

ALL
MARKETERS
ARE LIARS

THE POWER OF
TELLING AUTHENTIC STORIES
IN A LOW-TRUST WORLD

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PORTFOLIO

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TELLING A GREAT STORY

Truly great stories succeed because they are able to capture the imagination of large or important audiences.

A great story is true. Not true because it's factual, but true because it's consistent and authentic. Consumers are too good at sniffing out inconsistencies for a marketer to get away with a story that's just slapped on. When the Longaberger Corporation built its headquarters to look like a giant basket, it was living its obsession with the product—a key part of its story.

Great stories make a promise. They promise fun or money, safety or a shortcut. The promise is bold and au-

dacious and not just very good—it's exceptional or it's not worth listening to. Phish offered its legions of fans a completely different concert experience. The promise of a transcendental evening of live music allowed the group to reach millions of listeners who easily ignored the pabulum pouring out of their radios. Phish made a promise, and even better, kept that promise.



Great stories are trusted. Trust is the scarcest resource we've got left. No one trusts anyone. Consumers don't trust the beautiful women ordering vodka at the corner bar (they're getting paid by the liquor company). Consumers don't trust the spokespeople on commercials (who exactly is Rula Lenska?) and consumers don't trust the companies that make pharmaceuticals (Vioxx, apparently, can kill you). As a result, no marketer succeeds in

telling a story unless he has earned the credibility to tell that story.

Great stories are subtle. Surprisingly, the less a marketer spells out, the more powerful the story becomes. Talented marketers understand that the prospect is ultimately telling *himself* the lie, so allowing him (and the rest of the target audience) to draw his own conclusions is far more effective than just announcing the punch line.

Great stories happen fast. They engage the consumer the moment the story clicks into place. First impressions are far more powerful than we give them credit for. Great stories don't always need eight-page color brochures or a face-to-face meeting. Great stories match the voice the consumer's worldview was seeking, and they sync right up with her expectations. Either you are ready to listen to what a Prius delivers or you aren't.

Great stories don't appeal to logic, but they often appeal to our senses. Pheromones aren't a myth. People decide if they like someone after just a sniff. And the design of an Alessi teapot talks to consumers in a way that a fact sheet about boiling water never could.

Great stories are rarely aimed at everyone. Average people are good at ignoring you. Average people have

too many different points of view about life and average people are by and large satisfied. If you need to water down your story to appeal to everyone, it will appeal to no one. Runaway hits like the LiveStrong fund-raising bracelets take off because they match the worldview of a tiny audience—and then that tiny audience spreads the story.

Great stories don't contradict themselves. If your restaurant is in the right location but has the wrong menu, you lose. If your art gallery carries the right artists but your staff is rejects from a used car lot, you lose. If your subdivision has lovely wooded grounds but tacky-tacky McMansions, you lose. Consumers are clever and they'll see through your deceit at once.

And most of all, great stories agree with our worldview. The best stories don't teach people anything new. Instead, the best stories agree with what the audience already believes and makes the members of the audience feel smart and secure when reminded how right they were in the first place.

GOT MARKETING?

DOES MARKETING MATTER?

When you think of marketing, do you think of Wisk, Super Bowl commercials or perhaps an annoying yet catchy slogan? Do images of used-car salesmen pop into your head? Or worse, do you think of relentless spam and clueless telemarketers?

Marketing has become far more than an old lady crying, “Where’s the beef!” Stuff like that is just a tactic.

Marketing is about spreading ideas, and spreading ideas is the single most important output of our civilization. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese have died because of bad marketing. Religions thrive or fade away because of the marketing choices they make. Children are educated, companies are built, jobs are gained or lost—all because of what we know (and don’t know) about spreading ideas.

Am I trivializing these important events by implying that marketing is at the heart of the issue? I don't think so. I think that commercials and hype trivialized marketing, but in fact, my definition of marketing casts a much wider net. These issues are too important *not* to be marketed.

It's easy for the media and the public to focus on a small child trapped in a well or on a wacky auction on eBay. Some ideas spread far and wide and have a huge impact—while others, ideas even more valuable and urgent, seem to fade away. If marketers could tell a better story about the really urgent stuff—taking your medicine or sending peacekeepers where they belong—we would all benefit.

If you care about the future of your company, your nonprofit, your church or your planet, marketing matters. Marketing matters because whether or not you're in a position to buy a commercial, if you've got an idea to spread, you're now a marketer.

Key fact: in 2003 pharmaceutical companies spent more on marketing and sales than they did on research and development. When it comes time to invest, it's pretty clear that spreading the ideas behind the medicine is more important than inventing the medicine itself.

nonprofit, campaign, PTA, job seeker or whatever other entity is relevant to you. We all tell stories, every day, and this book is about your story too.)

