

Creating A Purpose-Told Story: The Key to Marketing and Branding

(Chapter Six of *Storynomics*)

Yusra Akhundzadah

Creating A Purpose-Told Story: The Key to Marketing and Branding

In the realm of storytelling, two distinct types emerge: purpose-told and fiction-told stories. Purpose-told stories, often found in commercials or YouTube videos, convey a key message concisely, ensuring that it is memorable. On the other hand, fiction-told stories, such as plays or films, are longer and remembered for their overarching plots and characters. While a fiction-told story accomplishes its goal after it is experienced once, a purpose-told story is retold in each engagement with the consumer as it aims to transform aesthetic pleasure into real-world action. This generates brand loyalty and repeat purchases, whereas loyalty in fiction-told stories is towards the author and the audience's anticipation for future works. Both types of stories seek to provide meaningful and emotional experiences that enrich the audience's inner lives. To achieve this, a well-crafted purpose-told story mirrors the audience's mental and emotional experiences. By connecting past experiences with future actions marketers can create purpose-told stories that ultimately motivate them to take action and become satisfied consumers. Crafting purpose-told stories diverges from crafting fiction-told stories because the objective is to prompt consumer action. This process is outlined in the following eight stages of creating a purpose-told story.

Stage One: The Three Targets

The first stage of creating a purpose-told story involves identifying the intended audience, the particular desire or issue to be addressed, and the specific action the audience should take. It is important to not only research the intended audience's demographics and characteristics but to also identify the profound emotional or hidden problems they may be experiencing. By addressing the target audiences' needs, purpose-driven stories can make a meaningful impact on their audience. Next, designing the target action entails specifying the

desired action the audience should take after engaging with the marketing story. This ensures that the story goes beyond mere entertainment, connects with the audience's underlying motivations, and inspires them to act. Ultimately, the identification of the target market, need, and action lays the foundation for purposeful storytelling that connects with the audience and drives meaningful change.

Stage Two: The Subject Matter

Stage two—preparing a story's subject matter—has three steps. The first one entails how to best address the audience's need that was identified in the initial stage. For example, Dove's marketing campaign "Real Beauty" focused on "self-criticism versus self-appreciation" to tap into the emotional struggle many individuals face regarding their self-image (McKee & Gerace, 2018, p. 81). The second step involves choosing a protagonist based on the brand's core function, which could involve capitalizing on resources, creating innovative products, or offering top-tier services. Audiences can better empathize with protagonists they can identify with, and the brand's story should uphold and strengthen the protagonist's personality. The final step is the creation of the setting: the story's location, context, and time, which can be compressed. While marketers have creative freedom, a purpose-driven story's setting is usually realistic and familiar. The flexibility of storytelling is emphasized, allowing for the compression of time and utilization of as much of the protagonist's life as necessary to convey the desired message effectively. By identifying the core value, choosing an appropriate protagonist, and creating a relatable setting, storytellers can craft narratives that resonate with their target audience and drive meaningful action.

Stage Three: The Inciting Incident

Next, stage three of creating a purpose-told story involves an event that disrupts the protagonist's life and leaves the audience wondering what will happen. This creates suspense and sets the stage for the climax. The audience should empathize with the protagonist's reaction to the incident. A great example of this is the Spanish lottery campaign called “December 21st” (McKee & Gerace, 2018, p. 88). The story features a grandmother preparing breakfast for her grandson, who is focused on his phone. When the TV announces the grandmother’s lottery number, she rushes out to find the neighbor she shared the ticket with. However, her son learns it was the previous year's drawing, becomes worried, and runs after her. This misunderstanding grabs the audience’s attention and creates an emotional connection because wanting to protect loved ones resonates with viewers. Thus, the inciting incident is a pivotal moment that evokes the audience's curiosity and empathy, setting the stage for the rest of the story and the call to action.

Stage Four: The Object of Desire

Then, stage four directs the audience’s focus toward to approaching climax. To do so, the story’s protagonist develops a goal that will return his or her life to a state of equilibrium. This “object of desire” can be an object, situation, or idea (McKee & Gerace, 2018, p. 89). The protagonist’s aim to achieve this desire becomes the driving force for his or her actions and propels the story toward its climax. To create a unique and compelling story, one must determine exactly what the protagonist wants, how it relates to the central value in the story, and how it reflects the value that is central to the brand. This alignment unifies the narrative and ensures the story has a strong, focused sense of purpose.

