

What Are Your Signature Stories?

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A Nordstrom customer in the mid 70s walked into the Fairbanks, Alaska store and asked to “return” two worn snow tires. An awkward moment! Nordstrom, which evolved from a shoe store to a department store, never sold tires (although another company once did at the store site). Despite that fact, the salesperson that had been on the job only a few weeks, relying on a customer-first culture supported by a generous return policy, had no doubt what to do. He promptly took back the snow tires and refunded what the customer said he paid. The co-founder of Nordstrom, John Nordstrom, is said to have witnessed the event. The Nordstrom story brings to life the generous return policy; the customer supportive culture; and the authority, competence, and attitude of the sales people.

The Molson Canadian Beer firm decided to create a professionally-made hockey rink in a 9,000 foot valley in a remote spot of the Purcell Mountain range in the Canadian Rockies for use by a few people that would do “Anything for Hockey.” The task wasn’t easy; it involved building a rink and selecting players. It took two weeks and many helicopter trips to build the rink complete with an iconic Molson Refrigerator. Players were selected based on their personal stories demonstrating their obsession with hockey. Eleven winners and the actual Stanley Cup (the ultimate hockey symbol) were flown in for a game at this unique rink. The global story detailed the program execution—finding the location, building the rink, getting the winners, the helicopter’s role, and the game itself. The story vividly shows that Molson has a shared interest with customers in hockey and has given that shared interest a program with energy, “*can you believe*” uniqueness, and emotional impact.

Leon L. Bean, an avid outdoorsman, returned from a hunting trip in 1912 disgruntled because of his cold, wet feet. With little resources but a lot of motivation and ingenuity, he invented a new boot by stitching lightweight leather tops to waterproof rubber bottoms. The boots worked so well he offered them for sale via mail order as the Maine Hunting Shoe using lists of nonresident Maine hunting license holders. Unfortunately, most of the first 100 pairs sold had a stitching problem and leaked. Mr. Bean faced a defining moment. His response? He refunded the customers’ money even though it nearly broke him and fixed the process so that future boots were indeed water tight. The L.L. Bean story shows a firm that has an innovation culture, a heritage around fishing and hunting (which has since been generalized to the outdoors), a commitment to quality, and a customer concern reflected in the legendary L.L. Bean “Guarantee of 100% Satisfaction.”

These three stories are signature stories, stories that are strategic assets to their brand.

Defining Signature Stories

A story is here defined as a narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end (not always portrayed in that order). Importantly, it is not a stand-alone set of facts (or features, data, or lists). A story may incorporate and communicate facts, but it does it in the context of a narrative so the audience member needs to deduce those facts.

So what is a *signature story*? It is an intriguing, authentic, involving story with a strategic message that enhances the brand, the customer relationship, the organization, and/or the business strategy.

A signature story needs to be intriguing if not fascinating so that it can grab attention. There needs to be a reason for the audience to notice and process the story. The story should attract the eye and mind by being some combination of thought-provoking, novel, provocative, interesting, informative, newsworthy, or entertaining to the audience. Just because a firm executive thinks the story is intriguing, does not mean a target audience will.

Authenticity means that the story audience does not perceive the story to be phony, contrived, or fake. The story does not have to be real; it can be fictional, but it cannot precipitate a conscious belief that the story is unreal, phony, or obviously motivated by a selling goal. For example, an AT&T message that tells the story of a realistic car accident caused by distracted driving is powerful even though it is clearly fictional, if it has verisimilitude. Further, there should be substance behind the story and, more particularly, its message in the form of programs, policies, or transparency that support. With respect to the Nordstrom story, for example, their only employee rule, "Use good judgment in all situations," empowers their people and supports the story message. The presence of supporting substance confirms and solidifies the message and the absence of substance ultimately tarnishes the brand and undercuts the story's authenticity.

Involving means that the audience member gets drawn into the story which usually, but not always, precipitates a cognitive, emotional, or behavioral response. Cognitively, he or she may have a tendency to embellish the story, fill in some gaps. For the Nordstrom story, perhaps the audience member will add a visual image of the scene, some thought about the background of the salesperson, or a conclusion that employees at Nordstrom can do a lot for the customer on their own. Emotionally, an involving story can precipitate feelings perhaps about the empathic characters but sometimes about the surprise or climax of the story. Behaviorally, the audience may be stimulated to change what brands are considered in the next purchase or to pass along the story to others.

