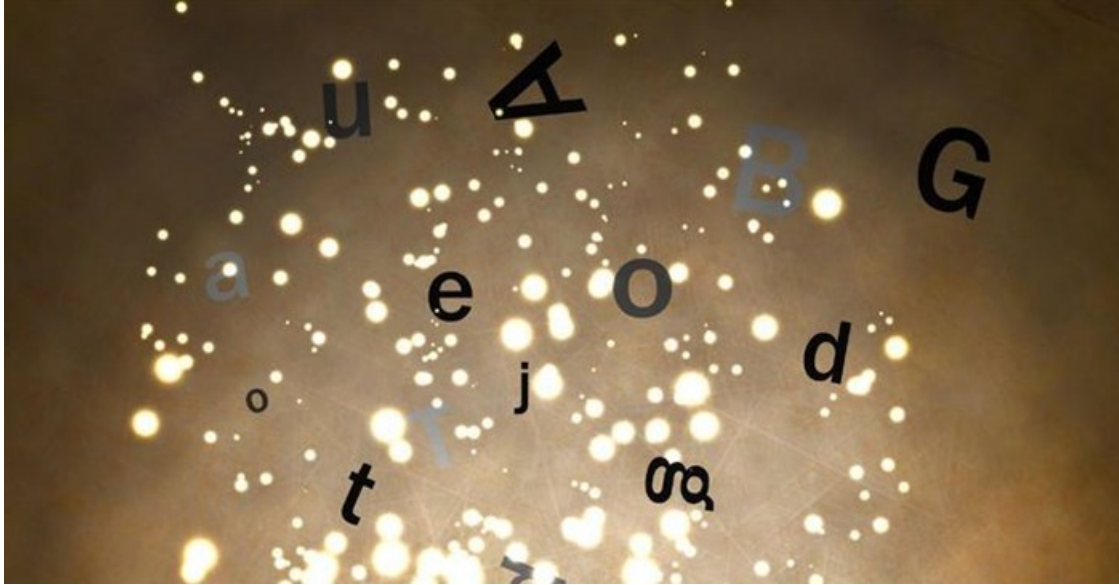


The compelling power of good storytelling in advertising

By  Garikai Nhongo

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Everyone loves a good story. We all love a compelling storyline that gets us involved, pulls at our emotions and keeps us on the edge of our seats. That's why we love books, movies and TV.



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Storytelling is not unique to any culture or geographical region, we all told stories from time immemorial and we all loved them. The love of stories doesn't discriminate against people's age, gender, occupation or social standing. From when language was created, stories were told and continue to be told. Some people have called storytelling the most powerful tool of all.

Armed with this ability I'm at a loss to explain where advertising over the last few decades missed the storytelling memo.

Our advertising is a series of well thought out, hard selling layouts, great pictures of beautiful people, great punch lines and captivating headlines, but in all this, a lot of brand managers, marketers and advertisers have missed out on what really engages the audience longer than just a nod of appreciation for work put in. I'm talking about a good old story. I have worked with agencies where the start of a campaign is to decide on a central visual then everything else falls in line.

I argue that we need to have the story first and that should determine the visual direction. We seem to have stumbled into an era of in-your-face advertising where ads were created to be ads and the visual is our holy grail.

So many agencies search for the perfect visual and much as they may achieve it (which is great), that may just be the reason for the ad clutter we all struggle with now. Once created, the ads fit into the traditional media that is available and we would hope for the best. Sometimes results are achieved and sometimes they aren't. Ad agencies would celebrate wins as the result of visionary talent and choke down failures under the hard-to-measure "Brand Equity" column.

Ad avoidance dilemma

That type advertising has become so much harder to defend because ad avoidance on almost all media types is now at an all-time high. Statistics are still rolling in, but estimates tell us that nine out of 10 people will avoid ads either by fast forwarding on pre-recorded shows, flipping a page, pushing the skip button, using ad blocking tools, or just going to the kitchen for a snack during advert time. It's a quandary for a lot of traditional advertisers because now they push volume with the hope that even as people avoid ads, the sheer volume of them will make it impossible to completely avoid all the ads they throw at you. This shotgun approach is disappointing at best.

