

Communal Storytelling

BY GREG ISZLER

THE MARS AGENCY

Any of us who had to take an advertising or marketing course in college know Apple's '1984' Super Bowl commercial well. It's been touted the greatest television commercial 'of all time.' Those were the good ol' days, pre-1995 or so, when the success of a brand could be as simple as a top-notch television commercial. Brands told us what to believe, and we often chose to believe them.

Today, a great ad serves as only a tiny piece of an intricate puzzle that makes up what we now consider to be the strongest consumer brands; those that have reached the Mecca of branding and have become household names with an ultra-loyal following.

Brand storytelling has evolved from a thought-leading idea to a delicate balancing act between a brand's identity and the way in which consumers are encouraged to participate in the continuous development of that identity. Brands are now defined by the dozens, sometimes even hundreds, of micro-interactions that play out over the course of a consumer's journey—some driven by the brand, some by the consumer, and some by independent market influencers.

Harnessing the full power and potential of this collection of micro-interactions requires a communal approach to brand storytelling *and* a new set of skills from brands: persona building, story mapping, and story hosting. Communal storytelling is the full recognition that it is *both* the brand's vision and the consumer's experience that determine the brand's ultimate story in the marketplace. How did we get here?

TWO DECADES OF STORYTELLING EVOLUTION

In the early '90s, Hal Riney & Partners was at the apex of brand storytelling—crafting romantic, earnest brand tales for the likes of Saturn and Bartles & Jaymes that appealed to consumers' emotions, rather than simply spouting product benefits.

So rare was this ability to make true connections with consumers through storytelling that Coca-Cola, at around the same time, did the unheard of and hired Creative Artists Agency to develop its advertising campaigns. Coke felt that when it came to brand storytelling, traditional agency capabilities paled in comparison to what Hollywood and the entertainment industry innately understood and consistently delivered. By that time, however, the brand storytelling model was already evolving into its next era.

It's clear Nike co-founder Phil Knight was ahead of his time when he explained in an interview with the *Harvard Business Review* that focusing on your product was a start, but simply wasn't enough to connect with your customers. He knew even then just how important it was to become involved with your consumers by living among them, to intimately understand what is driving them and their relationship with the brand.

This was in 1992, as the industry began to realize ad campaigns alone were not enough to drive a brand forward. Nike led the way in taking storytelling to that next level.

The brand still had a voice, but also became a great listener, and used its customers' stories to convince others. Nike re-focused on co-authoring just in time for another monumental shift in brand storytelling.

Micro-interactions build more powerful brand connections.

THE DIGITAL AGE MAKES ITS MARK

By the middle of the '90s, the growth in high-speed broadband Internet transformed the concept of brand storytelling with early website experiences like Amazon, Craigslist, Google, *The New York Times* and Dell. In the digital age, information on any imaginable topic became available to the masses on-demand, and often not from the brands themselves. The need to turn to the brand for company and product information had been virtually eliminated, and suddenly the brand's role in storytelling had to change. To provide value to consumers, a new way of thinking about how brands came to life in the new environment was required. Brands had to create a different type of content and weave more complex stories.

Then, in the new Millennium, fueled by the adoption of social media, 'digital storytelling' rapidly became 'community storytelling.' For many brands, the transition proved to be a tumultuous chapter in their brand-building efforts. The birth of online-reviews, public forums, blogger platforms and social networks like Facebook, threatened to take control of the brand story away from brands and place it in the hands of consumers. Terms like 'user-generated content' and 'crowdsourcing' became the focal point of brainstorming sessions as marketers and advertisers tried to figure out what role the consumer should now play in their story.

In some instances, the online community co-authoring the brand story added authenticity and credibility. Third-party validation and word-of-mouth have been, and always will be, the strongest forms of motivation for a consumer to act. Doritos' inaugural 'Crash the Super Bowl' contest was a perfect example. Consumers were invited to create their own ad for their chance to have it aired during the Super Bowl. According to an IPRA press release in 2007, the effort led to a 12 percent lift in sales, and nearly one-million consumers visited the contest website to participate, either through submitting a video or voting.

