

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *STORIES FOR WORK*

**GABRIELLE DOLAN**

# magnetic STORIES

CONNECT WITH CUSTOMERS AND

ENGAGE EMPLOYEES WITH

**BRAND STORYTELLING**

FREE  
CHAPTER

**WILEY**

First published in 2021 by John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd  
42 McDougall St, Milton Qld 4064  
Office also in Melbourne

Typeset in ITC Berkeley Oldstyle Std 11/14

© John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd 2021

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

ISBN: 978-0-730-38851-7



NATIONAL  
LIBRARY  
OF AUSTRALIA

A catalogue record for this  
book is available from the  
National Library of Australia

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the *Australian Copyright Act 1968* (for example, a fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review), no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, communicated or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission. All inquiries should be made to the publisher at the address above.

Cover design by Wiley

Author photo by Oli Sansom

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

### Disclaimer

The material in this publication is of the nature of general comment only, and does not represent professional advice. It is not intended to provide specific guidance for particular circumstances and it should not be relied on as the basis for any decision to take action or not take action on any matter which it covers. Readers should obtain professional advice where appropriate, before making any such decision. To the maximum extent permitted by law, the author and publisher disclaim all responsibility and liability to any person, arising directly or indirectly from any person taking or not taking action based on the information in this publication.

# Contents

<i>About the author</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xvii
<i>Introduction</i>	xix
<i>How to use this book</i>	xxv
<b>PART I: BRING TOGETHER BRAND AND STORIES</b>	<b>1</b>
The power of brand storytelling	3
A magnetic attraction	11
‘Just give me the story!’	17
<b>PART II: TELL 5 TYPES OF BRAND STORIES</b>	<b>25</b>
Creation stories: How and why it all started	27
Culture stories: Our values and behaviours ... the vibe	35
Customer stories: Showcase your impact in the real world	47
Challenge stories: Tales of when the going gets tough	55
Community stories: Bringing life to corporate responsibility	65
<b>PART III: IMPLEMENT BRAND STORYTELLING</b>	<b>73</b>
Define: Know what your brand is (and isn't)	77
Teach: How to educate storytellers	85
Collect: How to find stories	93
Communicate: Where to share stories	101
Create: How to generate stories	115

<b>PART IV: SEE MAGNETIC STORIES IN ACTION</b>	<b>123</b>
Case Story: Ferguson Plarre Bakehouses, Australia	125
Case Story: Columbia Restaurant, Florida, USA	133
Case Story: The Fullerton Hotels and Resorts, Singapore (and Sydney)	141
Case Story: Mekong Capital, Vietnam	147
Case Story: Transpower, New Zealand	157
<i>Conclusion</i>	167
<i>Connect with me</i>	169
<i>Index</i>	171

# Introduction

In 2019 I published my fifth book, and my mother-in-law, Jan, asked me a good question. She asked in a genuinely caring way, ‘Don’t you run out of things to write about?’ I thought about this and agreed that it would be a long, long time before I even considered another book. Yet here I am again.

Here’s why.

When I first started my practice on storytelling back in 2005, no-one was talking about storytelling in business. The common reaction I received back then was often along the lines of ‘Oh, all that once-upon-a-time stuff?’ It was dismissed as not being relevant or credible, or just too emotional and ‘touchy feely’.

Fast forward to today, and I never receive this kind of reaction.

**PEOPLE REALISE THE POWER OF SHARING STORIES IN  
BUSINESS AS A RELEVANT, CREDIBLE AND EFFECTIVE  
WAY TO CONNECT WITH CUSTOMERS AND  
ENGAGE EMPLOYEES.**

So after 15 years of writing and speaking about this topic, you’d think I’d feel like my mission was accomplished. The use of stories in business has gained credibility and popularity. Great. More and more organisations are implementing storytelling. Great. No need for another book ... right?

Well, if you go to the ‘Our Story’ page on a vast majority of company websites (maybe even yours), you’ll realise that, actually, there is no story there at all. It’s usually just a bunch of facts, stats and dates, or it’s filled with so much verbiage that does nothing but demonstrate an addiction to corporate jargon. You know, ‘We incorporate leading-edge design with best-practice methodology to deliver customer-centric solutions in a sustainable manner.’

And what about your ‘brand story’—heard of that one? I have clients asking me to help them create their ‘brand story’ all the time. Yet I can recall writing an article on this over a decade ago titled ‘Yeti and the brand story’. (Spoiler alert: neither exist, no matter how hard you try looking.) There is no ONE story that communicates your brand to ALL of your employees and customers.

