

What we know about storytelling strategies

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Provides guidance and reading on storytelling strategies, or the fashioning of events into a meaningful, relatable story for customers to identify with and remember.

Storytelling is designed to create relationships and gently persuade an audience into suspending their cynicism, to 'buy in' to an emotion or point of view. A good story has character, plot and resolution. It will also mirror the experiences and emotions of the audience in order to engage them. Brand stories will focus on the product, the vision or the user.

Definition

Storytelling as a creative approach involves following the structure of traditional stories – it needs characters, a plot and a resolution. Storytelling is often used as a way to drive emotional appeal. More broadly, brand storytelling is the act of building stories around a brand.

Key insights

1. Digital and technology trends are creating new opportunities for immersive storytelling

As purpose and authenticity gain traction, the art of storytelling – to engage, delight, inform and entertain – is more important than ever for brands who want to connect with consumers with communication that is relevant and evokes emotion. Brands have had to find more innovative and creative ways to tell stories because of global lockdowns, restrictions and new expectations of digital engagement. But at the same time, digital and technology trends are creating new opportunities for interactive, immersive storytelling, whether via new virtual reality spaces like the metaverse or storytelling tools such as virtual production, collaborative interactive events, VR, AR, gaming technology and NFTs. Telling stories in an immersive environment can create multi-sensory, hands-

on interaction which can be easier to identify with, more memorable and ultimately more effective. Some brands are already exploring these opportunities by placing the viewer at the centre of the story:

- BMW Joytopia, a virtual environment, was created for Munich IAA 2021, inviting audiences to explore BMW's sustainability story of a circular future as their own personal avatar.
- Warner Bros. launched an experience in Roblox to promote In The Heights – a virtual model of the Washington Heights neighbourhood where the film is set.
- To celebrate its founder's 200th birthday, Louis Vuitton tapped into the worlds of gaming and NFTs with a mobile game called 200 Anecdotes where players guide an avatar through the founder's journey from rags-to-riches and collect 30 NFTs.

VR in particular enables opportunities for more immersive storytelling thanks to seamless control and interaction with game characters through simple physical imitation which creates a new era of game realism. Brands should, therefore, explore new ways to bring to life compelling brand narratives that engage and involve players on both intellectual and emotional levels, making them feel naturally and realistically connected to the virtual world and invested in the brand experience e.g. as KFC has done with its "The Hard Way" experience.

Read more in: [The convergence of gaming and virtual reality and how it will shape storytelling for brands in 2024](#) and [Purpose, the metaverse and the next evolution of brand storytelling](#)

2. Storytelling is an 'edutainment' tool to drive behaviour change

Getting behaviour change messages to grab people's attention can be a real challenge for marketers – and without it, such messages have no chance of being effective. However, tapping into people's craving for quality entertainment, well-crafted educational entertainment can be a powerful and cost-effective tool for generating positive long-term behaviour change. 'Edutainment' is content that uses the strengths of entertainment to educate, reducing the resistance to advice and making audiences more likely to notice and pay attention. Storytelling sits at one end of the edutainment spectrum. It helps people understand or learn about new concepts through its constituent parts. The beginning, middle, and end structure of a narrative show how consequences unfold by linking cause and effect. Stories also have characters who people empathise with and experience events alongside. Stories act as a safety net, enabling people to imagine and explore different worlds and viewpoints without any personal consequences. In this way, when people are engrossed in a great story, they can be introduced to new ideas, norms and behaviours that carry over into their lives. Netflix's *Sex Education* is an example; as is, in the commercial world, UK Network Rail's 18 Trespass campaign - a 30-minute teenage drama about the dangers and consequences of trespass on the railways, which reached more than 7 million views.

Read more in: [How entertainment can be used to improve behaviour change outcomes](#)

3. Storytelling is a top creative strategy for effective communication, especially brand-building campaigns

WARC's 2020 Health of Creativity report – an analysis of the most awarded ideas from 2015-18 looking at campaigns awarded for both creativity and effectiveness – found that **more than a quarter (26%) of the ideas used storytelling as a creative strategy**, the third most used strategy. A **major study of creative effectiveness** has analysed and compared a total of 4,863 effectiveness award entrants and winners from 2011 through 2019, from every major market in the world. It introduces a new framework – The Creative

Effectiveness Ladder, which identifies the six main types of effects that creative marketing produces, setting them in a hierarchy of levels from least to most commercially impactful. Storytelling is one of the top three creative strategies used at all levels of the Ladder bar one (creating a short-term sales spike). Storytelling has proven to be especially effective for one type of campaign identified on the Ladder – those designed to build brand health. [2021 Creative Effectiveness Lions winners](#) such as Pernod Ricard's [The time we have left](#) showed how emotionally relevant narratives can create meaningful brand connections. Despite the subject matter being quite melancholy, the execution showed the warmth of human interactions – which is a successful tool to drive memory response – with the product woven into the narrative.

