

MAKE MARKETING A NARRATIVE

Marketers need to understand the art and science of narrative marketing.

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E-marketing



MANY people have remarked that story-telling is somehow innate to our humanity. From the earliest times, we have shared stories—to entertain, to teach, to remember.

It is not surprising then, that the most lauded advertisements often take the form of narratives—a 30-second story or perhaps a story that runs over many years, told one bite at a time.

While many forms of advertising are inherently narrative, there is an emerging form that brings the story to the fore. By engaging the consumer in a story that is ongoing, immersive, and perhaps even interactive, 'narrative marketing' provides a strong brand experience, and excellent integrated marketing opportunities.

TV shows such as *Gilmore Girls* and *The Block*, developed around advertising sponsors, are one way in which this trend is being realised. Another is in the creation of entertainment content that makes use of online and offline channels to offer consumers a chance to become part of their brand experience.

Results can also be achieved using more modest approaches. The affordability of website deployment and emails make these excellent tools that allow any advertiser to tell their brand's story, particularly when supported by other channels.

Consider the advantage of a methodology that does not immediately reveal itself as a marketing vehicle, in an environment cluttered with subtle advertising channels and savvy consumers. Given this upbeat prognosis, why have we not seen a rash of narrative marketing campaigns? There are two important factors responsible for this. The first is that this approach is not the right answer for every brand—particularly if delivered online. The audience of the brand must be able and willing to participate in this type

of experience. How open consumers are to playing a part in the story will also drive the level of interactivity. More traditional brands may fall back on simple story-telling, while more adventurous youth products and cutting-edge brands will opt for richer, more challenging and immersive experiences.

The second obstacle to deploying narrative marketing campaigns is finding a group capable of doing so. As a brand marketer, it is challenging to locate agencies (large or small) that can effectively deliver this type of marketing. It requires technical expertise, creativity, and excellent copy and art skills. Finding a small agency with this skill-set is not easy. Finding a large agency may be easier, but these groups are rarely able to bring together a close-knit team focused on the delivery of this type of product. Once again, the divide between 'marketers' and 'technologists' makes such projects more arduous and costly than they should be.

Despite these challenges, there will be times when narrative marketing provides an excellent way of engaging the consumer in a new and interesting way. As audiences become more jaded, we as marketers must respond with more entertaining, involving, and exciting stories to capture them.

Show me the money

When pitching narrative marketing, the first question is invariably "How does this sell our product?" Identify how the campaign will bring about return on investment, and work that into the structure from the very beginning.

Branding

The most straightforward impact of a campaign can be brand building. Calvin Klein used narrative marketing effectively in this way, telling a story unrelated to its products, but which consumers were aware was a 'Calvin Klein story'. The characters, its behaviours, their responses to events... all these factors layered themselves into the brand in the mind of the consumers.



'The Story of O' campaign melded classic design and artful copy to communicate the brand without feeling like a product catalogue

Hype

Through successful public relations, this type of marketing can generate excellent positive coverage, partly due to the novelty and interest of the approach.

Product placement

Opportunities for umbrella brands such as Sony or Nestlé include a single story to promote a wide range of brands through the activities of a variety of characters. More specific brands such as Billabong or Land Rover could instead build narratives around specific product sets.

Back-story extension

As a variant of product placement, entertainment products can use narrative marketing to enrich the primary delivery channel. Television series *Alias* was launched with an online narrative, and *Dawson's Creek* used online diaries to keep fans updated between seasons.

Database building

Initiating contact through story-telling can be a powerful way of starting a relationship with consumers. Opting in to be part of a narrative campaign provides opportunities to learn about consumers and channel them into sales cycles, or simply continue to provide timely information.

Market research

Deepening that relationship further, the actions of consumers during interactive narratives can be a rich source of research data.

Associated action

Perhaps the most direct and exciting way of driving return on investment is by making the narrative more real, and requiring 'real' actions as part of the experience. Tequila's 'Fellowship of the Ring' game required players to source an actual print newspaper, and other narratives have driven the participants through various websites in search of information.

Control of the narrative

There are many ways of telling a story and the most important decision when developing a

narrative marketing campaign is how much control the consumers will have in the process.

While it is more cost effective to reduce interactivity and simply 'tell the story', many of the most effective examples involve interactive narratives in which the participants were deeply involved—creating a truly potent branded experience.

There are roughly four levels of possible interactivity.

Level 1: Passive Narrative

This may take the form of a weekly email giving us a chapter of the story.

Level 2: Collective Narrative

While the consumer does not directly participate, collective narratives allow the audience as a whole to influence the plot, for example *Big Brother*.

Level 3: Individual Narrative

Chose Your Own Adventure books are an excellent example of individual narrative—the consumer is responsible for driving the narrative forward.

Level 4: Multiplayer Reality

The most complex form of narrative involves the creation of a multiplayer reality. In this environment, all the consumers participate in the same story, and each plays an individual part.

'The Story of O'

The Story of O campaign—produced by the Amnesia group for Orotan—melded classic design and artful copy to deliver an experience that communicated the brand without feeling like a product catalogue. Simple and elegant, the campaign was an eye-catching success. However Amnesia group director Iain McDonald said there is clearly a defined time and space for when, how and why narrative marketing should be used.

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