What if, instead of pushing more distractions, we actually gave people what they wanted and got them to willingly interact with our brands? How, you ask? Well, simply by telling powerful and compelling stories.

Stories define their own media

One of the trickiest things in advertising is to be creative with media choices. Some have the gift and others just stick to the traditional tried and tested methods. Unfortunately, those are the methods that people are now avoiding like a plague. In my experience, if your advertising campaign carries a good enough storyline and begins from the story, it could dictate its own media choices and some of them can be extremely creative and memorable.

We have run campaigns that have made radio an exciting and engaging medium again and even one campaign that used toilet paper as a delivery mechanism (we all know that when you are in the loo, you have plenty of time).

The best media choices are determined by the twists and turns that a good story makes. With the power of a good story, you can transform any every day platform into a smart and unique media choice which will guarantee results. Radio skits, movies, cars, shop counter tops, floors, all become possible and meaningful media choices with the right story to back them up. The best part about it is that you move away from the clutter and you become a singular voice that people will talk about for a long time to come. All you need to do is to keep your mind open and to let the story take you where it needs to go.

Good stories build endearment

The first thing I was taught in advertising was that 50% of buying decisions are made from the heart. Everything else takes up the other 50%. Therefore, winning people's hearts is the first step in building a brand with longevity. Human emotion is an interesting thing. If people feel that they can relate to or empathise with characters or their story, they will invest themselves emotionally in the process. Emotional bonds are hard to break.

So, when people laugh out loud in movies or cry at plays, rest assured that they will carry those characters for a long time. That is exactly the same result brands can achieve with emotive story lines. By tugging at the heart strings, you can create a relationship with the customers that will last a lifetime. It is key to make sure that other elements of the brand tick the right boxes, of course.

Critically, a good story engages human hormones in such a way that a connection is unavoidable. For instance, a good story can induce the release of dopamine that ensures that a person is focused, motivated and that they become part of the storytelling process by creating mental images to complete the story.

Some stories can induce oxytocin which brings up empathy, bonds and trust. So, with a powerful enough story, people

can't help the strong emotions they will feel towards your brand.

Story based campaigns have longevity

Isn't it interesting that in the clutter and thousands of ad campaigns that are churned out annually, very few of them last the test of time. Think back on campaigns that have lasted the longest time and you realise that there are only a handful. One that springs to mind is the 50-year-old Avis, "We try harder" campaign. That is such a compelling story that remains relevant even to this day. The story of an underdog who goes the extra mile. Who doesn't love an underdog?

The lesson from this is that a great story encourages relevance and relevance leads to longevity. So, if you want to run a campaign that is iconic across generations, start with a good story.

You can stack up on products (within reason)

Another thing that a story gives you is the ability to present multiple products in a single ad effort without sabotaging the results of your campaign and spiralling into brand confusion. You can achieve this by ensuring that your character development in the storyline creates a set of characters that are multifaceted yet simple to understand.

Think about the Lego Movie as an example. That is one huge and successful example of using a story to promote your brand. A very good story, at that. Because their story lent itself to a movie delivery mechanism, it allowed them to push so many aspects of Lego into the movie which ordinarily would have taken two or maybe three different campaigns to cram in. That is just one example, but by defining your characters and media well, you can achieve phenomenal cost management and impactful results for your client.

It's just exciting

A good story is just exciting and making your brand exciting is a good enough reason to go this route. Who goes out of their way to be boring? I am yet to meet that person. Exciting things are memorable and make people want to engage with them. The success of advertising is in making people want to engage with you and not avoid you. When they want to engage with you, you had better make sure that they remember you. The one sure way of doing that is through a good and compelling story.

I need to sound a warning in my conclusion. There are boring and poorly crafted stories out there. Those will not achieve the results any brand is looking for. So, not just any story will cut it. It has to be a good and compelling story so time must be spent in the storytelling process. There are numerous steps that include character development, plot layouts, etc. These

are things that any brand or agency must pay attention to in order to achieve the best results.

I can guarantee you that your brand can capture hearts, results, awards and market share. All through the age old art of storytelling.

ABOUT GARIKAI NHONGO

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