

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *STORIES FOR WORK*

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magnetic STORIES

CONNECT WITH CUSTOMERS AND

ENGAGE EMPLOYEES WITH

BRAND STORYTELLING

FREE
CHAPTER

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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 ...

CASE STORY

Ferguson Plarre Bakehouses, Australia

Ferguson Plarre Bakehouses is a joint family-owned and -operated business in Australia. The Ferguson Plarre history commenced in 1901 in the northern and western suburbs of Melbourne as both families separately established themselves as household names. (Growing up in Melbourne, a pie or vanilla slice from either was always a special treat.)

The families continued trading through both World Wars and the Great Depression, despite the tough conditions. After years of friendly competition, the families merged their businesses to become Ferguson Plarre Bakehouses in 1980. The fourth generation of the Plarre family bought out the Ferguson family in 2012, but kept the well-known name. They still have a very strong brand, with 80 bakehouses across Melbourne. When my mother-in-law promises to bring a cake for dessert but runs out of time to bake one herself, it will always be from Ferguson's.

The CEO is Steve Plarre, who is fourth generation. He runs the company with his brother Mike, who is the General Manager of Manufacturing. Steve lives in Melbourne with his wife, Kate, and two young daughters, Elizabeth and Felicity. He loves to cook and loves exercising, especially running ... which is probably a good thing, being surrounded by pastry all day.

Karaoke cakes

Steve came to my attention in May 2020 during the lockdown restrictions of the coronavirus. I saw one of his ‘Corona-oke’ videos where he was singing and dancing to songs that he had changed the lyrics to. The first one I saw was a parody of the Queen classic ‘I want to break free’: here was a CEO dressed in drag like Freddie Mercury in the famous video clip, and changing the lyrics to ‘I want to bake free’. (You can find the video on YouTube and the Ferguson Plarre Facebook page.)

My first thought was ‘You don’t see too many CEOs doing that’. With my interest piqued, I did a bit of digging around and found a recent interview where Steve explained why he started doing the videos. Basically, he said that their company purpose is ‘To bring happiness to people through amazing experiences’ and if they couldn’t do it their normal way, with a sausage roll or vanilla slice, then maybe they could do it through a bit of karaoke fun.

Some of his other Corona-oke parodies were:

- ‘Vanilla slice slice baby’
- ‘We built this city on sausage rolls’
- ‘Another one bites the crust’.

I contacted Steve and asked if I could have a chat to him about all things brand and storytelling. To my delight he said yes, and we spoke a few days later.¹

I was impressed by Ferguson Plarre’s understanding of the power of storytelling and experimentation with a variety of different forms. Storytelling seemed to be part of the way they communicated. Before I spoke to Steve, I was not even going to have case stories in this book, but they had so many good things to share that I decided a case story was in order.

¹I also interviewed Steve for my Authentic Leadership podcast series, and you can find it at my website or through iTunes or SoundCloud.

Passion for the past

Steve told me that way back in 1997 they had produced a coffee table–style book. It was 100 pages full of pictures and stories that communicated the history of the two families.

The importance of history to the company became clear to me when, during our interview, I asked Steve to tell me a little bit about himself and the family business — and he immediately started to share the story of his great grandfather Otto, who was born in Germany and moved to Melbourne to open up a bakery. While it's a story I know he has told many times before, none of the passion has gone.

Otto grew up in a poor household with his parents and grandparents. His father was a cooper (beer barrel maker), so Otto was the first of the Plarre pastry cooks. Back in those days, dessert was a luxury reserved for the end of the week when or if there was food or money left over for something special. Living frugally back then meant that, for Otto, the real joy of cake came not so much from the ingredients but the fact that he could share it at the end of a long, hard day with his family.

Steve can only assume that at some stage Otto took such enjoyment from being served a meal and dessert with love by his family that it was a feeling he wanted to replicate for others, making it his career. All of this can only be assumed, but Steve has grown up in a household and inside a business where it's clear that the joy they get from running their business is inextricably linked to the happiness they create for others.

