narrative helps us understand what we're doing in our work, and also why each of us should care about doing it. More than that, a

company's narrative, linking emotion to logic, clearly stated and often repeated, soon becomes reality for people inside and outside the company. British Airways wasn't the world's favourite airline when they first started using that phrase, but it soon became apparent what the relationship with their customer should be, and what kind of people would do well there.

How do you build a brand narrative?

1. Define the Psychological Need at the heart of your category. Why was the category invented? What higher need does it fulfil?
2. Analyse your category narrative: which narrative model is driving brands' behaviour within your category?
3. List out the possible Opposing Entities for your consumers and your category. (Knowing your narrative models helps here.)
4. Can you re-position your brand's Objective? There's normally more than one (or at least more than one way of *expressing* it.)
5. Test your new narrative by writing about it – do you break category conventions? Does that matter?

About Verbal Identity

Verbal Identity is a transformative brand strategy consultancy, specialising in brand language. Writers work alongside linguistic analysts and strategists, pursuing the magic and mechanics of language. We have worked with some of the world's most interesting brands, creating narratives for Ocado, Sky, Selfridges, Hunter Boots, Fred Perry, Christie's and Tourneau.

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