

think<shift

STORYTELLING WITH PURPOSE

How stories build brand value



EVERYONE HAS A STORY TO TELL

Want to truly engage key audiences and make a lasting impression? One surefire way is to tell a story.

Stories are the oldest form of mass communication, and some researchers think we're hardwired to respond to them. We're certainly trained to draw messages from them—think Aesop's fables and classic novels—and that makes them invaluable. Compelling brand stories bring people into the heart of your business and help you get attention from media, partners, customers and talented employees.

These Thinkshift blog posts and articles run the gamut from assessing the value of brand stories to pinning down the elements that make a story powerful. The common thread: every company can tell a story that builds brand value.

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- 3 ways storytelling builds brand value **3**
- Stories communicate sustainability value to investors **6**
- 5 essential elements of a great company story **9**
- To tell your company story, dig deep & don't be shy **11**
- Storytelling in action: 4 companies to emulate **13**
- Sexiness & B2Bs don't have to be strangers **15**



3 WAYS STORYTELLING BUILDS BRAND VALUE

Just how much is a ceramic cat decorated with red chilis worth? Fifty cents if you buy it from a thrift store; \$22.72 if auctioned on eBay with a story by novelist Lydia Millet.



The chili cat was part of the Significant Objects Project, an experiment designed to test the hypothesis that talented creative writers could invest an object with value that it did not previously have. The result: project curators Rob Walker and Josh Glenn sold \$128 worth of thrift-store junk for \$3,612.

We thought of this project when challenged to break down the value of a brand story. It's a clever and highly

entertaining demonstration of how much of the value we ascribe to things—and experiences—lies in the stories surrounding them. A story is often the X factor that inspires an intense desire to have that whatever.

So what's the value of a brand story? There are lots of ways to slice it, but most businesses seek the following three benefits.

The value we ascribe to things and experiences lies in the stories surrounding them.

1. Premium pricing

As the Significant Objects Project shows, people are willing to pay more for something surrounded by the aura of an emotionally involving story. (This is also borne out by celebrity estate sales.) Apple's success is often attributed to product and UI design, but the company's ability to sell at premium prices in commodified markets has at least as much to do with Apple's powerful brand story of creativity and individuality.

2. Employee evangelism

Sustainable businesses have always placed high value on communicating their purpose and having employees live it—and more and more businesses that wouldn't define themselves as sustainable are seeing the light. But merely larding the employee handbook with lists of “our values” or posting corporate mission statements is not going

to turn team members into evangelists. To really engage employees—and get them talking with customers, friends and everyone else about how great the company is—your business needs a story that expresses its values naturally, in a way that engages employees' own values, feels true and is true. (A company's actions need to square up with its story—[see this post](#).)

We've seen this work for clients: teams that couldn't even manage a concise or consistent description of what their company was about were speaking with confidence and excitement once they had a story to draw upon.

3. Consistent messages across channels

You can't have fundamentally different messages about your company for different markets and channels and still have a coherent,

An effective brand story can be told in many languages—literally and figuratively.

plausible brand. Consistency shouldn't be a straitjacket, though. Messages must speak to the concerns of various market segments and fit the styles of particular marketing channels.

The answer is a brand story that's rich and emotionally resonant enough to feed a wide variety of campaigns and communication needs. (For an example of this in action, see this [Harvard Business Review](#) article on how Coca-Cola has used a story platform to create advertising that's both global and local.)

An effective brand story can be told in many languages—both literally and figuratively—in a way that's true to your brand and adds value to what you're selling.

May 2016



STORIES COMMUNICATE SUSTAINABILITY VALUE TO INVESTORS

Investors increasingly see sustainability as an opportunity and a business advantage, but most of them also say companies don't successfully communicate about it.



Specifically, companies are not showing how “sustainability initiatives are linked to their strategy, financial performance and value in meaningful ways,” according to research by Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI), a UK-based initiative that works under the aegis of the United Nations Global Compact. *Investor Study: Insights from PRI Signatories*, co-written with Accenture, finds that a majority of CEOs (57 percent) say they are able

to articulate their sustainability strategy. However, only 9 percent of investors say that CEOs can do this. And while 38 percent of CEOs say they communicate the business value of their efforts, only 7 percent of investors agree.

The gap between talking sustainability and talking value

These findings reveal “a striking gap which exposes the shortcomings of many companies in effectively

A sustainability story can deliver a range of benefits, from improving investor communications to gaining customer buy-in to motivating internal teams.

communicating their approach to sustainability and its links to the traditional measures of business value and success,” according to the report.

The PRI report makes a number of recommendations for addressing this challenge, though curiously, only one—“focus on opportunity and value,” rather than risk and mitigation—is fundamentally about communications. The others are suggestions for systemic changes largely beyond the scope of an individual company: commit to the long term, develop the knowledge base of investment advisors, develop common metrics across industry sectors and collaborate with policy makers to reshape markets and systems.