Steve acknowledges that you physically don't need a pie or cake to get through the day ... but, emotionally, a great-quality baked treat can bring you that little dash of sunshine! He uses the story of the Plarre family to make sure the staff all understand that it's all about the experience ... great food served with love and passion.

Steve says that Otto's story is 'easy to consume' and 'is real, authentic and memorable'. And this is what draws him to using stories as a way to communicate. The story of Otto Plarre, as well as the founding members of Ferguson's, are all on their website.

Steve makes sure that every Ferguson Plarre franchisee knows that

for every dollar that a customer gives you, 50 cents is for the product — and we'll make that as well as we can — but the other 50 cents is for how you make them feel ... and if customers don't get a return on that second 50 cents, it doesn't matter how good the product is!

He doesn't want anyone to forget the origins of the family business, and he doesn't want to forget it either.

SHARING THE STORY HELPS GROUND HIM AND REMINDS HIM OF THE PASSION.

Defining their brand

When we map what the company has done well against the model outlined in the previous chapters, it's clear they have placed a strong focus on defining their brand. They know exactly what they want their brand to be.

They use a very simple one-pager that they call their 'brand temple'. It's a three-by-three matrix, depicting nine rooms with an overarching roof over the top that states 'Baking People Happy'.

There is real consistency across the rooms. The 'purpose room' declares the company purpose is 'to bring happiness to people through amazing experiences'. A similar room is the 'cause room' which says, 'Help simplify my life and give me little moments of joy'.

This is why the Corona-oke videos were so on brand. They ticked off the purpose (bring happiness) and the cause (little moments of joy). They also encapsulated a lot of the other values such as fun-loving, optimistic and relatable. Tick. Tick. Tick. Courageous. That is a very big tick. It is even congruent with their 'One family' value, as Steve features his two young daughters in some of the clips and his wife, Kate, who has a background in media and web content, even edits the videos.

They are also genuine. Steve plays in a band and writes songs, but he's not trying to launch his singing career through these videos. He is light-hearted with them but throws himself 100 per cent into it and pulls out

some killer dance moves. You sort of get the feeling that he would be dancing around the house singing these songs regardless. There is real, genuine passion, and I admire him for that. (Even though he has destroyed how I'll listen to those Queen songs forever. He's even destroyed my love of Cindy Lauper's song 'Girls just want to have fun' by changing the lyrics to 'Girls just want to have buns' ... but I will forgive him for that.)

**THE CRITICAL TAKEAWAY WE CAN GET FROM THIS IS
THAT YOU NEED TO BE REALLY CLEAR ON WHAT
YOUR BRAND IS, AND THEN STRATEGICALLY DO
THINGS THAT ALIGN WITH THAT.**

There has to be congruence in what you say and what you do.

Experiment with how to share stories

Once clear on their brand, the company experimented with a variety of ways to share stories. Their stores feature historical pictures on the walls. They include images of the owners across the generations, the old horse-drawn delivery carts and original stores. It even includes a copy of Otto's apprenticeship papers and a reference from his boss.

They also had a mural commissioned. With the use of mostly cartoon pictures and a few sentences, the mural manages to tell the story of the company. You could even call it a type of infographic.

The effectiveness of this mural lies in the fact that they didn't go about re-creating the entire timeline that's on their website. They didn't include everything. Steve said they included 'the things we talk about the most and are most proud of. We also chose the stories that we think are most relevant and relatable for our guests.'²

I counted the words on this mural, and in total there are only 168. But with the use of a few words and cartoon pictures, they really do communicate a lot.

² Notice Steve's use of the word 'guests' instead of 'customers'.

Maybe a vignette will do

They include micro stories or vignettes on their coffee cups, embracing the concept that lots of little stories make up your brand. Some might call them ‘fun facts’, but I think they add a bit more than just facts; I’ve decided to call them micro stories.