Stage Five: The First Action

In stage five, the protagonist begins his or her journey toward the object of desire that is established in stage four. This sets the story in motion and introduces the protagonist's initial course of action toward achieving his or her goal. To ensure the story is purposeful, the storyteller must delve into the protagonist's psyche and use his or her identity, motivations, expectations, and beliefs to anticipate what he or she wants to do and how exactly it would be carried out. For example, in the previous Spanish lottery campaign, the son performs the initial action of carrying his grandmother's jacket outside because he intends to inform and comfort her about the misunderstanding. By carefully designing the initial action, a storyteller can create an engaging yet calculated story that allows the audience to emotionally connect with the story and its purpose.

Stage Six: The First Reaction

Next, the sixth stage of a purpose-told story is when the story takes an unexpected turn, creating intrigue and suspense. The protagonist's initial action doesn't yield the expected outcome, as seen in the Spanish lottery example; the son does not explain the misunderstanding to his grandmother because the neighbor empathizes with the grandmother and suggests the son should not ruin her moment. While the unexpected response obstructs the protagonist's progress toward his or her goal, it also offers a new perspective that the protagonist uses to decide his or her ultimate action. Conflict arises when negative forces hinder the protagonist's desires, leading to choices and actions that resonate with the audience. These negative elements and surprises must be embraced in order to create an engaging story that sparks the protagonist's and audience's curiosity and drive for answers. Therefore, stage six brings surprises, conflict, and engagement to purpose-driven storytelling, creating meaningful connections and actions.

Stage Seven: Crisis Choice

In stage seven, the story reaches its climax, the point of highest dramatic intensity. The protagonist, armed with newfound knowledge, selects a new strategy to pursue his or her goal. As the protagonist takes decisive action, an eager audience wonders what will happen next. In the lottery story, the protagonists realize the day is ending and must inform the grandmother that she did not win the lottery. As the protagonist approaches the grandmother to deliver the news, the audience's question about what will happen is finally answered. The resolution of the major dramatic question carries a sense of purpose, delivering a meaningful impact to the audience. By crafting a powerful climax that reinforces the central message and purpose of the story, storytellers can leave a lasting impression and inspire their audience to take meaningful actions in their own lives.

Stage Eight: Climactic Reaction

Finally, stage eight is the culmination of the story, where balance is restored. In this stage, the protagonist's second action leads to the achievement of his or her goal. The story's ending provides audiences with the satisfaction of having their questions answered and a new understanding of how to apply the example of conflict resolution in their lives. In the lottery story, the son and neighbor collaborate to maintain the illusion that the grandmother had won the lottery. The townspeople's support emphasizes happiness and togetherness over material wealth. The story's climax provides a brief moment where the audience is in awe, and this is when the brand's logo or tagline is strategically presented. The conclusion of the story acts as a call to action, inspiring the audience to emulate the protagonist's triumph by engaging with the product or service central to the narrative. By crafting purpose-driven stories that culminate in a powerful climax, marketers can leverage the intense emotional connection to motivate their audience to further engage with the brand or message.

The Power of Purpose-Told Stories

In marketing and advertising, purpose-told stories hold immense potential because they are designed to deliver key messages and create a lasting impact on the audience. They have the unique advantage of being retold, generating brand recognition and loyalty with each exposure. Purpose-driven stories follow a structured approach, from identifying the target market, need, and action, to shaping the subject matter, crafting the inciting incident, highlighting the object of desire, and driving the story toward its climax and resolution. However, a marketing story can be powerful without explicitly going through all eight stages of story design. When a story is told exceptionally, audiences can fill in the gaps, even with minimal words or imagery. With their ability to resonate deeply and prompt real-world action, purpose-told stories have become a powerful tool in the marketer's arsenal, enabling brands to foster meaningful relationships with their audience, effectively.

Reference

McKee, R. & Gerace, T. (2018). *Storynomics: Story-driven marketing in a post-advertising world*. NY: Hachette Book Group.