What is really happening is that the word ‘story’ is being hijacked ... and it’s creating even more confusion for people. I’ve lost count of the amount of times I have read something or listened to someone referring to something as a story and then found myself mumbling, ‘but that is not a story’.

A growing number of businesses are attempting to implement storytelling, but they’re not doing it very well and are missing out on valuable opportunities to connect and engage employees and customers. From entrepreneurs to small- and medium-sized businesses, to large multinational organisations, there are so many mistakes and sadly a lot of misguided efforts going on.

On the flip side, I have also heard some fabulous stories that have not been shared—even though they absolutely should have been.

**THE ONE GOOD THING TO COME OUT OF THE CURRENT CLIMATE IS THE REALISATION THAT HUMAN CONNECTION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER BEFORE.**

COVID-19, Black Lives Matter and the Australian bushfire crisis are just three examples (from 2020 only!) that show how the world has been challenged and is changing.

Our social media feeds are flooded with tragic news, but also with stories of hope. Stories of individuals trying and making a difference, like UK war veteran Captain Tom Moore who at 99 decided to walk 100 laps of his garden before his 100th birthday to raise money for the UK's National Health Service (NHS). His story created such a connection with people that he went on to become a bit of celebrity, raising over £30 million, and he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in July 2020.

Then there are stories of companies who responded to the challenges of the coronavirus in unusual and captivating ways, like gin distilleries such as Four Pillars in Melbourne and Archie Rose in Sydney moving production to make hand sanitiser. When hotels around the world were forced to close, two Marriott Hotels in the French Riviera donated their unused produce and food products to a local children's charity.

These stories have been actively communicated by the companies themselves, and they have created a heady mix of magnetism and attraction. We can't help but be drawn to them. They connect with us. They engage us, like never before.

## **THIS MAGNETIC ATTRACTION IS THE FOUNDATION OF LONG-TERM BRAND LOYALTY.**

As such, there are four trends emerging that you need to be aware of when it comes to brand storytelling.

- **Trend 1:** Customers are increasingly making purchasing decision based on their own values. While this is not new, more socially aware consumers are realising their collective power when it comes to influencing companies to make more ethical choices.
- **Trend 2:** Employees are seeking greater alignment between their own personal values and their employers' values. They are looking to work for companies that have a greater purpose than simply profit.
- **Trend 3:** A super-connected world has resulted in a surge of transparency that people are referring to as 'Glass Box Brands'.

Before social media it was more like a black box ... hard to see into and easy to decorate on the outside. Social media has meant it is very hard to hide an internal culture from the outside world.

- **Trend 4:** The birth of ‘cancel culture’, where people will use social media to call out any company or celebrity that they believe has done something wrong. They will publicly withdraw support and shame them, encouraging others to do the same.

## **COMPANIES NEED TO BE AWARE OF THE COMBINED IMPACT THESE FOUR TRENDS HAVE ON THEIR BRAND.**

The internal and external brand have become one, and it is more important than ever to take control of your brand and your stories.

Hence, this book shows leaders of businesses, from individual to multinational organisations, how to navigate these trends by generating and sharing magnetic stories that authentically engage employees, connect with customers and create brand loyalty.

Your customers and employees can be your greatest brand ambassadors and supporters ... or detractors.

So you need to understand how to choose and use the right stories, in the right way.

In this book, you'll learn how to:

- connect with your customers in a more authentic way
- increase the engagement of your employees
- make decisions based on your company's values and purpose
- champion your employees and customers as your greatest advocates
- take control of your brand and reputation for greater success
- understand the importance of good storytelling (what it is and what it isn't)



- implement brand storytelling effectively
- have a stronger presence online by sharing great stories.

We will focus on the five types of stories you need in business (regardless of size) to connect and engage people with your brand. We'll do this by looking at a diverse collection of real examples to inspire and guide you throughout that process. I will also share with you my proven method to implement storytelling to connect customers and engage employees with your brand.

So, as it turns out, no, Jan, I haven't run out of things to write about, because if there's one thing I've learned, it's that everyone loves a good story but not everyone knows how to find and tell a good one—a magnetic story.

So here goes ...



**PART I**

**bring  
together  
brand and  
STORIES**

So, what is a story and what is it not? How can telling stories help communicate your brand? What does ‘brand storytelling’ actually mean, and how will it help you connect and engage your customers and employees?