Meanwhile, some of the brands that struggled with traditional storytelling in the '90s adopted community storytelling as an easier solution. While the siren call of crowd-sourced branding was tempting, too often the result was further erosion of

the core brand equity. Without first understanding the brand's true purpose, ceding that control entirely to the community was a recipe for disaster. Brands lost their true north, their consistency, and for many, their meaning in the marketplace.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

Fast-forward to today, and one thing is certain: no one doubts the importance of brand storytelling. It is the challenges that the process creates in a fast-paced, digitally advanced and noisy shopper ecosystem that is cause for debate. Brands have to navigate consumer scrutiny while maintaining their authentic passion for who they are.

To do so, they must possess a detailed understanding of how they are perceived in the marketplace and then figure out how to influence that perception, knowing they do not have complete control. User-generated content today is just one of countless types of micro-interactions that define a brand.

The transition from the 'old way' of storytelling to the present era of communal storytelling does not necessarily mean the goal of a brand story has changed, but it does mean there's been a shift in the method of telling it.

Some brands have spent decades developing their identity, and the challenge is now in how they should guide their narrative for years to come. Today, brands are learning as much about themselves and their future path from consumers as they ever did from their internal visionaries and agency leaders.

In an era where brands have been forced to relinquish control of their story, the focus now needs to be on how to set the perfect stage for valuable and resonant communal brand experiences. There are three key elements of a successful communal storytelling process.

Persona Building. Everyone has been told at some point that, no matter how hard you try, you will not be able to make everyone happy. In our society, we're inundated with the message that it's important to remain true to who we are—not a bad piece of advice. The same is true for brands. With opinions and comments flowing in from hundreds of sources on a daily basis, it's not difficult to see how a brand

could be caught up trying to appease a ‘noisy’ consumer base. Thus, the first step in managing your brand story within a more communal era is to establish the brand’s persona firmly throughout the organization.

A brand persona is a blueprint for how the brand presents itself in the marketplace. What are all of the potential dimensions to which consumers might be exposed when interacting with the brand? What is the brand voice? How does it reach out? Does it have a sense of humor (what kind)? How does it handle criticism? Praise? Where does it go for inspiration? How does it behave one-on-one? In social settings? Is it introspective or outgoing? Perhaps most important, what motivates it to act? What is the brand’s mission?

Simon Sinek’s 2009 TED talk on company/brand mission has garnered 23 million views and growing. Even today, too many brands focus on the *how* of what they do and lose sight of the bullseye, the golden circle, the *why*. Sinek explains that to inspire action you need to identify a core purpose, cause or belief—pinpoint the very reason your brand exists. What truly motivates your team internally each and every day also makes your brand more deeply relevant to your target consumer.

Ultimately, effective brand storytelling is reliant on the richness of your brand persona, the dimensions you bring to life in every interaction, and the experiences you create with your customers and your community. It also depends on your ability to keep the brand vibrant, fresh, and meaningful to your coveted customer base.

Tom’s of Maine found a way to do that in a campaign initiative during Earth Month this past year. The Tom’s of Maine team found that there were key micro-interactions where their brand target, moms, connected on the topic of Earth Month most often with their children in mind. It was an opportunity for the brand to play a more meaningful role in those interactions.

The brand rolled out its #StartYoungLiveGreen campaign to remind moms of the importance of saving the planet for our future generations through sustainable operations, natural products and even simple actions each and every one of us can take in our daily lives. The brand reminded moms of its commitment to the environment by providing education on how Tom’s products are made. It worked with recycling partners to ensure that when moms and their kids did a spring cleanup of the toy room, the toys didn’t end up in landfills.

Family oriented up-cycling activities at home, like turning empty deodorant containers into sidewalk chalk, became brand-created micro-interactions between moms and their children that, in turn, strengthened brand relationships and increased purchase intent. The brand was able to show its commitment through its actions, but also provide value to consumers through education and ideas on how they could implement green living in their lives.

Story Mapping. Activating your brand persona in the market requires you to understand every step your customers take along their brand experience journey. Unfortunately, there is no shortcut for this stage. Brands need to do the analysis and field work necessary to map the experiences, and qualify the influence potential that exists within each interaction. As Phil Knight and Nike discovered more than two decades ago, to understand the journey, you must spend time in the market with your consumers. Invest in research. Encourage your leaders to get out from behind their desks and walk with their shoppers—not with their teams: their *shoppers*. Ask tough questions. Probe for your shoppers’ true motivations. What barriers hold them back? How do they progress from one stage to another during their journey?