Read more in: [Great stories build brands](#), [Over half of award-winning ideas use emotion as creative strategy](#) and [The effectiveness code](#)

4. Well-presented facts and numbers can help create persuasive stories

Facts and data have the potential to make stories more compelling but need to be used with caution. It's human nature that the more information that is used to change minds or prompt action, the more people resist. Using facts and data as the rational underpinning of a story is about the judicious use of a small number of well-chosen, killer points to build empathy with the audience. Stories need to be simple, use only facts and data relevant to the purpose of the story, demonstrate understanding of the audience and speak to them on-the-level, in a human way.

For example, Big Data can be used to tell stories that form deep connections with audiences. UK pay-TV brand BT Sport needed to place itself into footballing culture and conversation and start a debate on social media that would spread organically into every other channel. The brand used Opta sports data, modelled analysis by Squawka and Google Cloud's platform to write a script predicting the outcomes of the entire 2019/20 Premier League football season using AI before releasing it to pundits, players, influencers, journalists and the nation. The campaign, called 'Unscripted', was awarded the Grand Prix at the 2020 Data and Marketing Association Effectiveness Awards. It earned media worth £1.7m and, most importantly, delivered 30% more subscriptions to BT Sport than the previous season, on a fraction of the budget.

Read more in: [How to tell stories using data and statistics](#) and [BT Sport: Unscripted](#)

5. Video ads that use creative elements associated with storytelling perform better

Research firm System 1 has previously found that in relation to TV ads, those which use defined characters, locations and storylines, which feed the 'right brain', deliver the strongest consumer attention and emotion. The firm's analysis of online video used in campaigns that were case studies in the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) database found that they tended to skew towards the same 'right brain' elements and deliver more, very large business effects e.g. sales, market share and profit effects. Furthermore, testing on Facebook and YouTube also found that 'right-brained' ads tended to generate more attention, emotional response and recall. So, across the most common types of video ads, using elements of storytelling such as character, place and storyline is more effective than more factual, non-narrative ads. These principles are broadly applicable across many creative challenges such as [sponsorship](#), [sustainability](#) or occasion advertising e.g. [Ramadan](#) and the [Super Bowl](#).

Read more in: [Orlando Wood unlocks the secrets of effectiveness for online video advertising](#)

6. Storytelling can help public service advertisers elicit audience empathy

Research looked at two ads for a fictitious non-profit that helped domestic violence victims to test the strength of different types of appeals. One of the ads used a non-narrative approach, and informed participants about the definition of intimate partner violence, the impact on the victim, and statistics about this problem in the US. The narrative ad, by contrast, told the fictional story of a character named “Susan”, who was 28 years old, living in Seattle, and was abused by her husband. The study found that using a personal account of abuse was more impactful than hard facts because it elicited greater empathy in the viewer.

Read more in: [The role of empathy and efficacy in public service announcements: Using narratives to induce bystander intervention in domestic violence](#)

7. Storytelling is most often used for big occasion advertising

According to Kantar research, eight out of ten UK Christmas ads use a story, as opposed to just four in ten that use stories the rest of the year. This can be a story with epic production values that aims to capture hearts and minds and create distinctiveness, such as the successful **John Lewis** campaign. Equally a simpler, smaller-scale approach can be just as effective if it creates emotional resonance through realistic and accessible stories. Looking at how best to use storytelling at Christmas – or other times of the year – Kantar advises brands to:

- Be distinctive through a story that generates enjoyment to get attention and emotional affinity to position the brand positively
- Be well branded through integration into the story or use of brand cues to ensure the ad is associated with the brand in the consumer’s memory
- Be meaningful so that the advertising will contribute to building long-term equity beyond the Christmas season
- Be authentic to what the brand does

Read more in: [The secrets of UK Christmas advertising success, Why Kevin the Carrot is a great Christmas ad](#) and [How a strong Christmas campaign can build brand salience throughout the year](#)

8. Storytelling TV ads are more likely to be remembered and change behaviour

A study of TV ads, using neuroscientific research data, by Indian drinks giant Tata Global Beverages found that storytelling ads can be more efficiently processed than non-storytelling ones, as they tend to follow a previously experienced structure. This results in higher engagement, cut-through and emotional connection that lead to believability and persuasion – showing that storytelling ads are more likely to be embedded in memory and create future behaviour change. From an executional point of view, ads with one or two scenes and two or three main characters performed best. Too many scenes and characters are difficult to process and cause disengagement, while having only one character makes it difficult to show conflict. Ads that used the story archetype “overcoming the monster” were twice as effective as other archetypes as it enabled the brand/product to be the hero in a problem-solution format.