Storytelling is not some airy-fairy kind of fluff. There is some pretty impressive research conducted by neuroscientists around the critical role that story, emotion and memory play when it comes to our actions and decisions. So we’ll look at some of these studies to show us why stories are so sticky and how, when used correctly, they can create the kind of magnetic attraction we are talking about.

Let’s dig in so you can understand what to do — and what not to do — when it comes to your brand and stories.

# The power of brand storytelling

Growing up, I was what everyone would have called a tomboy. I preferred to be outside playing cricket or football or riding my skateboard and BMX bike. I was not into dolls at all. Needless to say, I never owned a Barbie and, decades later, when Barbie was being shamed as not being a good role model for girls, I happily went along with this. I refused to buy my two daughters a Barbie (and I think might even have told others not to buy them one).<sup>1</sup>

Last year, however, I heard the backstory to Barbie and I realised my assumptions had been all wrong.

## Barbie's backstory

Ruth Handler was the wife of Elliot Handler, the co-founder of Mattel. She noticed that when her daughter, Barbara, was playing with her paper dolls that she was actually pretending they were adults. In this play, her two children (Ken was their son — yes, Ken and Barbie were named after their children) would act out future events, rather than the present. She also noticed that while Barbara only had dolls that had her playing the role

---

<sup>1</sup>I took a firm stance against gender stereotyping presents or colours. I can still recall getting chastised by my elderly aunt for dressing Alex when she was a baby in a black hat ... which was technically navy blue and did have a red flower on it.

of caregiver, Ken had dolls that encouraged him to imagine himself as a doctor, firefighter, astronaut and so much more.

There were limitations with the paper dolls, including paper clothing that failed to attach well. So Ruth set to work to produce a three-dimensional plastic doll with an adult body and a wardrobe of fabric clothing.

Her husband and other executives at Mattel did not think it was a good idea at all. They assumed parents would not buy their children a doll with a voluptuous adult figure. Basically, a doll that had breasts.

While holidaying in Europe Ruth saw the German Bild Lilli doll and bought one, as it was similar to what she was thinking. She redesigned the doll, named her Barbie, and convinced her husband and the other executives to produce a prototype.

On 9 March<sup>2</sup> 1959, Barbie debuted at the New York Toy Fair and, as they say in the classics, the rest is history.

When you look at the early years of some of the career Barbies that were created, they were actually very progressive. For example, in 1961 we had the Executive Barbie, 1965 Astronaut Barbie, 1973 Surgeon Barbie, 1985 CEO Barbie, 1989 Pilot Barbie. And way back in 1968 Mattel released Equal Rights Barbie, which was one of the first Black dolls on the market.

Ruth Handler is quoted as saying, 'My whole philosophy of Barbie was that through the doll the little girl could be anything she wanted to be. Barbie always represented the fact that a woman has choices.'

The point of this story? Well, it made me connect to Barbie on a whole different level — what about you?

**THAT ONE STORY ACTUALLY CHALLENGED AND  
CHANGED MY VIEW OF THE BARBIE BRAND. AND IT WILL  
INFLUENCE MY FUTURE BUYING DECISIONS.**

That is what a story can do for your brand.

---

<sup>2</sup> My birthday. Not the 1959 bit — just the 9 March bit.

## Tales from Europe

Good stories will attract people to your brand, and to your company. These stories drive people to decide to buy your products, to engage your services, to work for you, to recommend you, to support you, to speak favourably about you, to follow you, to refer you, and to keep coming back to you, time and time again.

Stories are so powerful that they can immediately influence purchasing decisions. Here's another couple of good examples I found while on a family holiday in Europe a few years ago.

### ***Story 1: Botas 66***

During a guided food tour in Prague, we learned about Botas 66. We had thought they were just an ordinary shoe company, but we soon discovered that they were an iconic Czech brand that make sneakers. The story goes that under communism, they were the only sneakers allowed to be worn. Imagine that? You only had once choice of sneakers to purchase. Once Czech Republic gained independence (again) in 1989, Botas 66 went out of business as people now had a choice. However, two design students resurrected the sneakers in 2007 as part of a school project. They made the sneakers cool by coming up with contemporary designs and colours that still give a retro nod to their heritage. They now have three stores in Prague and over a hundred designs. The word on the street is that you have instant street cred when you wear Botas 66 sneakers. And seriously, who doesn't want street cred?

So we sought out the store and my husband and I bought a pair each.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Story 2: Currywurst sausages***

Currywurst sausages are a famous fast food dish in Germany. The story goes that in 1949, care packages were distributed by British soldiers to the people of Germany. One woman received a care package that contained, amongst other things, curry powder and tomato sauce. Not having seen these ingredients before, she mixed them together and served them with a sausage.