HOW MARKETING WORKS (WHEN IT WORKS)

Most marketing fails. I want to show you what marketing is like when it works. Here are the steps that people go through when they encounter successful marketing. The rest of this book is organized into sections built around each of these ideas:

STEP 1: THEIR WORLDVIEW AND FRAMES GOT THERE BEFORE YOU DID

A consumer's worldview affects the way he notices things and understands them. If a story is framed in terms of that worldview, he's more likely to believe it.

STEP 2: PEOPLE ONLY NOTICE THE NEW AND THEN MAKE A GUESS

Consumers notice something only when it changes.

STEP 3: FIRST IMPRESSIONS START THE STORY

A first impression causes the consumer to make a very quick, permanent judgment about what he was just exposed to.

**STEP 4: GREAT MARKETERS TELL STORIES
WE BELIEVE**

The marketer tells a story about what the consumer notices. The story changes the way the consumer experiences the product or service and he tells himself a lie.

Consumers make a prediction about what will happen next.

Consumers rationalize anything that doesn't match that prediction.

**STEP 5: MARKETERS WITH AUTHENTICITY
THRIVE**

The authenticity of the story determines whether it will survive scrutiny long enough for the consumer to tell the story to other people.

Sometimes marketing is so powerful it can actually change the worldview of someone who experiences it, but no marketing succeeds if it can't find an audience that already wants to believe the story being told.

**YOU'RE NOT IN CHARGE
(PEOPLE *CAN'T* LISTEN)**

The biggest myth marketers believe: "I have money, which means that I am in charge. I have control over the conversation, over the airwaves, over your attention and over retailers."

WHAT COLOR ARE YOUR GLASSES?

We are not all the same.

The mass market is dead. Instead we are faced with collections of individuals. We may all be created equal, but our worldviews are different. Long before a person is exposed to a particular marketing message, she's already begun to tell herself a story.

A Republican's first look at a Democratic presidential candidate is very different than a Democrat's. Silicon Valley venture capitalists looked at eBay with expectations that were completely different than those of a similar firm in Hartford.

As the number of choices in every marketplace increases, the power of the consumer to indulge her worldview increases just as quickly. To go to market without understanding your audience's various worldviews is like trying to pick a lock without bothering to notice whether it uses a key or a combination.

A worldview is not who you are. It's what you believe. It's your biases.

A worldview is not forever. It's what the consumer believes *right now*.

Marketing succeeds when it taps into an audience of people who share a worldview—a worldview that makes that

audience inclined to believe the story the marketer tells. Marketing success stories (Starbucks, *Fast Company*, the Porsche Cayenne) occur when that shared worldview is discovered for the first time.

WHO WE ARE AFFECTS WHAT WE SEE

The story a consumer tells himself about a new product or service is primarily influenced by the worldview that consumer had before he even knew about the new thing. That worldview affects three things:

1. *Attention*: the consumer's worldview determines whether she even bothers to pay attention. If she doesn't think she needs a new brand of aspirin or a faster computer, she's far less likely to notice a new one when it appears.
2. *Bias*: everyone carries around a list of grudges and wishes. When a new product or service appears on your horizon, those predispositions instantly color all the information that comes in.
3. *Vernacular*: consumers care just as much about *how* something is said as *what* is said. They care about the choice of media, the tone of voice, the words that are used—even the way things smell. When the story that's told to the consumer doesn't match the vernacular the consumer expects, weird things happen.

Understanding how worldviews interfere with or amplify the story a marketer tells is the most overlooked element of marketing success. Until now it's been intuitive. Marketers need to figure out how to get it right every time.

GLIMPSES OF A WORLDVIEW

Do you agree with these statements?

- New technology can improve my life.
- If I was prettier, I'd be more popular.
- If it's a prescription medicine, it's probably safe.
- I can afford the best.
- All car salesmen are liars.
- I need some new clothes.
- I like opera.
- It's possible that a product advertised on an infomercial might be a good buy.
- My goal is to tread lightly on the Earth.
- I love the New York Yankees.
- Physical therapy will cure me faster than surgery will.
- Protecting my family from harm is the most important thing I can do.
- Let's party!
- Don't tell me shallow stories about consumerism and flash and spend, spend, spend. Talk to me about inner values, quality and life.

Regardless of “reality” (as determined by double-blind studies, extensive research or a cold, hard look at the facts), the statements above are easily believed or disbelieved by different individuals. Add them (and a thousand others) all up and you’ve defined the biases that a particular consumer brings to the table.

This seems obvious, doesn’t it? It does to me. It seems really clear that everyone is different and those differences explain what we pay attention to and what we ignore. Yet just about every marketer (job seeker, non-profit, political candidate, beer manufacturer, and so on) treats every consumer as a potential customer. Not just a potential customer, but a potential customer who is just like all the other potential customers out there.