A signature story will have a strategic message that enhances the brand, the customer relationship, the organization, and/or the business strategy. It could advance the brand's visibility, image, relevance, preference, and loyalty. It could also contribute to the organization's culture, mission, and values; and/or help articulate the business strategy. In any case, it should

be linked to the brand. If the story becomes disconnected from the brand, it will not fulfill its enhancement role.

A signature story is strategic, an asset with enduring relevance over a long time period. As they get retold and reappear they gain authenticity, traction, and influence. A signature story thus can be identified by its anticipated life as well as its message. It can be contrasted with tactical stories used to achieve a short-term communication objective, perhaps in an advertisement or on a website. There is a qualitative difference between tactical and signature stories that affects how they should be resourced and managed.

A signature story can represent a variety of thrusts, perspectives, and roles. For example, it can reflect:

The brand heritage

“Where did the brand come from and what are the implications?”

The brand vision

“What do I stand for?”

The brand personality

“Who am I?” “How can my customer relationship be described in human terms?”

The value proposition

“What are the brand’s benefits, points of parity, and points of differentiation?”

The types of customers served

“How would you describe the user and nonuser?”

The nature of the customer relationship

“Does the brand take on a relationship role such as mentor, friend, or advisor?”

A program linked to the brand and the interests of customers

“Is the brand an active partner in a customer interest area?”

The bases for customer loyalty

“How does the brand achieve satisfaction, liking, and passion among customers?”

The core organizational values

“What are the underlying values and supporting programs of the organization?”

The business strategy

“Where am I going? What is the story arc for how I will get there?”

The degree to which a signature stories qualifies with respect to the four criteria— intriguing, authentic, involving, and having a strategic message--will have to be made by those developing and using them. But the temptation or elevate a story to signature status that is weak on one or more of the dimensions should be resisted.

Signature Story Sets

Signature stories come in two varieties. First, there are the stand-alone stories like that of Nordstrom, Molson, and L.L. Bean that have one version of a narrative that is complete. The

story may be leveraged with programs, products, events, or ads but it is its own entity. Second, are signature story sets consisting of several or many stories around similar story arcs and message. Blendtec and Skype are examples. The variety of stories can enhance and clarify the theme adding power, breath, and freshness.

Blendtec in its “Will it blend?” challenge vividly demonstrate the power and versatility of the Blendtec blender and also the personality of the brand—confident, fun-loving, and humorous. Hosted by founder Tom Dickson, the brand in videos posted on YouTube has since 2006 attempted to blend a host of items including silly putty, golf balls, marbles, cell phones, credit cards, BIC lighters, and imitation diamonds using the blender. In each story, Dickson discusses the challenge by describing the object and poses the “Will it blend?” question. The blender always performs and earns a response of “Yes it blends.!” The ads which have created a “Can you believe...” reaction have very likely achieved the most viral response of any series of ads.¹ The one featuring blending an iPad got over 17 million views and the total views during the first seven years of the program were over 300 million, all with a zero media budget.

Skype solicits users, termed “moment makers,” to share their Skype moment. Selected stories are placed in the Skype story bank site and provide an inspirational portrayal of how broadly and creatively Skype can be used to do amazing things and the resulting emotional impact on lives. A conductor in New York was attracted by the talent among New York Subway musicians. How to harness and expose that talent? The solution? Create a symphony played by eleven Subway musicians each in their normal place but being visible to the conductor via Skype on eleven laptop computers each resting on a folding chair. Two girls, Sara from Indiana and Paige from New Zealand, who were both born without half of their left arm, were connected by their mothers. But how to have a relationship so far apart? The solution? Use Skype to connect daily, sharing living with the handicap and creating a deep friendship. The Skype video telling their story including an emotional meeting in New York got nearly 3 million views on YouTube and exposure on Ellen and other television shows.

A story can also be elaborated with additional stories. The Molson rink creation story is elaborated with stories about each of the winners which added texture and emotion to the master story. There was Vitaly whose father, Andrei: a hockey-loving Estonian moved his family to Canada 17 years ago dreaming of his son, then 12 years old, playing hockey in Canada. Vitaly had success as a player, becoming a member of the Quebec Major Junior League with his father by his side for every goal. Molson set out to help Vitaly thank his father in the most Canadian way possible, by playing a one-on-one game on the “top-of-the-world” rink. The video describing that event got 1.3 million views.