---

<sup>3</sup>Not matching, that would be cringe-worthy.

Typically, the dish is made from steamed then fried pork sausage, cut into bite-sized pieces and served with fries, mayonnaise, tomato sauce and sprinkled with curry powder. Upon hearing this story from our Berlin guide, we felt compelled to give them a try. The next day we decided to go to the original store that started selling them in 1960. It actually tasted surprisingly better than it looked, but we would never have bothered even trying the dish if it was not for the story!<sup>4</sup>

### ***Story 3: Ampelmann***

Ampelmännchen is the name for the human figure depicted in the green and red signals at pedestrian lights in Germany. The East Berlin Ampelmännchen, a male figure with a hat, was first installed in 1969 and after reunification in 1990 they started to gradually get replaced by the generic West German Ampelmännchen. This caused protests, and as a result the East German Ampelmännchen was reintroduced in both East and West German cities. As one of the few features of communist East Germany to have survived the fall of the Iron Curtain, it has now become an iconic symbol that adorns a variety of clothing items and souvenirs under the brand Ampelmann.

We were so fascinated by this story and brand that we bought up big in one of their many stores: baseball cap, beanie, t-shirts, socks, lollies, coffee mug, laptop bag, shot glasses, wine glasses and even doormats. Granted, I may have slightly gone overboard — but I did stop short of buying an actual traffic light. (Only because it would have been a bit more difficult to get back home.)

## **THIS IS THE POWER OF STORIES WITH A MAGNETIC ATTRACTION.**

These stories I share over and over, all the time. I don't talk about the facts, or the product benefits, not even the quality of the product.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>We even arrived 30 minutes before it opened yet still waited.

<sup>5</sup>Although the quality on all was outstanding and the Ampelmann wine glasses were the best I have ever had ... I wish I'd bought more.



## Your stories, your brand

If you search the definition of ‘brand’, you will find an enormous range of terms and phrases that vary greatly. You will also find many articles on how hard it is to define ‘brand’.

Marty Neumeier, who is a leading expert on brands and author of such books as *The Brand Gap* and *The Brand Flip*, defines brand by stating what a brand *isn’t*: ‘A brand is not a logo. A brand is not an identity. A brand is not a product.’ Neumeier then adds that ‘a brand is a person’s gut feeling about a product, service, or organisation’. I like this definition as it implies that brand perception is an emotional gut feeling.

My favourite definition of brand, however, comes from Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, who is widely quoted as saying, ‘Your brand is what other people say about you when you’re not in the room.’

My variation of that is:

### **YOUR BRAND IS THE STORIES PEOPLE SHARE ABOUT YOU WHEN YOU ARE NOT IN THE ROOM.**

Brand is the cumulative result of a company’s actions. Just like an individual, your brand will be affected negatively or positively by what you do and what you say ... not by your intentions, but by your behaviour. (I would love to take credit for that insight, but it was the great Dr Stephen Covey who said, ‘We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behaviour.’)

A company’s actions are determined by a combination of the company’s culture, values, desired behaviours, purpose, vision, mission and strategy. Every organisation will have different names for all of these, but collectively they are their brand because they influence how people behave.

Throughout this book, when I refer to ‘brand’ I am using this as an overarching word for culture, values, behaviours, strategy, purpose, mission and vision.

If a company values ‘win at all costs’ over ‘fairness and doing the right thing’, that will influence employee behaviour and therefore the company brand.

If a company has a vision statement to be the ‘most profitable in the industry’ as opposed to the ‘most respected in the industry’, that will influence their behaviour and therefore their brand.

This might be the behaviour of the CEO in a press conference, or the call centre person answering enquiries.

**EVERY SINGLE EMPLOYEE IN EVERY ORGANISATION CAN  
AFFECT THE BRAND POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY,  
EVERY SINGLE DAY.**

When you think about how you feel about a particular company and the stories you share about it, they are normally based on a positive or negative interaction you have personally had or a positive or negative story you have heard.

The reality is people are already sharing stories about you, whether you know it or not ... and regardless of whether you like those stories or not!

This applies to individuals as well as any business ... whether you are a small, one- or two-person company or a large multinational; a not-for-profit or a government organisation; a start-up or a corporate institution; a school or a sporting team; a religious institution or a political party; a local café or a global franchise ...

Your employees share stories about you. So do your past employees, your potential employees, your customers, your potential customers, your competitors, your suppliers, your partners, your stakeholders ... and so on.