In 2016 the company was celebrating 115 years. They decided to include several micro stories on their takeaway cups. These included:

- 1901 — How long have we been baking? Put it this way, our first delivery trucks were powered by hay!
- 1925 — Ray Plarre was caned for designing cakes in maths class. Ray’s pain was our gain!
- 1929 — The Great Depression hits. It stretched the dough but we are still here!
- 1935 — A sad year. Fire decimates our bakehouse in Brunswick. Thousands of pies lose their lives!
- 1963 — The Queen visits. Who bakes her sweet treats? You guessed it. Our goodies are fit for a Queen!
- 1966 — The President of the United States asks Ray Plarre to bake his cakes. American–Australian relations get a lot sweeter!

I laughed out loud when I read the one about thousands of pies losing their lives.

They embrace the concept of stories in other ways also, featuring videos about their franchisees on their website. In these videos the franchisees share personal stories of why they joined.

Who knows what ‘axioms’ mean?

Steve often shares stories at their gala awards. Steve says, ‘The stories are for everyone. It’s mostly me trying to use genuine family stories and

attaching them to our “Baking People Happy” message.’ Steve added that for him, ‘It’s always about trying to use real stories to connect back to our brand because real stories are easier to remember and become undeniable axioms of truth.’ I love his insight into ‘axioms of truth’. I’m going to be really honest here: I had to look up what axioms meant. According to the Collins dictionary, an axiom ‘is a statement or idea which people accept as being true’. This goes back to what my favourite corporate anthropologist, Michael Henderson, was saying: that stories can transcend truth.

These stories are also shared as part of the induction process. Every employee and franchisee is scheduled to spend 30 minutes with Steve to be taken through the family history. Steve tells them the founder story about Otto around the dinner table and how the Ferguson Plarre business did not start in the 1900s when Otto first opened his bakery doors ... it started as a spark of gratitude in his mind when he was eating with his family in Germany.

A story by any other name ...

One final aspect worth mentioning with Ferguson Plarre Bakehouses is what they call things on their website. If you go to their website, you will see they have not replaced the ‘About Us’ section with ‘Our Story’ as so many companies do.

What they have is an ‘About Us’ section that provides a brief description about the company. They then have an ‘Our History’ section. While this is in date order like any timeline, it’s written in a way that is more engaging than typical timelines. It includes little stories as well as the significant events that happened in that year. It’s a great example of how you could do a timeline.

They also have separate sections sharing the history behind some of their most popular and iconic products, including the history of the meat pie, lamingtons and Tiddly Oggies ... which I had never heard of but is what they call their Cornish pasties because ‘tiddly oggie’ is Cornish for ‘proper pastry’.

They even share the history of their Not Cross Buns, which don’t have a cross on them but rather a smiley face. The Not Cross Bun was first

created in 2014, solely to bring attention to the fact that major grocery retailers were selling hot cross buns on Boxing Day. Their creation formed a key part of Ferguson Plarre Bakehouses' push to keep Easter special by limiting the sale of hot cross buns to the six weeks before Easter.

They are calling sections on their website what they are: not calling their timeline a 'story', not calling their 'About Us' a story, not calling their history of lamingtons a 'story'. You actually don't see the word 'story' on their website, yet they share a lot of stories.

**IMPLEMENTING STORYTELLING AS A WAY TO
COMMUNICATE YOUR BRAND IS NOT ABOUT
TALKING ABOUT THE WORD 'STORY' — IT'S
ABOUT SHARING ACTUAL STORIES.**

Check and reflect

- Are there creation stories about your business that every new employee should know about?
- Who should share those stories?
- Is your company at the size that the CEO could dedicate individual time to each employee?
- If it's too large for that to happen one on one, how else could you replicate that?
- Could you do something that has nothing to do with selling your products but is still on brand? (Karaoke is not for everyone, but what else could you do?)
- Could you use micro stories in a fun way, like they did with the coffee cups?
- How else could you experiment with sharing and generating stories?