Of course, all customers are not the same, but they’re not all different either. **People clump together into common worldviews, and your job is to find a previously undiscovered clump and frame a story for those people.**

THE MOST IMPORTANT WORLDVIEW

(at least for our purposes)

The desire to do what the people we admire are doing is the glue that keeps our society together. It's the secret ingredient in every successful marketing venture as well.

You have no chance of successfully converting large numbers of people to your point of view if you try to do it directly. But if you rely on the nearly universal worldview that people like being in sync with their peers, you are likely to find that those who believe your story will work hard to share their lie with their peers. If your story is easy to spread, and if those you converted believe that it's worth spreading, it will.

WHY DID YOU BUY THIS BOOK?

What a weird business. People buy books (millions of them every year) without knowing what's inside. In fact, the only way people know for sure if they're going to like a book is to read that book, at which point it is unnecessary to actually buy a copy.

It's not just books, of course. People buy a car or a stove or a house after just a cursory run-through. We vote for a presidential candidate without saying, "Why not run the country for a month and then we'll see . . ."

Consumers pretend that they're rational and careful and thoughtful about the stuff they buy. Actually they're not. Instead they rely on stories.

Stories matter.

If you bought this book, it's not because you'd already read it and liked it.

You probably bought it because you'd read something else by the author . . .

Or it was recommended by a coworker . . .

Or you read the back cover and figured it was worth a shuttle flight . . .

Or it was face out on the bookshelf and something about it caught your eye . . .

Or because the clerk glanced at you with awe and respect when you picked it up . . .

There are hundreds of reasons, and not one of them has to do with your firsthand experience in actually using the product (the book).

You bought this book because of a story you were able to tell yourself. Some of the stories are fiction (does walking under a ladder actually curse you with bad luck?) while others are based on fact (a car with an EPA rated mileage of fifty miles per gallon is going to need fewer fill-ups).

Even if the story is based on fact, all the stories people rely on to make decisions are blown out of proportion. One story isn't the whole truth. Al Gore never said he invented the Internet and he's not prone to insane exaggeration, but it was a good story and it helped tens of thousands of people make up their mind about him. An SUV isn't a safer car than a station wagon, but the story the car tells sure makes us feel that way as the driver climbs on board and sits way up high. And that guy you hired in accounting, the trustworthy one with the firm handshake and the great references—you're not really certain he's not going to embezzle all your profits, but he looked you in the eye and it made you feel good to hire him, didn't it?

STEP 5: MARKETERS WITH AUTHENTICITY THRIVE

CHANGING THE STORY REQUIRES PERSONAL INTERACTION

You don't get to make up the story. The story happens with or without you. If you're not happy with the story, the only way to change it is with direct contact between your consumer and a person.

That person might be the consumer's neighbor or friend or teacher or boss. Or it might be one of your employees.

Personal interaction cuts through all the filters. Personal interaction is the way human beings actually make big decisions—by looking people in the eye, by experiencing them firsthand. That's why it was so hard for the dot-coms to build a loyal following—they couldn't afford to provide the interactions that are built into the retail experience.

Personal interaction comes from allowing people to be people, not script readers. When a customer talks to a telemarketer reading a script from a cubicle in New Delhi or Omaha, there's no interaction. When a clerk tells the consumer, "That's all I can do, that's our policy," he's creating a negative interaction. But when a human being works with the consumer and takes independent action on her behalf, something changes.

Allowing your employees to post an honest blog or to engage in direct instant-messaging conversations with your customers is a way to promote honest communication. If it makes you nervous to do that, maybe you need to worry about authenticity a little more.

Sometimes the interactions are nasty or rushed or even selfish. But when they're genuine, they have an impact.

BEFORE I TELL SOMEONE A STORY, I TELL THAT STORY TO MYSELF

The goal of every marketer is to create a purple cow, a product or experience so remarkable that people feel compelled to talk about it. Remarkable goods and services help ideas spread—not hype-filled advertising.

The challenge lies in figuring out what's remarkable and actually making the remarkable happen. I believe the best way to do that is to craft a story that someone enjoys telling to himself. Before we are able to share a story

with friends, colleagues or the Internet, we need to tell it to ourselves.

Politicians call these talking points. Retailers call it an experience. If you can build your entire organization around delivering a particular story, you've dramatically increased the chances that this story will actually get told.

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

If you're authentic, then all the details will line up. Your menu will match your food, which will seamlessly integrate with your staff and your decor. If you commit to a story and live that story, the contradictions will disappear.

If you want to send a message of friendly service, it helps to hire friendly people. If great design is at the heart of the story you're telling, you need a designer to run things and a designer to be your accountant as well.

I'm not letting you off the hook by encouraging you to tell stories. In fact, stories only *magnify* the need to have something remarkable (and honest) to say.

Humans are too smart to be fooled by a Potemkin village, a facade that pretends to be one thing and turns out to be another. Sure, you can fool some people once or twice, but this is the key lesson of the new marketing: **once fooled, a person will never repeat your story to someone else.**