**IT IS NEVER TOO EARLY OR TOO LATE TO START TAKING  
CONTROL OF YOUR BRAND ... ALTHOUGH I AM A STRONG  
BELIEVER THAT THE EARLIER YOU DO IT THE BETTER.**

I mean, if the stories people share about you define your brand, then wouldn't you want to have some influence over those stories?

# What is brand storytelling?

Using stories to communicate your brand is often referred to as 'brand storytelling'. Sometimes it's helpful, when defining what something is, to define what it is not. So, as Marty Neumeier said, it is not about a logo or a product. Brand storytelling is also not a tagline, or a timeline of your company. It's not a slick corporate video or a TV commercial. It's not a brochure or your purpose, vision and values stated on a page. And it is definitely not just one story.

It's a combination of lots of stories.

It's a deliberate approach to find and share stories, both internally with your employees and externally with your customers ... and others.

It's about being very clear on what your brand is and using stories to attract people to that brand.

To me, brand storytelling is a deliberate and sustainable approach to authentically communicate your brand, internally and externally, through the stories you share and the stories people share about you based on your actions and behaviours.

It's not an easy process and it's not quick.

**BUT DONE RIGHT, DONE AUTHENTICALLY, IT CAN  
STRENGTHEN YOUR ORGANISATION AND HELP YOU  
ATTRACT AND RETAIN TALENTED EMPLOYEES AND  
LOYAL CUSTOMERS.**

So, we'll look at the science behind that attraction next.



# A magnetic attraction

On the same holiday I mentioned previously, I visited the Stasi Museum in Germany. My husband, Steve (who would happily spend a vast amount of time in museums), and elder daughter, Alex (who is studying International Studies and Politics at university), were thrilled about the trip. On the other hand, our younger daughter, Jess, was coerced into going with the promise of a shoe-shopping expedition afterwards, and I was fine as long as it was a 90-minute visit and not an all-day event.

The Stasi Museum documents the influence of the German Democratic Republic Secret Service from 1950 to 1989. The layout of the museum is typical, with displays, images and text explaining their significance. Along the walls were the timelines of what happened in each year.

Jess and I stayed close to each other in order to make our own early secret escape to the café downstairs. Before our departure, we went into every room reading the information: mostly dry facts with an unbelievable number of acronyms. After a while Jess said to me, 'I am reading everything, but nothing is entering my brain.' Can you relate to this? I certainly could!

However, then we came to one room that had stories of individuals who were personally affected by the Stasi. For example, one woman recounted how she was targeted with personalised psychological attacks. This included entering her house and moving things around when she wasn't there, or letting her bike tyres down while she was doing her grocery

shopping. She said the incidents were bizarre things that ‘no-one would believe’. Consequently, if you mentioned it to anyone, they would think you were either paranoid or mad.

Another man shared a story about receiving continuous anonymous letters about his wife having an affair. He knew it was the Stasi’s attempt to destroy his family by eroding trust in their personal relationships.

Jess and I stayed in this room and read every single story. We stayed in that particular room longer than any of the other rooms.

**SUFFICE TO SAY, THE STORIES NOT ONLY ATTRACTED US,  
BUT ALSO MAINTAINED OUR ATTENTION.**

And here is why that happened.

## Made for memory

Neuroscientist Carmen Simon is the author of *Impossible to Ignore: Creating Memorable Content to Influence Decisions*. Her research shows that the whole purpose of the brain is to make decisions. Do we stay or go? Do we go this way or that way? Reading this very sentence, you are subconsciously deciding whether to keep reading the next sentence or to put the whole book down.

Simon’s research shows that every decision is based on memory. We don’t touch a flame because we know from memory that it can burn. We don’t eat chilli because we know from memory that it doesn’t agree with us. We don’t drink too much alcohol because we know the next day we will get a hangover.<sup>1</sup>

The research also showed that ‘people act on what they remember, not on what they forget’. And that for us to remember anything it first needs to grab our brain’s attention. Consequently, the main reason we don’t remember stuff is because it didn’t grab our attention in the first place!

---

<sup>1</sup> Okay, often we forget that bit or are prepared to suffer the consequences.

For example, when I was 17, my brother-in-law drove me to work every day for two months. Then I got my licence and drove myself for the first time ... and got hopelessly lost. Why? Because all the trips beforehand I was not paying attention. Has this ever happened to you?

‘Death by PowerPoint’ is another example of this. When we sit in presentations full of bullet points after bullet points, we are bored because nothing grabs our attention.