Read more in: [Measuring the impact of storytelling on the consumer’s brain](#)

9. Cultural nuances are particularly relevant for effective brand storytelling in APAC markets

Storytelling for brands holds a special significance for APAC audiences given the legacy of storytelling in Asia. In this region, the future of brands depends on storytelling. Seven trends have been identified which brands looking to APAC markets should consider as they develop their stories.

- Data: culturally-nuanced, data-driven insights need to be behind the story
- Culture: localisation and personalisation of story content are essential
- Native platforms: APAC consumers would rather be on unpopular social platforms consuming niche, tailored content than consuming generic content on globally popular platforms
- Voice: Micro-influencers are more influential than celebrities
- Delivery: As early adopters of advanced technology, APAC consumers look for more than showmanship when technology is deployed. The key is to use the right technology for the message
- Distribution: There is a strong affinity for earned media in the region
- Balance: The brand needs to be plugged in and the message clearly delivered by the story

Read more in: [Seven trends defining effective storytelling in Asia](#)

10. Animation can bring storytelling to life to express brand value and build market share

Animated characters and mascots are nothing new in advertising as a way to capture attention and sell product. It is now however being used more strategically to express brand value, build market share and entertain fickle consumers. It's also a great way to simplify complicated subjects. Animation is also seen as an antidote for short attention spans. It can mix emotional and pragmatic messages and touch consumers' hearts, at a cost far less than live-action advertising. Animation is a crucial part of computing giant IBM's marketing strategy, featuring in its Tumblr platform as well as in TV commercials as it can help communicate some of its intangible differentiators. For it to succeed, the animation must be relevant to the brand's customers and prospects.

Read more in: [Bringing storytelling to life: Animation advertising helps brands cut through the clutter in an entertaining way](#)

11. Storytelling can be used for effective content marketing in the B2B arena

In the B2B environment, achieving cut-through in crowded marketplaces can be particularly difficult. By developing story-driven content that resonates with the customer base brands can increase engagement and sales. Brands need to: identify a theme, choose central characters, personalise the story to reflect the audience, understand the moral of the story and create a story-telling culture within the business. B2B brands such as Deloitte, John Deere, GE and Lincoln Electric have all adopted such an approach.

Read more in: [Story time for B2B brands: Storytelling is a powerful way to create effective content marketing and generate sales](#)

12. Using behavioural economics can enhance the storytelling narrative

Wrigley Extra, the gum brand owned by Mars, turned around twenty-seven periods of declining sales through the use of creative storytelling based around the power of sharing and happiness. Using behavioural economics enabled the brand to shift from a technique of persuasive selling around brand loyalty towards one of storytelling.

Read more in: [How Mars used behavioral economics to revive a near-dead brand](#)

More on this topic

WARC Topic page: [Storytelling](#)

WARC Case studies: [Storytelling](#)

WARC Evidence: [What types of creativity work best?](#)

Further reading

[EFF BOMB: Cadbury returns to its core](#)

[Creative Impact Unpacked: Can purpose rediscover its purpose?](#)

[Boots focuses on joy and LGBTQ+ authenticity for Christmas](#)

[Brand in action: ZEE sees Indian festivals as key vehicles for rich storytelling](#)

[The best of the 2023 AME Awards: Putting human spaces at the heart of effective advertising](#)

[How brand ads can use behavioral science to help their customers address the climate crisis](#)

[Best practices for creating attention-grabbing ads on TikTok](#)

[Searching for the Angel's Cocktail: How storytelling in political campaigns beats rationality, and what that reveals about connecting with consumers](#)

[Understanding the creativity of Cannes winners](#)

[Brands disrupting Christmas 2022: Part 1](#)

[Thoughtful storytelling is the ultimate gift in 2022's US holiday ads](#)

[How Audible Australia transformed the book club experience with Twitch](#)

[Why B2B must embrace diverse and inclusive storytelling](#)

[Tapping into culture: Nuanced narratives for Pride storytelling in Asia](#)

[Spotlight India: DTC and branding: Narrating a new consumerism story](#)

[Capturing consumer attention with 1.7-second storytelling](#)

[Investigating the effects of narrative advertising in a real-life setting](#)

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