



You Wanna Go Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Lisa Vallee-Smith, co-CEO
Airfoil Group

In a landscape where social networks shape and share reputations, brand stories must be communicated and managed consistently across all media if they are to produce cheers.



In a landscape where social networks shape and share reputations, brand stories must be communicated and managed consistently across all media if they are to produce cheers. In the 1980s and early '90s, NBC's Cheers rated among the top 10 programs on the air, and in 2013 TV Guide ranked it among the 60 greatest shows of all times. Over 11 seasons, Cheers nourished its brand as a show that celebrates storytelling among the regulars at the bar. Its theme song made popular the phrase, "You wanna go where everybody knows your name."

In eight words, that phrase nearly summarizes the objective and the value of creating your own brand story for your business. I further propose your brand narrows its focus to ensuring that everybody that matters knows your name. You want your brand to suggest a story that your most cherished consumers and/or business clients – the Cliffs, Carlas and Woodys in your world – want to hear, one that is meaningful to them and one with which they can identify. Most important, you want that story to resonate on whatever channel your target audience is watching or listening to – broadcast, online, print, live presentations, wherever your brand is mentioned.

In this digital, social-networked age it's easier for everyone to know your name, because they share it in their posts, comments, reviews and photos. But it may be difficult to ensure they wanna go there – that they will choose to embrace your brand – because you need to work diligently to keep your story consistent.

Effective and consistent brand stories

For most of us, our minds conjure up a pretty consistent image when we hear a brand name like Disney, Apple, the Wall Street Journal or Waldorf-Astoria. These brands have worked hard to create a very specific story surrounding topics of fun and wholesomeness, innovation and surprise, critical information and reliability, travel and luxury. In turn, each of us may recall our own story in association with these brands, whether an actual experience (a trip to Disneyworld, an article in the Journal) or an aspiration. Every one of these brands stands out because it has done an exceptional job of communicating and consistently managing its brand story across all media, producing cheers from their target audiences.

The brand story becomes a narrative expression of the brand and encompasses the elements that differentiate it from every other brand, as well as the benefit it brings to its audiences, while striking an emotional chord.

The best brand stories are, above all, relevant to their audiences. They incorporate the language, experiences and ambitions of that audience to relate to its members effectively. In addition, the brand story, like any satisfying script, should have some measure of conflict or tension in it. Often these emotions flow around the consumer's difficult experience with competing brands, a need the consumer or business customer has been unable to meet or a challenge the audience has found difficult to overcome. The happy ending in your brand story is an understanding of how your brand resolves these conflicts.

B2C and B2B stories

Business-to-consumer (B2C) brands often tell their stories more compellingly, more consistently and in a more disciplined way than business-to-business (B2B) brands. B2C companies are addressing a mass market with huge numbers and are held to a tried-and-true marketing standard formula that moves the consumer from awareness to consideration to trial.

Starbucks is an example of a B2C brand that has done a great job with its story. The entire brand is built, not on coffee (its product), but rather on the in-store experience. That's where the storytelling occurs around the young server who made a remarkably kind gesture toward a customer, around the first date where a couple who met online could feel both safe and close, around environmental sustainability as told through cups with recycled materials and prominent recycling bins in the store. In these circumstances, prospective customers often move very fast through the funnel, from awareness to

"What often gets in the way of telling a consistent story is the failure of companies to realize that their story matters."

trial. Starbucks spent a lot of time, money and resources creating its brand story so it could be applied consistently across its customers' experiences with its stores.

B2B brands act very differently, however, and often their objectives are quite different from those of consumer brands. In the business-to-business world, establishing credibility often is a struggle, because the opportunities for visibility with the audience may be limited. The consideration phase of the sales cycle may be much longer and more complex because distribution channels are so complicated. The product may be available only in scattered market areas, or competitors may dominate markets among businesses that have complex policies relating to becoming—or replacing—a supplier.

Even more than these factors, however, what often gets in the way of telling a consistent B2B story often is the failure of these companies to realize that their story matters. They remain intently focused on pushing sales and shove marketing to the background. Some companies get it; IBM and HP, for example, have devoted considerable resources to marketing their brand stories, with nuances that distinguish them from each other among business buyers. But many B2B brands just don't bother to create a brand story, even though it is absolutely as essential as it is for any other brand category.

Leadership and the brand story

Whether a company develops a purposeful brand story usually depends on its leadership values. Small to midsize companies may still be headed by their founder, with product-development people in charge. They may not have scaled to thinking about branding, which can seem to be a luxury to them. In many cases, they may have not invested in company fundamentals—the mission, vision and values that serve as pillars for the brand. When these fundamentals do not exist, it's difficult to think about a brand, much less a brand story.

But a brand does not emerge from a balance sheet. A company's brand is not found in its brain, but in its heart.

That fact has been validated by America's most visionary corporate leaders, who have themselves become the core of a brand story. Steve Jobs, Henry Ford, and Walt Disney wrote the chapters of their brand stories with every innovation they produced.