These actions are worthy efforts, but they overlook something every company can do that would vastly

shrink the communications gap: create strong brand stories for sustainability.

Opportunity: the sustainability brand story

This is a significant overlooked opportunity. Few companies are telling sustainability brand stories, but they should be. A sustainability story can deliver a range of benefits, from improving investor communications to gaining customer buy-in to motivating internal teams. It can:

- Clearly convey your value and values in ways that resonate with all audiences
- Articulate your sustainability mission so employees throughout the business align around it
- Support increased investment in sustainability program funding

**Stories bring facts
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- Integrate your sustainability story with your brand story and overall business objectives
- Enable you to realize the brand value of your sustainability investment
- Serve as a lodestar for evaluating potential actions

To be sure, investors want hard business facts. It would be simplistic to say that a brand sustainability story alone will give investors the information they seek—there needs to be a “there” there. But stories bring facts to life and make them memorable. They resonate in ways hard numbers don't; a story connects the dots to the wider world as well as to the company's own vision and goals.

Fully communicating value and benefits requires engaging the heart as well as the mind. Giving sustainability a narrative that places

a company's efforts in context, highlights the people involved (both those who are acting and those who benefit), illustrates qualitative as well as quantitative value, chronicles the journey and maps that journey to goals will help a company provide the information that investors—and customers—need to spend their money wisely.

January 2015



5 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A GREAT COMPANY STORY

We've all read the classic founder stories about companies started in a garage/dorm room/remote town by a visionary/college dropout/iconoclast with a crazy idea and a few friends.



The founders overcame adversity/relentlessly pursued their vision/had an amazing stroke of luck, and now the company is a global brand/worth zillions/the owner of our most private thoughts.

The truth is, most companies don't grow up with that kind of drama. But you don't need it to tell a compelling company story. What you do need are these five essential ingredients:

- 1. Claims to fame** What makes your company stand out? What's your company's most remarkable asset? It could be pioneering thinking, a new way of doing business, a new technology, a new product or service, a commitment to achieving specific social or environmental benefits—whatever defines your company's core value.
- 2. Inspiration** What sparked the founding of the business? Who was involved and what motivated

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company story.**

them? What problem were they trying to solve? What was their vision and mission?

3. Vision What's next? What's the really big thing your company is shooting for? What keeps people involved in the business?

4. Challenges What challenges did the founders and their growing team face in building the business? (These could be internal or external, micro or macro.) What did they do to overcome them?

5. Accomplishments Where is your company now? What has it achieved? What work is your company actively engaged in? What has your company's impact been? To what extent has it addressed the inspirational problem?

Our *5 Essential Elements of a Great Company Story* infographic shows all the elements in action in our story about New Resource Bank's founding, vision and mission.

Find out how to dig deep to get your own answers to these questions on the next page.

October 2014



TO TELL YOUR COMPANY STORY, DIG DEEP & DON'T BE SHY

What makes some company stories great, while others fall flat? Successful stories contain a handful of key ingredients: inspiration, vision, accomplishments, claims to fame and challenges.



That list may sound simple, but we've found people often have trouble coming up with the goods. It's not because they don't exist; it's because people don't dig deep enough.

In the previous section, we posed questions designed to uncover the five essential story elements. Here are some common first responses, and help in coming up with the answers that will give you a story that turns customers into brand

advocates, attracts partners and captures media attention, among other benefits.

What was your inspiration? *"Well, the opportunity just presented itself."*

To recall the initial spark, think about the problem you were trying to solve in forming your venture. What motivated you to actually do something?

**If you only present
a sunny picture,
you won't be
believable.**

What is your vision? *“We want to be bigger” or “We want to help as many people as we can.”*

Go deeper and be more specific. What's next for the business? Where will you be in five years? What keeps people in your organization coming to work every day (besides a paycheck)?

What are your accomplishments and claims to fame? *“We don't want to seem like we're bragging.”*

If you don't cite your achievements, no one will know how great you are. (And when others bestow the honors, it isn't bragging.)

What challenges have you faced? *“I don't want to say anything about problems we've had.”*

We're all human. If you only present a sunny picture, you won't be believable. And you won't show how creative or strong you were in

overcoming obstacles to building the business. Challenges conquered are successes, not failures.

A strong story is an essential aspect of your brand, because your brand is much more than your products and services. That's particularly true for social enterprises and sustainability-focused companies—you're selling a vision and values along with your products and services.

July 2014



STORYTELLING IN ACTION: 4 COMPANIES TO EMULATE

We've distilled the five essential elements of a great company story. We've explored how to dig deep to uncover the details that will make your narrative sing. But is that enough?



