

Gather 'Round

Dale Carnegie once said: “When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but creatures of emotion.” As emotional beings, we are wired to remember stories more than data points or images. In fact, a good, descriptive story has the ability to light up the brain with the same power as a live experience.

So, it's no wonder that in our data-overloaded society, brands have turned to storytelling to engage consumers and convert them into believers, users and advocates. Tom's shoes is an example of how a brand story inspires loyalty. Their 'one-for-one' story clearly differentiates Tom's among competitors by letting consumers contribute to its mission of donating a pair of shoes to someone in need with every purchase.

However, with the average adult exposed to 5,000 advertising messages per day, having a good story doesn't guarantee success. For a brand's story to motivate a purchase, it must establish meaningful connection with its audience *and* contextual relevance across the path-to-purchase.

Stories grounded in meaningful connections help brands outpace their competition. The best product stories are snapshots of a world improved by using the product or service. A study of 50,000 global brands by Millward Brown and former Procter & Gamble marketing chief Jim Stengel found that the 50 fastest-growing brands were built on stories rooted in one of five “life improvement values.”

Whether challenger brands or market leaders, these brands grew at least three times faster than their competitors. What were the meaningful values and storied brands they helped grow? Social improvement (Seventh Generation, Method); fostering joy (Lindt, Zappos); establishing social connections (Coke, Starbucks); enabling exploration (Amazon, Red Bull); and evoking pride (Mercedes Benz, Jack Daniels). In all of these stories, the brand experience helped cultivate a better world.

Consider Jack Daniels: All of its marketing efforts celebrate individuals who make the world better through a unique approach to their craft. As conveyed in one of its print ads: “They do things their own way, and take pride in the quality of their craft... because

that's how Jack Daniels makes their whiskey.”

Jack Daniels' barrel-crafted point-of-difference unfolds through its sponsorships of seasoned musicians, bull riders and barbeque chefs. A blog touts 'best of craft' products and speaks to the pride Jack Daniels himself felt in a whiskey he honed more than one hundred years ago.

Displays and signage depict the product sitting on a one-of-a-kind, crafted barrel. Even licenses drive home the crafted flavor experience. No matter the environment or channel, every touchpoint establishes a bridge between people who take pride in their craft and the brand promise of flavor, bringing the Jack Daniels story to life.

Create relevance by putting the creative in context. While the story must reinforce the brand promise, the activation needs flexibility to ensure the contextual relevance of communication along the purchase journey.

As action goals change at each touchpoint, creative and message priorities should evolve, as well: *What are we asking the consumer to do at this moment... and then the next moment?* Asking this question (over and over) maximizes relevance and keeps brands from defaulting to a campaign of 'matching luggage,' in which the images are consistent and the experience doesn't change with the circumstances.

Solve for complexity with clarity. What happens when partners are brought into the story? At the shopper level, sister brands of a common manufacturer often promote together to leverage scale and efficiencies. Manufacturers will also promote jointly to gain efficiencies and provide turnkey solutions.

Complicating matters, retailers require that partnership solutions reinforce their unique brand story. Borrowing from the insights in the Stengel study, a partnership story should also be rooted in a common, life-improving solution. Like a novel whose characters follow different plot lines until they converge, a partner story must find contextual common ground that supports the equities of each partner. The challenge — and opportunity — is communicating the partner solution clearly and with relevance at each point in the shopper journey.

The brand message must pivot along the path-to-purchase.

BRINGING A PARTNERSHIP STORY TO LIFE

“Gather ’Round the Grill” is a partnership story that illustrates how to pivot the message along the purchase journey. When Tyson Foods acquired The Hillshire Brands Company, it had so many products for a barbecue—from fresh meat and poultry to hot dogs and sausage to desserts—that it made sense to bring them together under a single grilling narrative. Tyson tapped into the ‘life-improving value of social connection’ with the story that grilling creates occasions that bring families and friends together all year long—not just during summer.

Sister brands and external partners, including six separate partners, joined to tell a barbecue story that engaged the shopper along the path-to-purchase. Understanding the purchase journey enabled Tyson to engage the shopper at key points of influence while the promise of social connection added resonance.

When planning a barbecue, shoppers search online for inspiration from recipes, music playlists, activities and invitations. Gather ’Round tapped into the search for inspiration with an online hub and blogger outreach program designed to tell the story that grilling is a year ’round entertainment choice.

An online hub for grilling essentials served up a host of grilling recipes, family activities, money-saving offers and virtual invitations. Recipe content—organized and searchable by protein, prep time, grilling occasion/event, and flavor profiles—offered a mix of standard recipes. Interactive multi-media content featured grilling tips, advice and tutorials. Spotify, a media partner, powered a music playlist. Retailer-specific branded landing pages helped build content awareness and support the savings offer.

Bloggers were recruited to create year ’round content, highlighting a Gather ’Round night with the family, as well as share grilling recipes. Male and female bloggers with ability to tap into niche categories (e.g., Hispanic) and select bloggers based on retailer affinity/proximity ensured relevance across a wide range of consumers. They shared personal grilling experiences and multi-media recipe tutorials to promote the rewards program and disseminate offers in a unique and relevant way to their followers.

Digital media across mobile, search, display ads

and social-media delivered contextually relevant Gather ’Round messaging that pivoted based on reader interests, demographics, behavioral affinity, weather, geography, purchase history and past media engagement.

At retail, Gather ’Round signage cross-promoted brands to build baskets. A cross-category Gather ’Round rewards program allowed shoppers to accrue points for rewards (grilling tools, utensils, grill covers, serving trays, etc.) by sharing a photo of their receipt for qualifying partner products via mobile. Additionally, higher-value coupons were used to capture mobile IDs to re-message shoppers for future purchases.

A presence across high-indexing social channels (Pinterest, YouTube, Facebook) supported the cross-brand grilling story, inviting shoppers to share their own grilling stories by posting content in exchange for retailer-specific, branded offers. A cross-link to individual Hillshire/Tyson brand pages provided further incentives to keep the relationship going.

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Brand storytelling is a powerful thing. Done right, it transforms products from brand purchases to lifestyle solutions by tapping into life-improving values and leveraging key points of influence along the purchase journey. Whether it’s a single brand or partnership of equities, there are four key considerations as you build your own brand story:

1) Understand the key points of influence that inspire the purchase, generate in-store consideration, and reward usage to retain loyalty; 2) leverage media to create relevance; 3) develop a key visual that works across activations and provides flexibility to address messaging priorities; and 4) reward shoppers by continually offering engaging solutions that improve their lives. ■



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