

The art of storytelling

Shaping micro-stories
within a brand story

Creating and managing
brand value™

Interbrand



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Shaping micro-stories within a brand story

by Michael Mitchell

Once upon a time, before the Internet, there were fewer ways a brand could tell its story. Today, in our ever-changing mobile/social/viral world, it's never been easier to target and reach an audience—and also never harder to stand out and grab the attention of consumers faced with brand communications wherever they go.

Brands succeeding in this landscape all have one vital thing in common: they've mastered the art of storytelling. They know the different shapes stories take, and they understand that the key to connecting with audiences is to make them feel something.

Volkswagen does this in "Smiles," their 2012 commercial filled with laughter. Starting with babies, then adults and ending with the elderly cracking up uncontrollably, it closes with the line, "It's not the miles, it's how you live them." There are no cars on screen. The emotional effect is all that's necessary—an effect that the brand amplified through an online portal inviting drivers to share their own smile stories. While an established brand, like Volkswagen, may feel more

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comfortable speaking to our hearts and confident about not showing their product, the truth is, any brand can do this.

The first trick is knowing the larger story behind your brand, and finding where these smaller stories fit in. Each Volkswagen commercial, from "Smiles" to their iconic 2011 Super Bowl spot "The Force," is a micro-story within the larger Volkswagen brand story about delivering "the people's car." The second, perhaps more important trick, is knowing that these stories take different shapes.

We all know that traditional stories have an arc—with a beginning, middle and end. But brands aren't traditional subjects for stories. At Interbrand, we believe that brands are living business assets, capable of

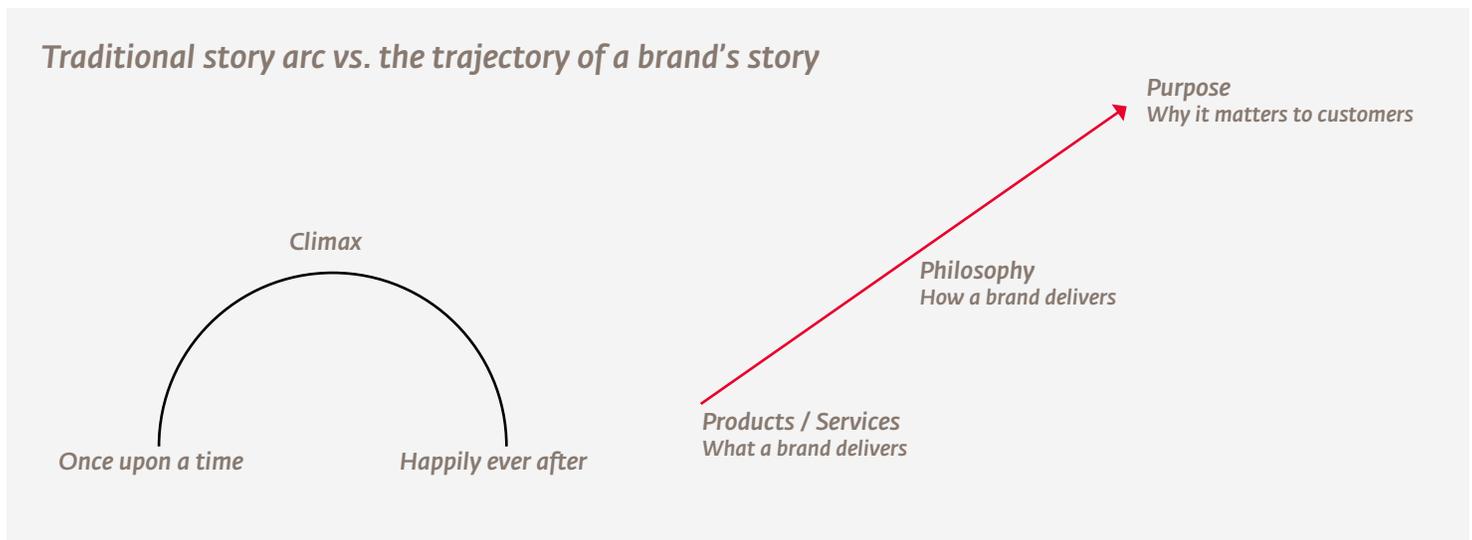
transformation and able to evolve with the changing world. This sets up a beginning and middle but, ideally, a brand's story should have no end in sight.

Shaping a brand's story

Rather than an arc, a brand's story has more of a trajectory. It's angled up and out toward the future, on a constant quest toward progress and what's next. This essential narrative is rooted in the brand's strategy, specifically its positioning—the governing statement that defines what a brand delivers, how it delivers and why it matters to customers.

We can plot these ideas along that trajectory. Products or services (what a brand delivers) sit closest to the axis. Philosophy (how a brand delivers) sits along the center of the line. And purpose (why it matters to customers) sits at the highest, most forward-looking point. (See fig. 1)

Figure 1



When a brand's *what*, *how* and *why* are codified in its strategy, they can be translated into timeless communications through messaging—truly solidifying an expansive, brand-defining story.

Sending a message

Messaging is key to storytelling. It's the carefully crafted language—filled with human emotion—that brings a brand's positioning to life. It turns the *what*, *how* and *why* into a story and provides the springboard from which shorter, more targeted micro-stories can jump, evolve and ultimately strengthen a brand.

From brand story to micro-story

With the foundation set, where do micro-stories fit? Think of them as chapters in an ambitious novel or episodes in an epic TV season. With a brand's story serving as the compass, micro-stories are opportunities to explore along the journey.

