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## The Angle

### The Power of Telling A Good Brand Story

By Jennifer Harrington

About five years ago, while most of us were all wiping bits and pieces of the high tech bubble from our faces, my mother decided to leave the world of business and apply her skills to pursuing her passion: writing. At the time this seemed a crazy departure from all that she knew. But as I have watched her explore writing and translate many of her memories and experiences into prose, I gained a much deeper appreciation for the power of a good story and its unique ability to hold a more meaningful place in our increasingly cluttered minds. The acclaimed screenwriting coach and luminary on storytelling, Robert McKee, put it well when he said: "Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact."

Likewise, clear and articulate brand stories have become the currency of building profitable relationships in a very cluttered marketplace. We live in a world without a lot of white space. It rings particularly true when we view ads in the elevator, hear news about US Airways selling sponsorships of its motion sickness bags, see Dole selling branded fruit, or witness guerilla tactics that irresponsibly leverage space under bridges and in train stations.

The fact of the matter is that brands live wherever there is interaction with the market whether through individuals, experience or communications. The goal for most marketing organizations is to find a way to capitalize on these interactions by building a powerful and differentiating story and telling it consistently. Good stories should be based on a solid value proposition and aligned with a company's identity (who you are) and positioning (how you want to be perceived). That said, there is some magic to the process and good brand stories walk the line between strategy and creative.

Keeping all of this in mind, there are six tenets to building a good brand story that should serve as guideposts in the process.

#### 1. Begins with the end in mind.

Unlike a novel, brand stories should tie back to business goals and objectives. It's important to ask yourself what you're trying to accomplish and how you are going to track success against the goal. What do you want the market to do once they hear and understand your story? How do you want to be perceived?

#### 2. Speaks directly to the market.

Brand stories that speak squarely to the market are the most compelling and memorable. There probably aren't a lot of people who didn't understand the importance of insurance in planning for the unexpected after watching John Hancock's "Real Life. Real Answers." campaign over the years. We all relate to different characters in different ways, but the message comes through loud and clear. Before you get started take a step back and ask yourself who you are trying to talk to, what are their specific needs, and what do you know about them that you can incorporate into the message.

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### 3. Compelling and believable.

Stories tap into emotions and the things that motivate people. They exploit real life situations which are not always rosy, rational, or tension-free. There are good guys and bad guys. They bare witness to heroes and miracles as well as villains and tragedy. Sound too dramatic? Who could forget more than two decades later the impact of Apple's 1984 campaign: IBM, the resident dictator/villain, was thrown into stark contrast with Apple and its belief that technology should be put into the hands of the everyday person. This story is one that has been told in a compelling way right through to today with the launch of the new iPhone.

### 4. Based on fact.

Good marketing is not fiction, or shouldn't be. What are the proof points that support your story? If you claim you build a better mousetrap, then you need to be prepared to prove it. This is increasingly harder for service brands as the facts are not typically tied to better, faster, cheaper but rather satisfied clients, a better outcome, or the benefit of targeted expertise for a particular situation.

### 5. Competitively distinct and not easily copied.

What are the facts and proof points unique to your organization? For many service brands testimonials and case studies can provide the perfect opportunity to own something unique. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts has an interesting campaign running now in which the protagonist, Isabel Perez, retells her battle with breast cancer and the importance of a partner like Blue Cross in helping her to overcome the challenges of the healthcare system and the disease. Interestingly, we only get a glimpse of the story through their broadcast campaign and need to visit the web to find out if Isabel won the battle — along the way we learn more about Blue Cross and the value of a strong HMO partner

### 6. Can be translated into tools of the trade.

At the end of the day, brand stories need to drive people to action through communications. Powerful brand communications leverage all of the tools at their disposal — not just verbal — but also visual. On the web, through advertising, direct response, and in person. Good stories should come to life through communications and predispose or prompt some action like adding a company to one's "Top 3" list or visiting a website for more information. These are measurable metrics and they are critical in evaluating the power of the story and the success of your efforts.

Succinctly stated, a brand story should state who you are, what you do, and how you deliver value in a unique or better way. It should also convey your personality and give the market a sense of how you behave and respond to the challenges of your industry, your market and the world.

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