Armed with first-hand knowledge of your consumers’ behavior, you can take an objective view of the journey and begin identifying which interactions might be holding the brand back or have potential for competitive leaps. You will not be able to affect every micro-interaction, nor will you have the resources to do so. The ability to identify the most influential points of interaction along the journey is what arms your brand with its greatest points of leverage.

The fitness app Strava is an interesting metaphor for story mapping. Strava has empowered a community of nearly eight-million runners and cyclists worldwide to create and share routes. At times the maps follow accepted, logical paths (as is often the expectation with brand journeys). However, more often than not, the individual runners and cyclists use personal preferences and motivations to create their own courses through the very same areas. Consider, for a moment, the ‘Strava’ version of your shoppers’ path-to-purchase and advocacy, and how and why the paths they follow may differ.

While you or others within your organization may feel like they have a solid grasp on your customer’s journey, it’s far more likely that there

are hidden surprises. Spend the necessary time to dig into the specific motivators and barriers within each key interaction that threaten to slow (or, ideally, accelerate) a consumer's path to your brand. Once you've isolated the interactions with the greatest potential for impact, it's time to determine how best to deliver the experience at each touchpoint.

Story Hosting. Story hosting is about taking those key interactions and setting the stage for the most positive, relevant, memorable and motivating experiences possible. In Forrester's *The Brand Experience Playbook for 2015*, a "shift from a company-centric approach of managing a brand as an asset to a customer-centric one of creating a resonant brand experience," is highlighted. When you host a party, you don't necessarily tell guests how to spend their time. However, based on the people you've invited, you plan the event with as much detail as possible to ensure they will have a great time while they're there. Brands should keep the same concept in mind.

Some interactions require a far lighter touch than others, thus the term 'story hosting.' Based on the nature of the interaction, the brand may take full responsibility for designing and participating in the entire experience; simply hosting an environment for like-minds to meet around the brand; or providing more passive support by entering the conversation only when called upon. It is up to the brand (as dictated by the brand persona) to host the most productive interactions possible. Each experience in which consumers feel they have received value will move them one step closer to a purchase.

THE BRAND IMPLICATIONS

Brand storytelling will happen whether your brand is involved or not. Your ability to influence the story relies almost entirely on your ability to immerse yourself in your consumers' experiences with your brand, accurately identify the micro-interactions, and understand the motivators and barriers at each. Brands that are unwilling to make that knowledge investment will come across as out of touch and inauthentic in the marketplace. They will cede influence (and brand meaning) to the community, reduce opportunities for engagement, and erode brand revenue and/or share. It is far better to establish the persona clearly, map your brand story, and host the key interactions required to fuel sustainable marketplace momentum.

Additionally, the siloed consumer research initiatives that many organizations (brands and agencies alike) have continued to fund are distracting at best and misleading at worst. The new era of brand storytelling—and brand building—requires a holistic view of the marketplace and of the full spectrum of purchase drivers—and barriers—in play.

Context is critical. While one recent piece of research revealed above-average satisfaction ratings with a brand's customer-service center (perhaps suggesting an enhanced brand story), a separate study revealed increasing dissatisfaction with the brand overall. One reason: Pleasant as they were, the customer-service calls were considered an avoidable annoyance by shoppers. Ensure that your research investments are capturing both the breadth and depth of the brand experience.

WHAT WILL THE FUTURE BRING?

A brand's relevance is no longer driven by landmark events, but by accumulated micro-interactions. It is necessary to earn and re-earn consumer loyalty through fostering vibrant and meaningful communities. In a world of limitless choices and technologies advancing at record speeds, it's hard to say exactly what the future will bring. One thing we know for certain, however, is that brands must continue to recalibrate to remain in tune with their consumers.

Rapid change always comes with challenges, and the brands that overcome those challenges will remain true to their brand persona. Regardless of new-age advancements like the Internet of Things, the key to remaining relevant will continue to be the stories you enable or host during the journey's most influential micro-interactions. Be cognizant of constant change in emerging environments and be prepared to refine your hosting approach in accordance with the latest consumer expectations. When you host an experience that's authentic, you create the space for consumers to connect deeply with your brand. ■



GREG ISZLER (iszlerg@themarsagency.com) leads the integrated planning practice for **The Mars Agency**. He previously held executive strategy roles with Organic and Doner, working with brands including Hilton Worldwide, Kimberly-Clark, and Coca-Cola.