A portfolio of signature stories may be needed to represent multiple strategies and audience targets. For example Prophet, the brand and business strategy consulting firm, has a set of five customer facing problems/solutions such as “transform customer experiences” and “accelerating growth” each of which has its own signature story. Further, the five areas have three or four subareas all with signature stores. For example the “transform customer

experience” has subareas like “understanding the customer,” “analyzing touch points,” “using design and digital to transform,” and “bridging brand silos.” So there are 18 signature stories each giving a take on the Prophet client experience from a different perspective. A customer with a particular problem will then see a signature that will be relevant to him or her rather than a less-relevant generic story

The Target: Customers and Employees

A host of stakeholders can be the target of a signature stores including suppliers, investors, the community at large, and more. However, the principle targets are customers and employees.

Customers are an important target because they are central to the health of the brand and firm. Advancing the strategic position of the brand and organization in the eyes of customers is challenging because of message clutter, media dynamics, growing customer ownership of context, and the complexity of social media. Signature stories can be an answer providing the ability to not only to provide break-through visibility but to communicate the basic essence of a brand and organization.

A signature story may not always represent directly or even indirectly functional benefits. The Molson’s Hockey story, for example, provides depth to the Molson connection with hockey, a Molson brand goal. While Molson customers are not interested in the details of beer or its production, they are passionate about hockey. And when Molson shows a shared passion, not just be sponsoring a team or game, but by building the rink in the mountains and bringing to that rink ordinary hockey devotees, the brand and customer relationships are energized and elevated beyond functional benefits.

Success can be measured by seeing a story go viral or have a huge penetration over years to decades. However, success can also occur with a reach of a few thousand, or a few hundred, or even a few dozen because in many cases the quality of audience is more important than the quantity. A car company, for example, may be more concerned with having its signature story connect with and impact a limited number of active prospective buyers that with obtaining a huge audience. The story’s impact would be therefore based on the audience profile, perceptions, and behavior of the audience and success could be based on a modest audience size.

Another prime target can be employees, where the story can provide a source of inspiration and a cornerstone for the organizational culture and values. The Nordstrom story provides direction as to what culture, people, and processes should be developed or enhanced. The L. L. Bean story supports a higher purpose around innovation, product integrity, and the passion for the outdoors.

A signature story can communicate a strategy. IBM, for example, has been influenced internally by the story about how Lou Gerstner transformed a troubled firm when he became

CEO in 1993. IBM at that time was threatened with bankruptcy, ruled by product and country fiefdoms, and posed to break itself up into seven companies. Should he proceed with the break-up of the firm? To make that decision, he solicited customer feedback by having each of the top fifty executives and their direct reports visit five customers. A major finding--customers loved IBM but wanted to buy integrated solutions from one firm. As a result, he killed the proposal to break up the firm and instead worked to make the product and geographic silos communicate and cooperate under the global IBM brand to deliver systems solutions. The story described a pivotal moment in the firm that led or supported basic changes to the organizational structure, processes, and people.

Signature stories around a firm's heritage can also provide a "north star" guide to ongoing business strategy or a route back to basics when a firm has strayed and is struggling. Adidas is one of many firms that have reinvigorated themselves by going back to a firm's core values represented by their heritage stories. The image of the founder, Adi Dassler, talking to athletics about their needs, trying out ideas in the field, and examining used shoes in order to learn what was wearing out helped Adidas chart a course when, in the early 1990s, the firm had lost their way and were unable to stand up to the Nike challenge.

Employees are also important targets because they can play a key role in spreading the signature stories through social media, articles, talks, etc. They will know and understand the stories and be motivated to get them exposure. For many companies, employees have become an important force in stimulating and influencing social media activity.²

The Power of Stories

Why use stories strategically to communicate the brand or the organization? The motivation, which is supported by logic, communication theory, and empirical evidence, comes in part from a realization that stories are simply a powerful way to communicate, persuade, change behavior, and precipitate discussion. They are almost always far more effective and impactful than communicating facts. They also sometimes have the potential to be spread by others making them a less costly content vehicle. As a result, stories have become a hot topic in marketing communication today. Many firms have added journalists to their staffs to create or find meaningful stories and present them in a compelling way.