Jobs was an accomplished storyteller and at annual conferences would have participants on the edge of their seats—or standing—as he led up to the denouement of Apple's latest invention story with the much-anticipated phrase, "One more thing." Henry Ford's story of the "Universal Car" changed America's story.

He found a way to manufacture cars the average family could afford, resulting in the settlement of rural areas and the creation of suburbs as people were able to escape cities conveniently.

Disney stories about dreams that come true and magical places are ingrained in the minds of nearly every American child. What 3-year-old daughter does not aspire to become a princess, and what mother does not buy that child as many princess-bearing Disney items as she can reasonably afford?

In many instances, a single product may create your brand. The Polaroid camera was a brand phenomenon for decades. Today, the Tesla is a brand like no other. Polaroid evolved into its brand story that saw families gain instant pleasure from taking photos that developed in a minute, and eventually Tesla will connect with its own brand story in which innovation and clean energy evolve to a future lifestyle that consumers seek.

A brand story that consumers can trust

Look closely at these examples and you'll spot another value that is essential to successful brands: trust. Whether a smartphone, a car or a movie, products that are predictably trustworthy produce trust among consumers and better brand stories. McDonald's and Domino's Pizza were able to expand so rapidly across America because customers knew exactly what they would find at the roadside restaurant and exactly when the pizza delivery person would be knocking on their door. They trusted the brand to consistently meet their expectations.

One of the most intriguing brand stories centered on trust is that of eBay and eBay Motors. When eBay was founded in 1995, e-commerce was becoming an exciting trend; but buying products online required that consumers trust the retailer to send the product in the form as advertised and in undamaged condition. eBay created a marketplace where individuals could buy and sell with each other, a tremendous leap of faith that buyers would trust people they had never met and that sellers would treat their customers fairly. eBay lived by the value that "people are basically good."

As it turned out, and as with every other marketplace, not every seller was honest. By the middle of the next decade, the eBay story began to morph into tales of buyers who felt that sellers had taken advantage of them. eBay responded from 2006 to 2008 with a "trust and safety program," developed with supporting strategies and tactics from Airfoil. eBay promulgated new rules and policies. Transactions began to be carried out through eBay as a trusted "middleman," and money-back guarantees were implemented. eBay also began a

"eBay offered a consistent brand story about trust and safety across all media, with a consistent storyteller."

comprehensive effort to educate its market about fraud prevention and protection. The company hired a former assistant U.S. attorney as its senior vice president of trust and safety, a personality who became a figure of trust in the media for the tips he offered.

eBay offered a consistent brand story about trust and safety across all media, with a consistent “storyteller” who helped legitimize the marketplace. Ultimately, buyers and sellers understood the new rules and safeguards of the game and this trust made it easier for eBay to begin attracting retailers and manufacturers into the marketplace.

Confusion from inconsistent brand stories

Keeping your brand story consistent in every channel can be challenging; and in business, as in court, an inconsistent story can lead to troubling results. One source of inconsistency is the tendency of many businesses to simply toy or experiment with branding and then abandon it. A company leader may become enamored with the brand or pursue branding at the recommendation of an investor. The company goes through an often expensive branding process, but if sales slump a bit during this process, branding is quickly forsaken in pursuit of sales goals. The result is an unresolved story, and confused consumers begin adding their own plot lines and endings to the company’s tale.

Unresolved brand stories also can produce bad advertising. Any type of engaging story must be of interest to the audience, carry them from milestone to milestone and satisfy them in the end by resolving a conflict. Especially when brands become subject to bureaucracy and commoditization—whether computer chips or potato chips—companies may spend a lot on their brand story but not express the story well.

Good ads, from good brand stories, evoke an emotional response. The child dressed as Darth Vader who thinks he has magically started a Volkswagen Passat with a wave of his hands while his father, holding the remote starter, smiles coyly at his wife. Chrysler’s re-creation of Paul Harvey’s story recounting why God created the farmer. These acclaimed TV spots drive right to the heart of their brands—VW’s renewed focus on family vehicles and the Dodge Ram’s determined toughness in the fields or on the road—through stories that shape their brand via humor and emotion, successfully connecting with the customer’s own stories.

Without a convincing and consistent brand story, businesses can spend huge amounts on marketing while simply shooting in the dark, hoping they’ll connect somehow with someone or other in the

marketplace. The results can be internal confusion and a lack of either guidance or alignment within the organization.

Telling the brand story on social channels

The Digital Age applies even more pressure on brands to develop an articulated brand story, because now social listening tools can measure and monitor the exact words uttered in the consumer market.

Even though the social channel is new and very different for some marketers, the brand story must remain consistent on social sites. To the benefit of savvy brands, social media present a better opportunity than was ever previously available to tell their brand stories, control their messages and prompt conversations around them.

The reason is that brands today can easily and inexpensively create their own content—blog posts, articles, online magazines, e-newsletters, videos, e-books and guides, podcasts and other forms of written, oral and visual materials that tell the brand story in words, images and sound.