They do double duty, telling their own tale while also advancing the larger narrative. And they allow us to craft compelling story arcs, with beginnings, middles and ends. This can help strengthen the brand where it

may be falling short. The right micro-story can realign brand expression with business goals, redirecting customer attention to a specific aspect of the brand—products, philosophy or purpose—and emphasize it, elevate it, and make it the hero.

Even when they're centered on the most pedestrian parts of a brand, great micro-stories can be dynamic and engaging—eliciting emotion through inspired branded content.

The right micro-story can help realign brand expression with business goals, redirect customer attention, and help strengthen a brand where it may be falling short

The importance of content strategy

There are many ways to deploy micro-stories along the trajectory of the larger brand story. (See fig. 2) The key is staying strategic and rooted in brand messaging. Developing a strong content strategy that offers guidance on where, when and how to implement micro-stories—online or

offline channels, social or traditional media, created or curated content—will make all the difference in the impact these targeted narratives have.

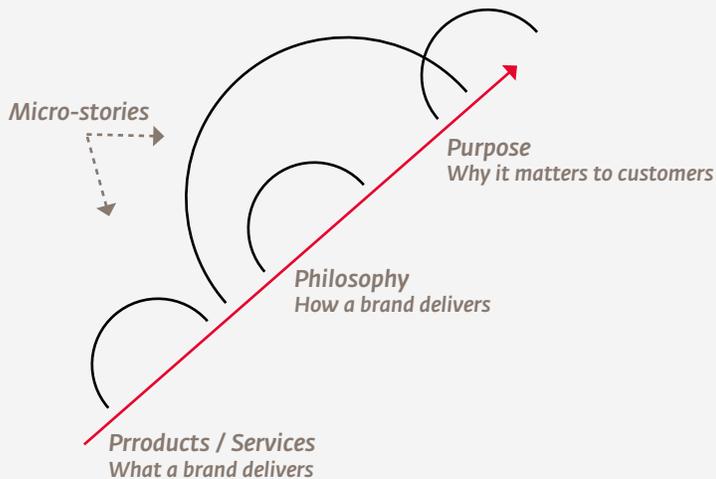
For example, micro-stories can align with the customer journey, enhancing customer experience by presenting targeted, timely narratives that help customers engage with, buy from and—ideally—remain loyal to a brand. They can be incorporated across the spectrum of retail, pop-up, sponsorship and online experiences.

They can also live within product launches, demonstrating how a new offering anticipates customer needs and transforms desires. Just look at the launches of the iPod, the iPhone and the iPad. Each one is a micro-story in the larger Apple saga about revolution and creating magical, personalized experiences through technology.

Our post-digital world offers innumerable opportunities to experiment with micro-stories. How do we encourage involvement and customer participation? Is it through character and humor, like Old Spice and its "Man Your Man Could Smell Like" viral

Figure 2

Content strategy helps inform where, when, and how to plot micro-stories along a brand's story



campaign? Is it through new technologies that change customer behavior and invite participation, like Nike's FuelBand? Is it a mixture of both, or something entirely new?

A strong content strategy can help answer these questions. It can help determine whether to flex a micro-story across a brand's larger story, or hone in on a specific point of focus; whether to create an arc that emphasizes a brand's philosophy or a tangential storyline that's inspired by a brand's most progressive ideas—and creative enough to take a brand to new heights. As more brands take chances online—like Pepsi Max's "Uncle Drew" series or Chipotle's award-winning "Cultivate Campaign"—the benefits of great content strategy are becoming increasingly evident.

In a globalized world, micro-stories can also help multinationals feel more local. Truly global brands, like Coca-Cola, tell local stories all the time. But the key to the brand's success is that each culturally specific micro-story is clearly and consistently rooted in Coca-Cola's grand narrative about happiness.

The challenge and opportunity

The key to effective storytelling—at all levels—is finding that balance between having a living and breathing expression while still remaining true to the core *what*, *how* and *why* of a brand. We live in changing times, which means brands must continue telling authentic and differentiated stories that reflect our evolving world in order to remain relevant.

If that happens then maybe, just maybe—like the joyful laughs in the Volkswagen commercial—they will live happily ever after. ■

Keys to shaping smart stories

Think big

Great, progressive brands have a core, defining story that lives on. An ambitious and emotional narrative can help guide a brand and open infinite opportunities for micro-stories to target audiences.

Be selective

Make each micro-story just that—micro. There's no need to say everything in every communication. As long as micro-stories ladder up to the core essence of the brand, being selective is effective.

Flex worldwide

Going global means getting local. If the brand's story is expansive enough, it will allow more opportunity for micro-stories to flex at local levels. Embrace that dynamism, because different parts of the world respond to different styles of storytelling.

Stay strategic

Online or offline, guerilla or broadcast—each micro-story is a chance to activate and reinforce a brand's messaging and express its personality through dynamic, branded content. With careful and strategic implementation, brands can truly engage customers in intimate, inspiring and impactful ways.



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As a writer and storyteller, Michael has helped brands like AT&T, GE, Toyota, Royal Brunei Airlines, Standard Chartered and Opera Australia use language creatively—helping them stand out and tell their stories to the world. Joining Interbrand in 2010, Michael has worked in our New York, Sydney and Singapore offices.

Prior to Interbrand, Michael was a financial marketing writer at OppenheimerFunds. Before that, he earned a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from The New School in New York.

He believes in the creative power of words. When chosen carefully, they have the ability to truly transform a brand—creating real, emotional connections with audiences.