In order to justify investing in creating and leveraging signature stories, it is important to gain an understanding and acceptance of why stories are potentially so powerful. When facts are put into story form they become powerful because:

Stores are Remembered

There are a host of studies in psychology and elsewhere that document the fact that fables are much more likely to be remembered if they are part of a story. For example:

- Stanford professor, Chip Heath, gave students data on crime statistics in the U.S. and each was asked to give a talk on either why crime is a huge problem or why it is not. After a filler task, the students then were asked to write down what other speakers had said. Although only 10% of the speakers formed the data into stories while the rest relied on statistics, 63% recalled stories and only 5% recalled any statistics.³
- The psychologist Arthur Greasser and colleagues rated short written pieces as to their familiarity, interestingness, and narrative strength. Those high on narrative strength were read in half the time by experimental subjects but still remembered twice as much as the others, while familiarity and interestingness had little effect.⁴
- Researchers at the University of California, Irvine showed subjects a series of matched stories except one of the pair had a higher level of emotional arousal caused by subtle changes in the narration. The stories with elevated arousal enhanced the long-term memory of the content.⁵

There are several reasons why stories are remembered more than facts (or features). First, stories can command more attention because they are interesting and often connect to the audience. As a result, the story listener is more attentive and involved than during a recitation of facts. When the story includes a surprise or emotion the listener attention will increase as will the impact on memory. Second, a story provides a way to organize information making it easier to remember. It also provides links to prior knowledge and thus is embedded in memory in a more robust way than a set of facts would be. Third, the story arc becomes, in essence, one thing to remember rather than a set of facts.

Stories are Persuasive

The reality that stories help persuade has been known throughout time. Think of the Aesop tales or the parables in religious writings that are used to make a point. Or the impact of Uncle Tom's Cabin, the bestselling book of the 19th century. One scholar suggested that its story affected the outcome of the Civil War by raising abolitionist sentiment in the North and helped keep Britain from fighting alongside the South.⁶ A story that resonates can be powerful.

A host of studies have supported the hypothesis that facts presented in story form lead to greater changes in beliefs and liking which in turn leads to changes in attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Virtually all of the studies control for content, some, for example, by comparing the impact of a series of sentences formed into a story with those that are not.⁷

Signature stories involve, draw people in. Psychologists call the process by where an audience loses itself in the story, narrative transportation; the audience is transported from his or her existing reality into the story or narrative. Narrative transportation is usually accompanied by empathetic characters and visual imagery. Research shows that when narrative transportation happens, attitudes and intentions change to reflect the story. In fact a review of some 132 studies reported in 76 articles since 2000 shows that elevating narrative transportation has a statistically significant and meaningful impact on story-consistent beliefs, affective responses (liking), story-

consistent attitudes, and story-consistent intentions plus a decrease in critical thoughts.⁸ The more real the story appears, the more its impact.⁹

Stories persuade for several reasons.

First, stories persuade by inhibiting counter-arguing. The power of the story distracts and breaks down suspicion. A wide variety of studies have confirmed that a story gets in the way of a tendency to confront and then counter facts.¹⁰ Further, because the beliefs that emerge from the story are not contradicted or refuted, they will carry the day. A story will be particularly effective when there are strong prior beliefs and counter-arguing is likely.

Second, stories potentially affect audiences differently from analytical arguments based on facts, because the story and its associated emotion and affinity to the characters create an aura that is carried over to the brand. It would be inconsistent to have a positive feeling about the characters or the plot and have a negative feeling about the brand that was in some ways a driver of the story or its outcome.

Third, a story teller or the protagonist is usually more liked and credible than a person attempting to persuade with facts. Certainly Tom Dickson in a story-telling context is more persuasive than an ad spokesperson even with the same content because he is not seen as selling but rather telling a story and because he has both authenticity and credibility.

Fourth, stories are effective at changing attitudes in part because in a story context, people deduce the logic themselves and we know from research and common sense, that self-discovery is much more powerful than having people talk at you.¹¹ If Blendtex had asserted that its product was powerful and durable even with believable data to support, the end result would be much less likely to persuade than having the audience digest the “test” that happened in front of their eyes. A story communicates 2 plus 2, the path to four, not simply the answer four.

The power of stories to aid persuasion should be highest when prior beliefs are strongly help. In fact, it is remarkable how ineffective the most compelling facts, in the absence of stories, are in changing strongly held beliefs.¹² The classic evidence was a study by Leon Festinger and colleagues of a cult that became more strongly committed to their beliefs even when the day passed without the predicted end of the world from a massive flood.

Figure 1

Facts vs. Story

Insert about here

Stories Spawn Social Communication

When signature stories stand out because of their ability to be thought-provoking, novel, provocative, interesting, informative, newsworthy, or entertaining, they are likely to be repeated in the social media space and elsewhere. Facts have to achieve a much higher level of attention and interest to activate social activity.

There has been considerable research identifying why people engage in word-of-mouth communication and what types of content tend to stimulate it.¹³ Among the findings are that a story tends to be shared when it contains useful information (making the sender feel knowledgeable and giving), makes people care (in part by creating emotional response), is in some way remarkable (perhaps with a “Would you believe....?” moment), has “insider” information (an obscure but interesting story), or generates physiological arousal (e.g. the feelings of awe, amusement, excitement or anger).