It’s often only when someone shares a story (a real, relevant story) that it gets our attention and we remember it. Most of the time, the story is potentially the only thing we remember.

**CAN YOU RECALL A GREAT SPEAKER YOU SAW YEARS AGO? WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER FROM THEIR PRESENTATION? CHANCES ARE IT’S THEIR STORY, OR A STORY THEY SHARED.**

As Simon’s research proves, we need to engage the brain first, to get its attention, which then leads to memory, which then leads to a decision.

As Simon says,<sup>2</sup> ‘Your buyer’s decision to purchase will happen in the future, but you can influence those decisions in your favor now.’

When we talk about buyers, we mean more than in the literal sense of buying a product or service. Yes, that is important, but it also refers to people deciding to work for you, recommend you, invest in you, follow you or defend you.

## **Draw on emotions, not logic**

If you’ve read any of my previous books then you likely will have heard about some crucial research by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, showing how emotion plays a significant role in our ability to make decisions. (But just in case you haven’t I’m going to tell you about it again here.)

---

<sup>2</sup> See what I did there?

While many of us believe logic drives our choices, the reality is that we have already made an emotional decision and we then use logic to justify the choice—to ourselves and to others.

Damasio's research involved examining people with damage to their frontal lobe, which is the area of the brain that generates emotions and helps to regulate personality. Except for their inability to feel or express emotions, the participants had normal intellectual capacity in terms of working memory, attention, language comprehension and expression. However, they were unable to make decisions.

The vast majority of participants could describe in logical terms what choice they thought they should make, but they found it difficult to actually make a decision, including simple ones like deciding what to eat. This indecision came from them going over the pros and cons for each option again and again. Presented with a choice, we struggle to make a decision without some form of emotion influencing it.

This is the reason why stories have such a magnetic ability — an ability to stick in our memory and then sway our decisions. They draw on our emotion, not just on logic, data and bullet points.

Daniel Goleman, author of the best-selling book *Emotional Intelligence*, explains that our brain's neocortex is the reason our emotions are so powerful. The emotional centre of the brain can actually 'influence the functioning of the rest of the brain'.

Good stories make us feel something as we listen to them, whether that's excitement, fear, anger or enthusiasm. Consequently, we feel something towards the person telling the story, which helps create connection.

**THE SAME EFFECT CAN HAPPEN WHEN COMPANIES SHARE STORIES. IT CAN HELP CREATE AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION, AN ATTRACTION TO YOUR BRAND.**



In Tim Duggan's 2020 book *Cult Status: How to Build a Business People Adore* he stated,

*If you're not controlling the message and telling your story, your intended audience can't create an emotional connection with you that builds trust and empathy and creates the potential for a cult brand.*

## Pulling power

The research in this chapter proves that tapping into emotion not only aids our understanding of a logical message, but also helps us retain that information. We are more likely to remember a good story as opposed to a bunch of facts, because a story makes us feel something.

As American poet Maya Angelou famously said, 'People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.'

**AND THAT FEELING CAN BE LONG LASTING. LIKE A  
MAGNET, ONCE THERE IS A CONNECTION, IT CAN BE  
VERY HARD TO PULL AWAY FROM IT.**



# ‘Just give me the story!’

‘Tell me the facts and I’ll learn. Tell me the truth and I’ll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.’

If this Native American proverb is true, then why in business do we have such a bias towards facts? Why do we communicate and influence with data points, graphs, bullet points and all the boring stuff, and largely ignore stories?

Why is it that we’ve heard ‘Just give me the facts’ many times in our career and have probably never heard ‘Just give me the story’?

Don’t get me wrong: data is important in business, and logic and facts are critical for credibility and judgement, but, as the previous chapter demonstrates, they don’t inspire or influence in the same way stories do.

The reality is we need both. Yet we have a misguided bias towards facts. An example of this is if you look at the ‘About Us’ section on a company’s website, annual report or sometimes even in the foyer of their head office. It’s usually a list of dates and significant events about how and when the company was formed.<sup>1</sup> But these efforts in documenting and communicating this history are often misguided. While this history could be interesting to some, it rarely helps us connect and engage our employees and customers. Unlike our heritage.

---

<sup>1</sup> By the way, changing the name from ‘About Us’ to ‘Our Story’ does not make it a story.

