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Marketing plots – learning from the stories about the stories

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Brand Narratives & Marketing Plots

The narrative aspect of marketing has been getting academic attention for many years but only in the last decade has it become a practical focal point for marketing communication practices.

Many traditional branding methodologies rely on values & attributes to define brands, but these tend to be homogeneous in competitive markets. “Innovation” and “simplicity” come to mind as popular values for most technology and service brands, “empowerment” and “enabling” were popular attributes amongst telecom brands during the last decade.

Values and attributes are useful as handles but have limits when deeper meaning is required. Their benefit as a reference point is useful but when employed alone, they can lose their original meaning and be interpreted in different ways by different people.

Stories are closer to the way people interpret, articulate and communicate meaning in most contexts, especially complex or emotional ones. The associative connections people make about brands are tangled, fluid, complex things. Stories are

so central to culture and the way our minds make sense of the world, that the same message communicated using a story enjoys some of the following advantages:

- Stories are more memorable
- Stories are more interesting
- Stories are more evocative
- Stories are perceived as more unique
- Stories are more believable / authentic
- Stories encourage identification and empathy
- Stories contain conflicts in a credible manner
- Stories are more viral

These benefits are not generic to every story, but the use of stories can confer these traits.

Over time you can tell various stories about a brand; some may accompany it for its entire life. It is essential to recognise what the long-term brand narrative is rooted in. Only then can positioning concepts create a current version of that story that is credible, relevant and differentiated.



Brand narratives don't exist in a vacuum; they exist in the marketplace together with other stories. The dialectic interaction between different stories influences both the way audiences perceive any single story and the multitude of stories in the market at any one time. For example, when Orange entered the market, they were one of the first to offer a future-oriented positive story about technology, so the story was differentiated and powerful. Today, many technology brands offer this as part of their story, so optimism has become a part of the background and brands are looking for other ways to differentiate their narrative.

A side effect of the interplay of narratives in the marketplace is that stories can be told about that interplay, and about patterns which repeat, change and manifest across markets, categories or segments. The academic jargon calls these stories about stories "meta-narratives". We prefer the more practical term "marketing plots". The view is that these recurring patterns are the plots of marketing stories. In our work, we have recognised that interpreting marketing plots and using them to inform brand narratives is a rich source of insight into strategic marketing challenges.

The Number One vs. Number Two Drama

Some stories are so strong that they are bound to repeat across categories. Here is the plot for one of the classic stories about competition and differentiation. This is the No. 1 vs. No. 2 drama.

No. 1 is a brand that creates a new category. He may not be the first one to come up with the idea or the product, but is the first one to leverage it for the mass market.

No. 1 learns how to tell the market about the new product, No. 1 teaches people that it is good, and eventually many people are convinced. Maybe No. 1 even comes to stand for that idea or product. Their brand is the strongest in the category by far, there may be some small players pitching similar products, but they can't touch No. 1. No. 1 is the one who teaches the market why the entire category is good, why it works, why it is important.

Everything is fine until one day, No. 2 comes to town.

No. 2's product isn't as revolutionary as No. 1's. Maybe there's a twist on the original idea somewhere, but sometimes that twist is more in the way they communicate the brand. You see, No. 2 is quite happy with the fact that No. 1 is synonymous with the category, because it means No. 1 stands for values & attributes that are generic and shared by every player in the category – big or small.

Ironically, it is the fact that No. 1 built the category and told everyone what it was all about that made them generic and vulnerable. This is especially true if the category has commodified in the meantime.

This situation gives No. 2 a chance to look at the category and tell a new story about it. No. 2 will usually do that by either finding out what it is "really" about or by making a claim regarding what's important. Anyway, No. 2's claim comes off as strong, especially if it is emotional in nature, mainly because it is focused and different, and that makes No. 1's loyal customers pay attention.

Before you know it, No. 2 is a serious threat to No. 1's domination of the market. They get a bigger and bigger share of the exciting, more unique aspects of the category, and their popularity accelerates.



At this point, the story usually takes one of two paths:

- No. 1 doesn't realise what's happening quickly enough and before you know it they start being perceived as dated and boring. They lose their No. 1 position forever.
- No. 1 wakes up in time to reposition themselves, using their more established heritage to make a more emotional claim that they are the real thing. Even then, life will not go back to being as easy as it used to be.