Stories Beat Facts

Compare the two ways of communicating the qualities of the Maine Hunting Shoe, the list of facts and the story shown in Figure 1. Which will have the best chance of being remembered, communicating facts, persuading, and being retold? The list of facts or features is unlikely to even gain attention while the story can become a vehicle to have lasting impact.

Compare also the efforts of Under Armour, the fast growing and technology-driven sports clothing firm, to gain a place in customer’s minds with its HeatGear products, that now are not only moisture-wicking but also offer odor control and sun protection, with its competitors. The Under Armour founder, Kevin Plank, as a college football player got tired of sticky wet clothing and developed in his basement products that would stay dry using fabric from women’s lingerie. His advance, introduced in 1996, became the start of a major innovative clothing company delivering performance apparel with a supporting story was both memorable and authentic. Competitors such as Nike’s Dri Fit, Uniqlo’s Airism, Hanes’ Cool Dri and others had to engage in a communication effort emphasizing functional benefits without the support of a story in a crowded and messy space.

Believing that signature stories have strategic power and value is only part of the task. There are three challenges. First, signature stories need to be found or created. Second, they need to be evaluated. Third, they have to be actively managed so that they can be leveraged in the short-term and refreshed through years and decades.

How to Find Your Signature Stories?

Many firms will have signature stories in their history and the task is to recognize or discover or rediscover them and then set priorities by identifying those that can serve to play

important roles. For some firms, however, particularly those that are facing a culture change or a new strategy involving different products or markets, it may be necessary to create signature stories. Some suggestive guidelines:

To determine what strategic message is needed or would be helpful, it is important to understand who you are and what you do. Look to your brand vision and value proposition, drivers of customer relationships, your organizational culture and values, and your business strategy. What are the most important aspects of the organization's reputation and its brand image? What perceptions and attitudes need to be changed or reinforced to allow the business strategy to succeed? Know what is aspirational, not now credible but important to the long term strategy of the firm. Given that assessment, what story content would make a difference?

Look broadly for story heroes. Signature stories can come from different perspectives. The key is to find ones that are intriguing, authentic, and involving; will advance the message of the brand, organization, or business strategy; will inspire employees; and will motivate passionate customers. Among the hero types that are effectively used are the business founder, transformational CEOs, employees, suppliers, customers, programs, a coming business renewal strategy, and the offering, but there are others as well. A story will often have multiple heroes but there is usually one that is driving the story idea.

The **founder as hero** can be a powerful signature story source because the core values and value propositions are often apparent at the firm's origin. We saw this in the L.L. Bean story. The founder of Clif Bar & Company, Gary Erickson, was on a 175 mile bike ride in 1990 and was out of energy. He just could not eat another unappetizing, sticky, hard-to-digest energy bar. This experience inspired him to make a better tasting bar with nutritious ingredients. And he did.

The **transformational CEO as hero** signature story can represent internally and externally a new culture and strategy. The Lou Gerstner IBM story was an example. Another is the story of the CEO of ConAgra who had a heart attack and realized that the frozen dinner selections, including those of his firm, did not contain any that were heart healthy. What to do and what to eat? The answer was the creation of the Healthy Choice line of foods in 1985 that for the first time provided heart- healthier, frozen-dinner selections.

Still another is the story of Zhang Ruimin who was promoted to be the head of a very troubled Chinese appliance manufacturer, Haier, in 1982. After a customer brought in a faulty refrigerator back, Zhang and the customer then went through his entire inventory of 400 refrigerators looking for a replacement only to find that nearly 20 percent were defective. Zhang promptly had the 76 dud refrigerators lined up on the factory floor and had his employees along with Zhang destroy them with a sledgehammer. The exercise not only reinforced the concept of product quality in his own workers, it also garnered the company some much needed publicity. The next year, its refrigerators sold well in major domestic markets and Haier has gone on to be a major Chinese success story with a global footprint. But the signature story still gets retold and underlies the firm's culture and strategy.

The **employee as hero**, as the Nordstrom story illustrates, can be a source of a strong and memorable signature story because employees are on the front lines. Zappos.com, the online shoe store, has a set of signature stories around its ten core values, one of which is to deliver “Wow” customer service. One such story involves a Zappos.com call center employee who at 3 A.M. received a call from a customer who could not find an open pizza store. Instead of gently turning the customer away, the employee actually found a pizza store open and arranged a delivery.