No. Because what brings a concept to life is examples, examples, and more examples.

With that in mind, we went hunting for examples of each element done right in the stories of fellow B Corps and sustainable businesses.

1. Inspiration: What sparked the founding of the business? Who was involved and what motivated them? What problem were they trying to solve? What was their vision and mission?

[Warby Parker](#) executes this element with simplicity and humor, in a story and a voice that connects with its markets. The story begins, “Every idea starts with a problem. Ours was simple: glasses are too expensive.” *[Read the story.](#)*

2. Challenges: What challenges did the founders overcome to build the business? What did they do to overcome them?

Patagonia handles challenges with characteristically unflinching honesty.

Patagonia handles challenges with characteristically unflinching honesty.

Its company history describes growing pains, ending with this note: “We laid off 20% of our work force—many of them friends and friends of friends. And we nearly lost our independence as a company. That taught us a major lesson. We have kept growth—and borrowing—to a modest scale ever since.”

Read the whole story.

3 & 4. Claims to fame and

accomplishments: What makes you stand out? What’s your most remarkable asset? What have you achieved with the business? To what extent have you addressed the inspirational problem?

Ben and Jerry’s addresses its accomplishments and causes in a lighthearted, slightly goofy way in its perfectly on-brand timeline.

Here’s an entry from the early days: “Ben and Jerry are named ‘U.S. Small Business Persons of the Year’ by President Reagan in a White House Rose Garden ceremony. Jerry’s one suit comes in handy and, luckily, Ben finds an Italian waiter’s jacket to wear.” *Read the timeline.*

5. Vision: What’s next? What are you shooting for? What keeps people involved in the business?

Clif Bar nails this element in its company story, which makes a big statement, “Clif Bar’s vision always has been to do business in a better way,” and then illustrates throughout the story exactly what the company has done to live up to that vision. (The Clif Bar story is also a great example of how to write about your company’s inspiration.) *Read it here.*

May 2015



SEXINESS & B2BS DON'T HAVE TO BE STRANGERS

Successful B2C companies usually have brands with a certain je ne sais quoi. B2B firms can be sexy, too, and there are sound business reasons to make the effort.



To be clear, by sexy we mean compellingly attractive, not underwear-model sexy. Conveying that is all in how you tell your brand story.

But what does it take to elicit an “I want that” reaction? We’ve boiled it down to the HELIX code: Humor, Emotion (or Empathy), Looks, Intelligence and the X-factor. Businesses that incorporate these elements effectively in their marketing

are more memorable and likeable, and have more dedicated fans. (More on decoding that DNA [here](#).)

B2Bs can use the code as successfully as B2Cs. It may take a little more imagination, but sustainable businesses have an advantage here, since they’re inherently smarter and more innovative than others in their market. The three approaches that follow can help B2Bs make their products and services irresistible.

We're always going to be more receptive to something desirable than something dull.

1. Build from the core

Start with your primary message—the distillation of what you do, how it's different and why it matters. (Don't have one? Then [messaging is your first step](#).) What's smart about that or intrinsically cool? How can you emphasize it using humor, emotion and design?

2. Have fun

Having a sense of humor doesn't mean you'll sacrifice credibility. And it doesn't have to mean jokes—you can just be playful. MailChimp, for example, built its brand on not taking itself too seriously. From its goofy mascot to its chatty blog to its behind-the-scenes Instagram feed, MailChimp's marketing makes a functional tool fun. And that's one reason MailChimp has the largest share of its category.

3. Borrow some allure

Sexiness doesn't have to come from within—not when we're talking about

marketing, anyway. One way to increase your appeal is to associate your brand with something else that's considered sexy or cool. We turned to drink for the Silicon Valley finance consulting firm RoseRyan, creating a [campaign based on custom cocktails](#) for the firm's 20th anniversary. We commissioned gorgeous drinks from a happening restaurant, gave them finance names and voilà—press coverage for a milestone that normally wouldn't have rated a second glance from media.

Remember, robots don't buy things (yet). Humans do. We're always going to be more receptive to something desirable than something dull, whether we're looking at a brunch menu or comparing services. B2Bs that realize that and build a sexy brand have the advantage whether they're first movers or competing in a crowded field.

August 2015



BRAND BUILDING FOR
REVOLUTIONARIES

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report.

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Break Through the Noise: Secrets of Successful PR
and Thought Leadership

Content Marketing Manifesto: Strategies That Draw a
Crowd and Build Brand Value

Thinkshift Communications is a team of strategists, thinkers, writers and campaigners inspired by the power of business to address pressing social and environmental problems.

We build brand value, fuel growth and advance mission goals for trailblazing sustainable businesses, cleantech companies and social enterprises. We do it by uncovering what's best in a brand and expressing those stories in PR, thought leadership and content marketing programs.

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