**HERITAGE AND HISTORY ARE BOTH IMPORTANT, BUT  
WHILE HISTORY TENDS TO EDUCATE AND INFORM,  
HERITAGE HAS THE POWER TO CONNECT  
AND INFLUENCE.**

## Heritage over history

To help explain what I mean here, I'd like you to introduce you to my favourite anthropologist of all time. Well, unfortunately, Indiana Jones was not available, so I contacted my favourite *corporate* anthropologist, Michael Henderson.

Michael has over 25 years' experience working with corporates on their culture. He has authored eight books on organisation culture, leadership and performance, including *Get Tribal* and *Above the Line*. He was born in the UK, raised in Africa and educated in New Zealand.

I have had the privilege of seeing Michael present on several occasions and have discussed all things storytelling and culture with him over a few glasses of wine. I spoke to Michael specifically for this book via Zoom on a cold winter's morning.<sup>2</sup>

Michael shared with me that the word 'heritage' comes from the Latin word *hereditatem*, meaning 'to inherit'. This can be in the form of money, land and objects — or it could be in the form of tradition. 'History is all about the facts and heritage is all about the stories,' Michael explained.

Like me, Michael believes that heritage stories are often overlooked in many organisations. To explain why this is something that needs to be rectified, let's look at how heritage works.

Michael shared with me the background of the *Seanchaí* (pronounced shan-a-key), who were traditional Irish storytellers. Through their stories they were the custodians of history for centuries in Ireland. Their role was to be the carriers of folklore, to recite ancient lore and tales of wisdom. Michael describes this as providing a 'profound cultural gift'.

---

<sup>2</sup>I was disappointed he was wearing a beanie as opposed to a fedora like Indy.

You see successful examples of traditional storytellers in other cultures too: the Australian Aboriginal and New Zealand Māori elders, for example. They pass on wisdom to ensure the culture is not lost. These Indigenous peoples, as well as religions around the world, rely on the use of stories to communicate their beliefs and customs. Even the word 'folklore' means the traditional beliefs, customs and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth.

We often encounter examples of this folklore while travelling. Take Ireland's Blarney Stone, a popular tourist attraction. Apparently kissing the stone endows the kisser with the gift of the gab. No-one really knows if this is true, hence why you will often see it written or told as 'according to legend'. But the story is so powerful it is communicated and passed on regardless.

I'm sure you've been somewhere in the world and thrown a coin into a fountain or rubbed a statue to 'bring you luck'. For example, Abraham Lincoln's nose in Oak Ridge Cemetery; the boot of the John Harvard statue at Harvard University; or even the testicles on the Charging Bull statue just off Wall Street in New York.

Are these stories true? Do they really bring you good luck? Who knows, but it's the story that has a magnetic pull for us. I've been to the John Harvard statue in the grounds of Harvard University. The statue itself is mounted on a big concrete block about 180 centimetres tall, with his boot hanging over the edge. I did not have any evidence at all that rubbing the toe would bring me good luck, yet I rubbed it anyway ... because the story made it real. (I have also been to the Charging Bull in New York but stopped short of rubbing the testicles ... too weird.)

As times goes by, it's the stories that make things real, not the actual event. Michael says that over time, 'Stories move beyond the truth ... beyond the actual facts.'

## **Stories that stand the test of time**

Now, I'm not suggesting you just make stuff up, but as Michael's work shows us, over time the story is what makes it real for a whole new generation. The story is what people connect and engage with. Without the ongoing sharing of the story, the actual event will be lost and forgotten.

For example, have you heard the story of Roger Corbett, the retired CEO of Woolworths, and a shopping trolley? (No, it's not a joke.) Apparently when he was running Woolworths' retail operations in 1998 he came across an empty Woolies trolley and pushed it all the way from Sydney's Circular Quay near the Opera House to the Town Hall supermarket: a 1.5-kilometre trip.

At the time, Corbett was creating a culture of attention to detail and cost reduction. He retired in 2006, yet that story is still shared today; it's formed part of the Woolworths heritage.

The other story I often hear comes from when Apple was developing the very first iPod. Apparently when engineers completed the prototype, they showed it to Steve Jobs for his approval. Jobs was not happy, saying it was too big. The engineers explained that it was simply impossible to make it any smaller. Jobs responded by dropping it in a fish tank and as the air bubbles floated to the top, he said, 'Those are air bubbles so it means there's space in there. Make it smaller.'

I also think Steve Jobs knew a thing or two about the power of stories, considering this quote is attributed to him: 'The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision, values and agenda of an entire generation that is to come.'