Employee stories often need encouragement to surface. Mobil before its merger with Exxon had “Leadership,” “Partnership,” and “Trust” as the corporate brand tenets. The firm held a contest for any employee or groups of employees to nominate a person, group, or programs that best exemplified one of these three tenets with the winner to get to be in the infield in the Indy 500. They got over 300 entrants and some incredible stories.

The supplier as hero can provide credibility to a value proposition. For example, retailers and food companies that want to earn credibility about claims of being organic and natural can develop supplier stories. Cliff Bar & Company has an ingredient series, Farmers Speak. One episode told the story of how the Burroughs Family Farms, an almond supplier, made the transition from conventional to organic almond farming with details like how they allowed their chickens to roam the orchards to provide compost and support the vegetation. The story included the challenge, the decision itself, the rationale, the process, and the outcome.

The **customer as hero** can be effective because there is no “my brand or product is better than yours” connotation and the customer story is likely to be closely linked to either the organizational values or the brand’s value proposition.

Facebook stories is a site that allows people to tell a story about how Facebook allowed them to do something extraordinary. A scientist, for example, had pictures of hundreds of fish that he collected on a South American expedition and wanted to identify them. He decided to solicit help by posting them on Facebook and explaining his need. Help in identifying them arrived in a matter of days. A group of young Tibetans’ set out on a quest to preserve much of the old culture that had been dissipated. The problem was how to coordinate the effort and chronicle the progress. A Facebook group provided the answer and a lot of energy in addition. The Facebook stories around Tibetan culture are compelling and suggest to readers the power of Facebook.

Customer stories can be observed or may be found through recording touchpoint experiences. However, customers can also be incentivized to reveal them. Purina Cat Chow held a contest in which customers recounted a cat relationship story using a theme such as: “Why I’m a Cat Person;” “How We Found Each Other;” “Always There for Me;” and “Memories.” The stories captured the emotional connection that people have with pets.

The **program as hero** often works because a program, often not related to the marketing of the physical product, is more intriguing than any product story. That was the case for the Molson ice rink story. Another example is the Unilever's Lifebuoy "help a child reach five" program that aims to get people to wash hands because washing hands can prevent many infant deaths. Some 5,000 children under 5 die each day, many because of diarrhea. The program, which has reached over 180 million people with the wash hands message, is told through powerful stories. For example, there is the story of Utari, a young mother who has affection for a tree, told through a two minute video. She waters it and protects it from water buffalo. She dances under it during the day and sits during the evening. Why? What is it about the tree? In her village, people plant a tree to commemorate the birth of a child and her village is not immune from infant death. Reaching five is thus special and the next day was the fifth birthday of Utari's son. He made it! Utari's story makes the point in a personal way that touches the audience. Her video has over 11 million views and a companion one over 19 million.

The **business transformation or revitalization** story. The story can look to the future rather than the past. The story arc can point to a perhaps distant future with a road map on how to get there. Especially if conflict/tension can be introduced, the "future" story can inspire employees and customers alike even if it has not played out yet. The Gerstner IBM story was an example that was once a "future" story and the T-Mobile story was another.

At the end of 2011, T-Mobile saw its proposed merger with AT&T denied; a declining market position behind AT&T, Verizon, and Sprint; a weak brand relying on price; and discouraged employees. Something needed to be done. The conventional answer would be to upgrade marketing by communicating improved phone coverage, enhancing awareness, and developing effective promotions. Safe options. Or, T-Mobile could take a big risk and reinvent the whole category. Research showed that customers were mad about the category with its two year commitment, restrictions on usage, complex pricing that confused, and failure to reward customer loyalty and would move to any brand that could change that paradigm. T-Mobile decided to be the "consumer advocate," the brand that would remove these pain points through its "Un-carrier" program that would empathize simplicity, fairness, and value. The program story even at the outset provided energy and momentum to customers and employees including its very visible CEO. The story changed the culture at T-Mobile and created marketplace buzz around the brand.¹⁴

Postscript. The T-Mobile Un-carrier program did in fact change the whole category. It resulted in over 4 million total net customer additions during 2013, making T-Mobile the fastest growing wireless company in the nation. And by early 2015, it passed Sprint to be the third place player. The story by then changed its focus from the promise of the future to a symbol of an ongoing program representing innovation, success, and consumer advocacy.

