

The Power of Storytelling

People love a good story. Stories are the reason we stay awake late to finish a book, watch a movie or binge watch on Netflix. Stories engage us like little else. So why do we not see more stories used in advertising? If done right, storytelling can make your communications more engaging, more impactful, and more motivating for your brand.



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WHAT IS A STORY?

A story needs to be a clear narrative arc, one scene needs to influence or build upon another to tell a story. Take the example of the Dear Holly ad for Google Chrome. On one hand it is a series of disparate images of a little girl growing up but on the other it is linked by a very clear narrative as the Dad recounts his memories of his daughter's first years. For the purposes of advertising, however, not any story will do. It takes skill and thought to make a story an effective creative tool for your brand.

MEASURING THE POWER OF A GOOD STORY

Millward Brown's global neuroscience practice uses facial coding to demonstrate the power of storytelling as a creative tool to engage viewers, to identify whether a story is working for a brand and how it might be improved. Based on testing thousands of ads facial coding confirms what we have previously found in our Link pre-test: stories have huge potential to both engage the audience and to motivate them.

EMOTIONALLY ENGAGING NARRATIVES

While most consumers are indifferent toward brands most of the time, stories can help brands engage people and overcome their indifference.

The first job of any advertising is to engage the audience, to attract and hold their attention, and story ads do just that. Story ads typically result in greater enjoyment and engagement

than non-story ads, observed in both more expressive facial reactions and stronger ratings on the key Link questions, indicating a greater ability to attract attention and be remembered.

STORIES CAN CREATE EMOTIONAL JOURNEYS THAT MAKE US WANT TO ACT

Once an ad has attracted attention it must then establish a motivating impression of the brand. Academic research has shown that narrative transportation, or losing oneself in the flow of the story, predicts how well a viewer will recall a story and whether they will act at a later date. Our research confirms that, if well-crafted, story ads can have more motivational power than non-story ads. The most successful messaging occurs in stories where the brand's role is necessary, believable, and integral to the plot.

STORIES CAN BUILD BRAND CUES AND ASSOCIATIONS

Story ads tend to be better branded than non-story ads. A story allows you to build and utilize cues that may have nothing to do with your product. Strong narrative ads allow for significantly more recognizable brand cues and can help you expand beyond your category. For example, through their narrative ads, British sauce brand HP has become associated with eating a bacon sandwich—the scenario itself has become a cue for using the brand. This cuing would be very difficult to establish with ads that depended on a non-narrative appeal to the rational.

STORIES CAN MAKE INFORMATION MORE COMPELLING

Well-deployed stories can and do improve an ad's impact, and they are great instruments for engaging people since they generate more emotion and are more likely to be enjoyed than other types of ads. Storytelling can also be an excellent tool for conveying information as long as the brand has a clear role in the story—in other words, the brand cannot be an afterthought. It must have a role, and the role it plays must be believable.

TO BE EFFECTIVE STORIES MUST FIT WITH THE BRAND

We know that stories are powerful devices, but our research shows that story ads are not always more persuasive than non-story ads. This ineffective persuasion is likely caused by a lack of brand fit in many story ads and a consequent lack of believability. While a story might be enough to engage viewers and generate emotions, if it jars with how people think of a brand, then it won't necessarily be compelling. The mere presence of a story in an ad is not sufficient to make it persuasive, and a bad story is worse than no story at all. If they don't relate to the brand, or are not integral, then stories can make ads less compelling.

STORYTELLING: POWERFUL WHEN DONE RIGHT

Neuroscience techniques that use real-time facial coding can be very helpful in determining whether a story ad is appropriate and working for your brand. Are people responding where you would expect? If not, why not? Does what viewers experience help explain what they take away from the ad? Employing storytelling successfully is about identifying the drivers of people's responses.

While there may be commonalities among summary metrics (lots of expressions are better than no expressions, more smiles mean more enjoyment, etc.), stories come in many shapes and sizes, so there is no one type of story or storyline that is most effective for all ads. Knowing whether the reactions are correct for the story you are trying to tell is much more useful. You need to know whether your story is working for your brand.

And rather than merely jumping on the storytelling bandwagon, know when to employ a story and when to choose a more straightforward approach. Stories are able to evoke stronger enjoyment and engagement, but without a clear and compelling role for your brand, the emotion generated by the story will be wasted.

Key Takeaways

- Stories can help brands to engage people
- Facial coding can determine if storytelling is working for the brand
- The stories told need to be appropriate to the brand and its objectives