

Marketing research telling a story?

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'Once upon a time there was a marketing researcher who...'

One of the most popular current marketing and communication buzzwords is "storytelling". There is a flood of courses, talks, articles and books on the subject – to such an extent that marketing researchers feel obliged to weave some of the underlying concepts of creative writing into their work. Why is this and how does it work? How can one introduce storytelling without it becoming the whole point of the exercise, rather than as one of the utensils in the toolbox of a professional marketing manager, communicator or marketing researcher to help convey your messages?



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One of the reasons why the same concepts that creative writers have used – and struggled with – to make their own and to bring across their thoughts, ideas and messages, is that a narrative or 'story' can make it easier to relate to complex thoughts. Stories help us to form memorable images and often help to guide decision making. Anyone who has ever compared the lectures of boring and interesting lecturers, or used an example of a scene in a movie or referred to the storyline in a novel, knows how powerful imagery can pave the way to better understanding.

A fad or not?

So, is storytelling in marketing just a fad, or could it add depth to marketing research? If useful, where could it be employed as part of a broader strategy?

The quick answer is that yes, a powerful narrative can be useful when used at the right time, in the right place, for specific clients. It does not have to be 'just a fad', because telling a cohesive tale to help cement a concept, is an approach that is not new: the 'wheel' of telling stories to explain things to other people, is probably almost as old as mankind itself. It works.

However, there are some dangers in over-using the tool or in it becoming part of a recipe that is no longer fresh or convincing. Firstly, building a full narrative is not an idea that is useful everywhere. Some 'routine' research – or for that matter, overall marketing strategy and communication – does not require it at all. Keep storytelling as a technique to help you persuade, to 'sell' strategies and to explain complex ideas. Secondly, don't confuse the wood and the trees.

As marketing strategist, and specifically as marketing researcher, you are not writing a novel or staging a play, even though you are telling a story to help you convey concepts. You do not have to force things into a complex tale with enormous drama – simply use memorable stories when and where they fit the purpose.

When to use it then?

In a world where change has become the only constant, marketing research forms part of the backbone of many important decisions. The professional marketing researcher has to compete with many other influences and influencers, and attempt to hold the attention of audiences whose attention spans are shrinking under the influence of social media and instant global communication channels. So, if using some of the techniques of the dramatist, novelist or screenwriter can help you succeed, then grab hold of them and use them.

Obvious examples where storytelling is useful for marketing researchers are proposals (especially proposals to prospective clients, or to explain a proposed project to an existing client) and presentations of research findings. In brief, here are a few thoughts on some of the elements of storytelling that could work for you:

- **Characters:** Typically, the hero could be the brand you are investigating and the other characters are competitors, perhaps with the strongest competitor or an alternative kind of solution for the client's service or product as the villain. An example would be various mobile phone brands – of which one is the client – as characters, with fixed phones as the villain. Brands within a segment's repertoire are not necessarily threats; they could be allies. Brands within a category could be allies by focussing on complementary offerings or distribution. If there is a higher priced brand in a repertoire, and your client's brand is lower-priced, the story will focus on the advantages of this 'everyday' brand compared to the 'treat' brand. Together, they would also have to look out for the real 'bad guy' that offers an altogether different solution to the consumer (example: e-books versus different genres or different authors within the printed book range).

There are numerous possibilities of creating a memorable story around your characters, whether you refer to their brand names, or use the technique of fictional representative users of the product. The important thing is to 'flesh them out' as a good novelist would do, and to make them memorable through a comprehensive description – in marketing research terms, by being specific about the variables that make them different or unique.

Difficulties or choices relating to segmentation are obvious opportunities to create memorable characters to illustrate specific choices made relating to the research process itself, or to results being presented.

- **Structure, dramatic effect and turning point:** The **structure** of any good narrative is driven by the dramatic possibility of 'things that can go wrong' or 'how it happened that the characters find themselves in a particular situation and the choices that will have to be made'. The parallels for marketing and for research are easy to spot. When writing a research report, it could become more memorable if the 'characters' you have created illustrate, for example, specific usage and consumption occasions. The entire drama of brand awareness through trying it out, adopting it and becoming a regular and satisfied user with considerable brand loyalty contains many possibilities for drama, inconsistency and conflict.

Of course, **dramatic effect and turning points** can be useful in a presentation or report – but beware the dangers of over-use or forced use. Where there is a clear dramatic possibility arising from factors affecting a brand and the expectations around it, weave the potential surprise and consternation of changing circumstances into the narrative. Brands come and go: to refer again to the example of mobile phones, a story incorporating the dramatic turning points involving Nokia, Blackberry, Samsung and Apple makes for an engrossing tale.

Is legislation or a dramatic change in international markets threatening a brand? Those could fit into a coherent narrative. A tracking study that shows a dramatic change in user patterns, or the dramatic turning effects of external influences could be explained in a carefully constructed narrative. Examples here could be the crisis in education that influences employment and user patterns or a dramatic fall in steel prices affecting numerous industries and brands. One particularly dramatic turning point for marketers and researchers arose due to the lack of trust in the international banking industry after the 2008 financial crisis, where South African legislation financial services industry's own strict control measures took it to the top of the international class: many possibilities arose for a powerful narrative there! Marketing research also lends itself to more 'muted' dramatic effect in other cases, such as in a verbal or written explanation of the effects of sampling error, where it tends to swamp the 'natural' volatility of loyalty.

The brands that form the subject of your research, the situations you have to explain may not always have a happy ending. But using the right story at the right time could help explain to clients and managements exactly where to focus their strategies and use of available resources.

ABOUT CLAIRE HECKRATH

With a design background, and a successful career in publishing at Penguin Books heading the local publishing division, the skills in process management and people management made for an obvious choice initially as operations manager, advancing to managing director in seven years in online panel research at Panel Services Africa.
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