The **product or offering as hero** is often a part of most signature stories as it was in the Nordstrom, L.L. Bean, Skype, Subway, and Facebook cases. But it can also be the principle hero as it was in the Blendtec case. The classic Timex ads, also in that category, placed the watch in

at-risk contexts. A cliff diver in Mexico, for example, undertakes a scary dive with a Timex on. An extreme challenge for the diver and for the watch. Will the watch survive? After the diver struggles to reach the shore, we all look to see if the watch works. The narrator, the newsman John Cameron Swayze, reports that the Timex is working and in fact “takes a licking and keeps on ticken.” The product-as-hero stories require little interpretation because the brand is an integral part of the story.

Not all stories are worth elevating to signature status. There needs to be an evaluation process to identify the strength and promise of candidate stories.

Story Evaluation

The signature story or stories set need to be evaluated on two dimensions, the quality of the story and its message. It should score high on both.

The Ability of the Story to be Intriguing, Authentic, and Involving

Story criteria can be based largely on the definition of a signature story which suggests several questions:

Is it a story? It should have a narrative with a beginning that captures our attention (the challenge of Blendtex to blend something like an iPad), a middle that creates interest (the blending test), and a resolution (Yes, It Blends!) even if it is not told in that order. If it is a stand-alone set of facts or features or data or lists, it will not qualify.

Is it intriguing? Does it grab your attention? There needs to be a reason for the audience to notice and process the story. It should be some combination of being thought-provoking, novel, provocative, interesting, informative, newsworthy, or entertaining. If the story does not score high on one or more of these dimensions, it will not be a good candidate to be signature story. A consulting company that has an intriguing client story may be inhibited from painting the really black picture that motivated the engagement and from sharing the details that made the solution magical. The result is a bland story. The answer is to search for client stories, even if less powerful, for which detail that makes the story intriguing can be included.

Is it authentic? Do the settings, characters, and challenges feel real? Or is the story likely to be perceived as phony, contrived, or a transparent selling effort? Is there substance behind the story and its message? Or is does it represent wishful thinking or even deception. It can be fictional as noted at the outset. In fact, a story that is clearly fictional may actually lead to a reduction in critical thinking.¹⁵ A danger is to come too close to a selling effort. There was a set of stories by a hotel chain around the value of fast check-out and how that time could be used to do exciting and interesting things. It did not do well perhaps because it came across as selling focused and not very believable

Is it involving? How powerful is the story? Does it draw people in? Does it make you care? Does it merit retelling? Does it precipitate a cognitive response such as belief change or an emotional response such as feeling warmth or awe? Will it precipitate a decision to pass on the story or a change in the brand attitude? If the audience is likely to be passive because the story is shallow, the signature story will be weak. An organization that helps homeless and others down on their luck has a dozen compelling stories but in telling all of them superficially, they fail to capture the character identification and emotion. Compare with the stories of Charity: Water such as one where through pictures and text you really get to know Natalia, the 15 year-old president of the water committee that controls the new well and how that well has changed the life of people.

We know from research that an effective signature story will also have certain additional characteristics. It is thus productive to also look for:

- **Empathic story characters.** Can the listener put him or herself into the story context, to have real empathy for the characters that will stimulate the same emotions the characters experience?
- A **meaningful challenge or obstacle** that is real and worthwhile and is overcome by the story hero. If the customer has a problem of getting clothes clean and fresh, the problem will appear too familiar, commercial, and mundane. Who cares and who listens? If the story is set in rural Mexico where there is a water problem that affects the life of a family in a particular village, there is a meaningful challenge to which people can relate. When Downey Single Rinse, which works with much less water, responds, the story gets traction.
- **Conflict and tension** that creates an emotional involvement. Lou Gerstner's choice between breaking up IBM or becoming a unified systems firm represents palpable conflict. There is tension when the Blendtec faces a new "will it blend" challenge.
- A **surprise**, something that is unexpected perhaps preceded by a tension in the narrative that engages. The probability of retelling is boosted when there is an "I can't believe that....." moment that some in the audience will be motivated to talk about.
- A **visual image.** The audience member should be able to imagine the story coming to life in his or her mind. Both impact and memory are enhanced if there is a connection to a visual image in part because the story then becomes more similar to a real experience. Also the content is then more likely to be processed holistically which accentuates the impact of the positive elements of the story and reduces the impact of a negative element.¹⁶
- **Detail** that adds interest and enhances the authenticity. In general the more we know about L.L. Bean, the problem of wet feet, the boot design solution, and the money-back decision, the more involved the audience will get. Most stories would benefit from more detail.

The Strategic Message

As the signature story definition makes clear, the story should also have a message that is strategically important to the brand, its vision, the customer relationship, the organization, and/or the business strategy. It should communicate a core value of the brand or organization that represents a point of difference or point of parity that is meaningful and influential in the marketplace.

