

From 'meh' to 'yeah!' - the science of storytelling

 By [Yaw Dwomoh](#)

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Have you ever had your virtual hand up in an online meeting, ready to make a brilliant suggestion or ask a pertinent question? As time ticks away and a cacophony of voices drown out your chance to shine, you eventually concede to those who are louder and more persistent.

In this scenario, you, my overlooked friend, are your brand. With a bevy of voices jostling for attention in the digital space, how do you get your brand to speak loud enough for your audience to hear you, and most importantly, take action? Or will big brash budgets always win?



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Enter the science of storytelling

The history of storytelling dates back thousands of years with some of the earliest narrative found on African rock art. Whether through cave paintings, wall carvings, papyrus drawings or myths and legends shared around the camp fire, our ancestors shared their values, beliefs, and experiences.

Storytelling is the reason novels like, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is prescribed reading in African schools and around the world. In its pages we see ourselves and in the folklore from ancestors in Igbo culture, we recognise a common thread of humanity that extends to countless other cultures. It is also the reason a seemingly innocent Marvel movie like *Black Panther* gave rise to a counter-cultural movement of pride in Africa, its abilities and heritage.

Brands have woken up to the fact that customers and prospects no longer want to know why their brand is the best *buy, buy, buy, buy*. But, if they can communicate their value proposition in a narrative format, their audience is much more likely to stop and listen. When we share our brand purpose through a story, we are doing it in a way that is natural to us and the receiver.

What does this mean?

We know when we're being sold to, and we don't like it. But should a brand, instead of trying to sell you a high-quality couch, tell you the story of the mom taking naps with her colicky newborn on the couch, you may just pay attention. And, if they then show you how the same woman, as a grandmother, sends her granddaughter off to college with the same couch, you may just be hooked.

Why?

The experience of hearing and seeing a human narrative allows us to place ourselves inside the story which increases our oxytocin levels (the "feel-good chemical") and, therefore, empathy. The hearer also literally gets on the same wavelength as the storyteller, as their brain patterns mimic that of the storyteller.

Stories persuade while advertising bombards. Stories remove barriers while advertising has to work extra hard to scale the obvious hurdle of self-interest before the customer will engage.

Who cares? *You* should

When you're building your brand, a logo, a vision, a mission statement and shiny CI is not enough to tell people who you are. Through storytelling, people will get to know what your brand stands for: your values, beliefs, and experiences.

People buy from people not from a Pantone colour. We'd like to twist Theodore Roosevelt's famous quote a little and say, "People don't care what you sell until they know how much you care."

As Scott Bredbury, a former Nike and Starbucks CMO put it: "A brand is a story that connects with something very deep. Companies that manifest this sensibility invoke something immensely powerful".

Sharing your authentic purpose binds you with your customer during certain life stages and even for life. But how do you share your brand story without drowning in the crowded digital public pool?



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Let's get practical

If we go back to the history of stories, there's a reason why these tales or lessons handed down from our ancestors evoke such significant emotions and memories. It's about community, belonging and knowing where we come from. It's also tactile. We remember the hum of their voice, Gogo's pillowy lap, the smoke from the fire and the occasional jolts of surprise.

“ Digital storytelling requires a multi-pronged approach to draw customers in. ”

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

SEO is the performance marketing practice of connecting the audience to your message. When you know what your ideal audience is searching for, you start to build a picture of who they are.

To produce an effective SEO strategy, partnering with a company that has the digital analysis and martech capability will look at which topics are trending and how your target audience uses words to connect to your brand. An SEO Specialist will look at how best to use content and the website to connect your story to your audience online.

This helps you speak to your customer in a consistent authentic tone across all touchpoints about issues that matter to them and sows the seeds of brand love.

Website

You only have three seconds to capture your reader's attention while they decide whether to click away. Instead of *buy, buy, buy* messaging, why not 'sell' them the lifestyle that could accompany those items. Help them escape. Talk about the "why" behind what you do. If you create jobs locally or source sustainable materials, it should be on your webpage. With your content whether visual, written or video, think 'best friend' rather than the salesperson with the brown suit and briefcase.

Video

Eighty-one percent of businesses use video as a marketing tool. By 2022, online videos will make up over 82% of all consumer internet traffic — 15 times higher than it was in 2017. Viewers keep 95% of a message when they watch it in a video, compared to 10% when reading it in text. Video is no longer just for big brands. We have some exceptional talent locally who create world-class video affordably. Is it time to dust off your stale corporate video or newsletters, or to go live with your CEO on social?

Employees

The people who work for you are often the forgotten superfans. Apart from your digital assets, you have these real, live storytellers who can share your brand story out there. But charity begins at home and the way you communicate with your employees will guide how they share that message in the digital world. Spend the time to take your employees through your brand story and purpose or, even better, live it. They will quickly tell you whether you're full of it and not living up to your portrayal of yourself.

Experiences

This has become a little tricky during the pandemic as social distancing curbs in-store activation. VR, AR and Smartcodes are a safer way for customers to experience your brand without having to leave their home. How could you serve them where they are even by entertaining them? How could you show you care?

Dwomoh says, "Customers are suffering from digital messaging fatigue. We all are! To cut through the clutter, you need to show up as a real, likeable 'human', wherever your fans live online and in the actual world. Brands need to go back to the storytelling basics or face banishment to "unsubscribe" and "unfollow" zone."

ABOUT YAW DWOMOH

Born in Ghana, Yaw Dwomoh is the Managing Director of Idea Hive, a specialist Brand Storytelling company based in Johannesburg that enables medium-to-large brands to craft their brand stories in a way that is authentic, connecting with customers in a way that captures their hearts and their purchasing power.

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