Content marketing, or “owned” content, is one of the surest ways to propagate and manage a brand story and to set the environment in which consumers or business customers will respond online through reviews, comments, Pinterest “pins” or tweets.

Don’t confuse owning your content with owning your brand, however. Social media have reversed the historical definition of branding. Throughout most of its history, branding was a one-way communication exercise. The brand explained the features and benefits of its offerings and delivered that message to consumers. Today, consumers are the ones who create the brand. Based on the version of the brand story that they hear and consider credible, a brand may have true, unpaid advocates who extol a specific product in Facebook posts or record video at branding events and place it online. In the digital world, customers are telling the brand story in public digital spaces where others can review them, comment, share, pin, “like” or retweet the story.

This phenomenon is global and immediate. I could talk right now with someone in Europe and tell them if I like the airline I flew home, based on how well the brand’s story corresponded with my personal experience. I could post reviews on Yelp or Trip Advisor—the company’s brand managers have absolutely no control over what I say.

Wise marketers, therefore, have rapidly begun engaging with customers to ensure that their service experience has lived up to

“Today, consumers create the brand, based on the version of the story they consider credible.”

“Social media are a gift—people are telling you about yourself and your product for free.”

expectations, or they've employed social listening tools to monitor what the online audience is saying. When they discover a response or a comment that matches the brand story, marketers can ask the consumer for permission to use those remarks. Bloggers who review a product or service positively may hear from marketers who want to offer information on a new product about to come out.

In these ways, the brand has become the follower, not the leader, in building the brand. The marketer seeks out customer experiences that reinforce the brand story and determines the best way to communicate those experiences on social platforms.

You are what you make of your brand story. If you're not participating in the social space, you can't influence it, but when you ask for feedback or simply listen in an organized fashion, you will be able to spot trends and cultural themes that the public is discussing, incorporating them in messages that move your story toward a happy conclusion. Social media are a gift—people are telling you about yourself and your product for free. Treasure their feedback and use it to write new chapters for your brand story.

Who owns the brand's social sites?

From the time that social media emerged, the question of who will be responsible for managing the company's social accounts has been a point of contention. Should marketing—with experience in reaching and measuring audiences—control how the organization uses Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, or is that more appropriately the responsibility of the public relations department—with experience in crafting content and earning audiences? The current trend of integrating PR and marketing, at both the corporate and agency levels, has developed in large part from the need to capitalize on social media effectively with the talents of both disciplines.

Integrated agencies like Airfoil can provide the strategies and skills to help marketers create their brand story, to build content and to join the online social conversation. We can help overcome confusion in the marketplace about a brand story through carefully planned, executed and monitored programs and campaigns, in which we listen to learn what others are saying about the brand to identify how well its story is resonating.

Airfoil can help unify the brand message for all of the organization's internal and external stakeholders; educate leadership and employees on the brand story and how to keep it consistent; and train spokespersons to maintain the consistent story before news media, live business audiences, internal groups and the community.

Four pitfalls and four best practices

Those brands with stories that end in heartbreak instead of applause often fail because they have fallen into one of four traps:

1. They have not bothered to develop a brand story, relying instead on just a slogan or an overly broad message.
2. They have not socialized the story—either internally or with social followers—and have not gained internal alignment on what the story should be.
3. They have jumped to producing creative before the brand is resolved. The creative—whether an ad, a TV spot, an article or a brochure—needs to tell a compelling brand story, and the story should be essentially the same wherever it appears.
4. In constructing their brand stories, they have not differentiated their product or service from that of competitors. No one wants to read a story for which they already know the ending. The brand story should focus on features that make this tale distinctive and lead to a conclusion that surprises customers in a positive way.

How can your business ensure that your brand story is communicated consistently and positively across all channels?

1. Formally publish your story in your own media—on your website, in a blog post, through a video or even in a speech. Get the story down and amplify it to other channels.
2. Put a system in place for generating a mix of paid content (ads and advertorials), earned coverage (news reports), owned content (your telling of the story in your own media) and shared content (submitting your offerings to social networks for comment and review)
3. Hire a talented external resource to craft the brand story, an agency or other source that understands not only what you want to communicate but also how to craft your brand messages into a story that is likely to be well received online, in print and on the air.
4. Test your brand story. Ask consumer focus groups how it resonates. Give a speech to a chamber of commerce audience to monitor initial reactions to the story from businesses. Create a video that tells your brand story and post it to YouTube to watch for comments and views.

Your goal is to create a brand story that makes your brand positively impossible to ignore. The most fortunate brands have stories that go viral with a mounting anticipation of their resolution.



With the right strategy, a consistent brand story and the talent to build that story across media channels, you can ensure that everybody knows your name, greeting your brand warmly with a loyal following and cheers.

**Lisa Vallee-Smith, co-CEO
Airfoil Group**

*vallee-smith@airfoilgroup.com
@LValleeSmith*

www.airfoilgroup.com