Generations on, people are still kissing the Blarney Stone in Ireland, and rubbing parts of a statue to bring good luck, and will continue to do so for generations to come. Likewise, the stories of Roger Corbett and Steve Jobs can still influence the vision, values and agenda of an entire generation that is to come.

You can too, if you use the right stories.

## The value of heirlooms

Heritage stories can be created from behaviours, such as Corbett returning the trolley and Jobs dropping the iPod in the fish tank, but they can also be associated with heirlooms. Remember the word 'heritage' comes from the word 'inherit': often there is a valuable story behind something that has been passed on in your company.

'Just give me the story!'

My father recently passed away and as Mum cleared some of his belongings out, she asked us if we wanted anything. It was amazing that what held no significance to one sibling held enormous significance to another. From card holders he'd had made for him and his friends when they would play cards every Saturday night after church, to a jewellery box he'd made, to his old set of screwdrivers. They have no monetary value, but the story is what gives them value.

## **THE STORY CONNECTS AND CREATES VALUE FOR THE AUDIENCE.**

During lockdown throughout the coronavirus pandemic, there was an increase in social media challenges asking people to post a travel photo a day for 10 days without explanation. Or a music album that meant something to them but again without explanation. I found these infuriating because without the backstory, it doesn't mean anything.

Michael shared with me a time years ago when he worked in a call centre in London for a magazine that sold cars:

*In the lobby a fake campside fire sat in the middle of the floor, as the first executive team meeting had taken place around a fireplace. The fire symbolised equality for all, as people sitting around a fire can all see each other and hear one another. The story of the fire was referred to in every sales meeting and in all induction programs and award ceremonies in every branch nationwide.*

The fake campfire was a way of keeping the story alive, connecting current employees with the company values demonstrated in a meeting that took place years earlier. So much more powerful than just stating 'we value equality' ... the story creates the connection.

## **Rituals help tell stories**

It's not only stories behind heirlooms that can provide connection, it's also stories behind rituals. Take for example the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team and the haka they perform before every game. During the 1980s the All Blacks almost stopped performing the haka because the current

players had lost the connection to what it meant. They felt like they were going through the motions.

Michael, who has studied the All Blacks in his work, said:

*Captain Wayne (Buck) Shelford and his Māori colleague Hika Reid said in 1985, 'We either stop doing it or do it properly and understand what it means.' They voted to do it properly, so Buck taught them how. The haka has since become a central and grounding ritual of the team that has the highest winning percentage of any sports team in any sports code across multiple seasons.*

In James Kerr's book *Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us about the Business of Life*, he says, in relation to the haka and rituals, 'Inspiring leaders establish rituals to connect their team to its core narrative, using them to reflect, remind, reinforce and reignite their collective identity.'

I interviewed James about the importance of the stories behind the rituals and he agreed that 'without the story the ritual loses its power'. In fact, in *Legacy* he explores a later time when the All Blacks almost stopped doing the haka again. In 2005, many of the players felt that it had become more about the spectacle and they had lost a personal connection with it. They went through the process of involving all the players to co-create a new haka, with new actions and words. James says that the 'output was a new haka but the outcome was a new connection' and that they had 'revitalised a heritage story'.

James also explains how the most senior players always sweep the sheds after each game. The story goes that after having a few post-game beers the then assistant coach Steve Hansen noticed how untidy the shed was and started to clean it up. The players that were still there started to help him. It got to the point where they would tell the cleaners they would clean up themselves. It's part of their culture of leaving something better than you found it and their value of humility.

## Leave a legacy

A ritual does not have to be hundreds of years old to be part of your heritage; there are modern heritage stories. James believes that the role of leaders is to create stories today for tomorrow, as that can leave a legacy.



'Just give me the story!'

Very few companies focus on their heritage and share stories that create a connection to an event that has happened in the past (even the recent past) or an heirloom or ritual that has been passed on ... very few.

**OUR BIAS TOWARDS FACTS OVER STORIES PREVENTS ORGANISATIONS FROM SUCCESSFULLY COMMUNICATING THINGS THAT MATTER, WHICH CAN CREATE A MAGNETIC ATTRACTION.**

This is why when we step into a professional situation — when we walk through those revolving doors, set up a company website, write a quarterly newsletter, design an induction program, create a social media campaign, or place an artefact from the past in the foyer — we need to share the stories, not just the facts.

So, next time someone says to you 'Just give me the facts', respond with, 'Sure — and how about I throw in a magnetic story as well?' You will at least get them intrigued.

That's why in the next part of this book we are going to look at the five types of magnetic stories you should consider finding and sharing to create a magnetic attraction and lasting impact.