

SOCIAL-MEDIA STORYPOWER

By Ellis Henican

THE 20-SECOND TAKEAWAY

Pitches, slogans and arguments all have their place in the brand-marketing toolbox. But nothing builds a brand like a story well told. With the rise of Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and the rest, marketers have a wonderful new array of message-delivery platforms. So what do we say once we get there? Random tweets fade into the ether. One-off blog posts aren't getting it done anymore. When it comes to building successful brands on social media, marketers need to tell their stories far more compellingly. This takes practice and insight. But the methods are highly learnable. They involve applying time-tested narrative techniques to the digital architecture of social media. And the results can be impressive indeed. Greater connectivity. Increased credibility. Deeper connections to the brand. Targeted with the power and precision of well crafted stories, a brand's social-media strategy will come vividly alive.

STORIES HAVE ALWAYS CONNECTED US

Anthropologists have an expression. What defines our humanity, they say, are the stories we share. In every culture at every point in history, from the caveman's campfire to the modern suburban den, people tell stories. That's how values are imparted and cultures passed down. That's how people come to share a unified point of view. "I'm a sports fan...I'm a Democrat...I'm a Henican"—most of us don't get that way by careful study or comparative analysis. Our basic human allegiances, to toothpaste brands and to Grandma, are formed from the stories we hear through our lives. Why do you think so many families share the same sense of humor? It's because they've laughed together at their wacky relatives and traded tales from last summer's vacation. Stories are what we use to pull each other in.

HOW ARE SOCIAL-MEDIA STORIES DIFFERENT FROM THE REGULAR KIND?

They're shorter, snappier, more direct and far more interactive. Often, they are dialogues. Think of social-media storytelling like a book with many short chapters. You can say a lot—in bite sizes. Social media isn't the place for long-winded brand promotions. The platforms don't lend themselves to pushy selling or overt arguments. Attention spans are too short for that. The competition's too keen. The initial space limitations—140 characters! one Instagram! a one-line status update!—can be brutally severe. So dish it up in a hurry, or they won't be hanging around. The trick is learning to use the brevity and fluidity to your brand's social-media advantage. Write more like a comic—set-up, punch set-up, punch—and less like a novelist. And stay with it. Approach social-media storytelling like a soap opera or a miniseries. Your point gets made detail by detail over time.

ELLIS

HENICAN

BRANDS ARE STORIES, AFTER ALL

It's just that sometimes, they aren't effectively told. Social storytelling has to begin with clear understanding of what the brand is. Are we the comfortable low-cost airline? Are we the razor blade that stays sharper than the rest? Are we the blog or the bank or the butcher that someone like you wouldn't dare be without? Is our brand the fastest, the sexiest or the most eco-friendly? The stories we tell should always support the brand's true core. Don't know where to begin? Pretend you're sitting in a bar or a coffee shop, and you're trading stories with friends. Start with this: Why is our brand special, and how did it get that way? The stories will begin to flow. If you're bored repeating them, you need some better ones. Here's a good rule of thumb: Don't ever tell a story you wouldn't listen to.

GETTING GOOD AT THIS

Centuries ago, the Greeks discovered something about narrative structure, how to build a story so people will stay engaged: Stasis, crisis, resolution with some character and setting tossed in. The brightest minds in Silicon Valley haven't improved upon that. It works as well for brands on Facebook as it did for Aristotle. We've just found some new settings and stepped up the speed. Here are eight principles for telling great brand stories on social media. They won't turn you into a master overnight. But plant them in your head. You'll definitely be on your way.

1. TONE MATTERS

Funny is good. So is sentimental. So is sexy. So is hard-driving and rough. Social stories can convey almost any emotion. What's important is that the story you tell appropriately reflect the brand you are building. Fast, accurate, omniscience — those are great themes for a global media company. They're wrong for a day spa. Get silly, if you want to, about a new ice-cream flavor. Tell reverent stories about a funeral home. Please avoid, "We put the FUN in funeral."

ANY OTHER QUESTIONS TO GET US STARTED?

Sure. These aren't the most original. But they'll get you thinking. And the best stories will be the ones that you tell to each other twice. Try these.

- Why are we so passionate about what we're doing here?
- Who's benefitting from it?
- Who's the biggest character on our staff?
- What unexpected things have our customers done lately?
- Will you help us dream up our next great idea?
- Where did our last one come from?

2. CHARACTERS WELCOME

Tell your brand's social-media story through the actions of real people. What cool thing did the founder do today? What's the craziest email that just came in? Pass along the buzz you're receiving, even some of the criticism. People—that's what brings attention to brands. Whatever the point of the story, tell it through people. Other people will be interested in them.

3. SHOW VULNERABILITY

Bragging almost never works in social media. Being open does. Admit mistakes. Acknowledge the achievements of others. Answer customer concerns. Treat critics respectfully. Humility shows confidence and builds respect.

4. DON'T BE CONFLICT AVERSE

All great stories need conflict, just like heroes need villains. Start asking: "Who can we engage with?" And then engage. All in good fun, of course.

5. ANSWER BACK

Nothing keeps a great story going like a vibrant back-and-forth. Add some new details. Answer complaints. Throw in a fresh wrinkle. Let people know the brand isn't sleeping. It's paying attention to them.

6. BE MEDIA OPEN

Add links. Add sound. Add video. Add smell when that comes around. They're all great story aids, as long as the narrative point isn't overwhelmed.

7. DON'T GET HIJACKED OUT THERE

People will trash you on your own Facebook page. That's hard for some brands to accept. That didn't happen so much in the advertising-and-PR days. Welcome to social-media democracy. You can't control or fully censor what is said about you. (Which isn't the same as saying you have to give a free platform for profanity or offensive slurs.). The best way to counter negative comments is to craft great stories that draw attention away. If your stories are good enough, no one will notice the bad stuff.

8. DO IT NOW

Enough said.