The seminal example of this story is the Coke vs. Pepsi story, but we've seen it manifesting in various categories and markets – from yoghurt brand wars in the Middle East to multinational telecom brands fighting over European markets.

So what is the value of recognising this plot? The lesson for established brands is to watch out for that moment when what was once an innovative message becomes obvious, and to try to stand for something unique even before the need to differentiate is pressing. If a newcomer plays on difference, it's time to find a fresh way to reclaim your heritage.

The lesson for challenger brands and many of our clients belong to this category, is that leading brands are not as indomitable as they may seem and that it is possible to isolate the area where the leader has created a standard and become generic, and use it against them to find a unique story. Sometime that story is the heart of the category and standing for it in a marketplace can be priceless.

Easier said than done? Sure. Complete solutions will take much planning and hard work, but the point is the inherent value in recognising

the narrative pattern of this plot and using it for your benefit – recognise your brand's role in the drama and your communication goals become clearer.

The Leader's Lament

Working with brands emphasises the need to use their stories to differentiate them in competitive markets. Here is another plot which points to a generic trap, a "golden generic cage" of sorts. Another case where being successful brings with it the curse of becoming generic.

It's fascinating how time after time we've come across stories where leading brands have become stuck in that generic spot everybody is trying to get out of. These are players who worked very hard to get to the top, only to discover that they're all pretty much the same up there.

As brand strategists, we like working with challenger brands, but often find them trudging through a painful plateau that can be quite depressing for a hard working over achieving team.

This is a plot that repeats itself in highly competitive global categories, especially with big service oriented B2B companies. In these categories it is common to have hundreds if not thousands of global players, but there will usually be a group of leaders that tower above everyone else. They may be top 5, top 10 or top 50, it depends on the category, but they stand apart from all the rest.

When a brand enters this exclusive club a common mistake will be to get stuck on things that no longer matter for audiences. During our first meetings with such players, often someone will say something along these lines:

"We've grown a lot in the last couple of years - nobody seems



to know it. Let's make more noise about how big and good we are."

The harsh reality is that no one cares. Of course you're big, that's why you're a top 10 player. Thus, paradoxically, this fact becomes boring and irrelevant to your audiences.

What got you here will not set you apart from the rest of the leaders. Why? It's like the Olympics. When you compare all the runners in the world the performance varies greatly, but on the Olympic track, the winners differ by just 0.1 or 0.01 of a second.

When this happens in business, you're in trouble. Many of your differentiating achievements magically disappear and turn into "entry prices". The things you spent years fighting for, no longer mean that much to your audience. Established practice is the new average. Worse still, best of breed is the new average.

When this happens, top-of-mind surprisingly counts for a lot. If it's a competitive B2B category, a decision maker will have one or two favourites, the first ports of call, but beyond that it's the first top 10 name that comes to their mind. Being this top-of-mind player brings with it a chance to win new projects and clients, amongst them those star accounts and star deals which are so important to have the first chance to acquire, as they create a benevolent circle with the reputation that precedes them. This is true whether you're a VC cherry-picking entrepreneurs, a chemical manufacturer seeking key B2B partners or a professional services provider looking for prospects to turn to you automatically .

"So now what?" That's your big question, and yes, it can be a

slightly depressing one. The futility of achievement is one of the challenges of leading a meaningful life, and that goes for doing meaningful work as well.

Now is the time to start exploring what successful habits have brought you this far and what's different about you. If the answer is "nothing" it's time to figure out what you want to stand for. Once you find it – tell it concisely at every opportunity you have.

Preferably, find some juicy stories you can use. Like the way Sequoia Capital uses the star internet brands they invested in (Google, Paypal, Youtube and more) when talking about themselves, thus creating a virtuous cycle of star-deals. Architectural practices use their star projects influentially, their stories being told in a very obvious way.

Welcome to Olympus! The bad news: everybody is immortal around here. The good news: it's a clear and limited group to stand out from.

Pattern Recognition as Insight

Brand narratives are powerful at focusing and differentiating your brand, but like other types of narrative they too interact with other stories; whether they are the ones told at the time or in the past through traditions of stories and storytelling. This is why recognising the recurring patterns of marketing narratives or marketing plots, is so valuable.

Recognising the unifying dynamics of how different stories interact across markets, categories and segments will lead you to meaningful insights along the way to your strategic solution. Those insights will show you how to use your story in order to reinforce perceptions of the marketplace or subvert the perceptions your competitors are trying to create.



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