The potential importance and impact over time of that strategic brand message needs to be evaluated. How important is the strategic message? How would it impact the business strategy going forward? Is it central or just peripheral to strategy? Does it enhance and leverage a point of strength or neutralize a point of weakness in the brand or business strategy that matters? How enduring will it be? Will the nature of this message fade in importance over time? Is the message supported by substance and truth? If that support is visible and credible, the story will be more effective.

The story also needs to link its message to the brand. If the brand is one of the heroes the link will be strong but if the brand link is at risk of being overshadowed by the plot or characters then its potential strategic value will be less. It might be necessary to test the story against its ability to retain a brand association rather than assuming that the connection will be made.

Managing Signature Stories to Impact over Time

Having compelling signature stories is only part of the game. The challenge is to leverage them to perform their function of building or reinforcing the core brand vision, customer relationship, organizational values, or the business strategy. That requires active management.

The problem internally is one of making signature stories integrated into the process of creating and supporting the culture and values of the organization. That means that it should be a tool of the executives who are promoting and using the culture and integral to internal messaging in training sessions, special events, and visible symbols. Of course the external use of signature stories affect their impact internally because what the brand is communicating externally provides credibility as well as visibility internally.

Managing signature stories in their external role is more difficult because getting exposure becomes a major challenge. Often, there are many, even too many signature stories or story variants and internal brand spokespeople have a problem accessing them for a communication task whether it is a speech, an advertising campaign, or an article. A tool that works is a categorized story bank that is well-structured, well-known within the organization, and easy-to-use. When good, effective stories become part of an active library they do not have to be rediscovered again and again.

A signature story, no matter how intriguing, needs exposure, it needs to be seen or heard. In rare cases, a story will go viral without any push simply because it got lucky (those stories with amazing content tend to be the luckiest). But, normally, there needs to be a concerted program to expose it to a target audience. It is usually necessary to prime the pump.

The effort to push the story can be involve articles or books, media appearances or interviews, public relations contacts, or simply paid advertising but social media should play a central role. One goal of a social media program is to get people to access and share the story. Employees and brand friends are particularly good candidates to seed the story. A vehicle with a following such as a blog, column or website feature can be especially effective in exposing a signature story or its implications and extensions because of its established audience base. Social media will be most effective when its goal is to remind people to access and share a story that they would be inclined to do so anyway. If a story is pushed that is weak or comes off as a selling effort, the effort may backfire.

Whether the context is internal or external, the presentation of the story--the style, the presenter, the visual effects, the links to the audience, and more--will affect the ability of the story to get traction. It will rarely make a story but it can break it. A wide variety of presentation styles and approaches can work but there will definitely be some that fit your story better than others. In general, a presentation should add interest, feel right, and certainly not detract.¹⁷

A key challenge is to make sure signature stories have legs, that they are kept alive and fresh over a long time period. That is the essence of their strategic role. Ongoing signature story management is different for a stand-alone story and for story sets around a theme.

The Stand-Alone Story

When the signature story is a stand-alone entity, keeping it fresh and alive is a big challenge because once the story is told there is an assumption that most have been exposed to it and there is less incentive to retell or listen to it. So how can it be kept alive? Challenging, but it can be done. Consider the following approaches.

First, create a larger narrative by generating companion stories as Molson did with stories of those that played hockey in the “mountain rink.” The founder of L.L. Bean also had a stream of stories all making or reinforcing the original boot story and its hunting, fishing, and outdoors contexts. For example, in 1936 Mr. Bean wrote in his fishing catalog, “These flies are the result of years of testing to determine the ones most effective in New England waters. I have decided that eight flies in two sizes are all that are necessary and in many cases, three or four will answer nicely. When salmon won’t take one of these flies, you may as well call it a day.” This story and others like it, enrich and solidify the narrative about fishing, the outdoors, innovation, and quality and keep alive the presence of L.L. Bean and, by extension, the Maine Hunting Boot story.

Virgin’s Richard Branson, David Olgivy founder of O&M, and Marc Benioff of Salesforce.com created a stream of stories recorded in best-selling books that not only embellish

and enrich the stories around the founder but contribute their own visibility and energy. The existence of a set of reinforcing stories makes it easier to retell—“Have you heard this one?” It also reinforces and deepens the founder story theme.

Second, make the story a part of a larger marketing effort with supporting offerings, communications, and programs. The Subway story illustrates. From 1999 to 2015, Subway leveraged a signature story around Jared Fogle, who as a 425 pound student at Indiana University lost 245 pounds with a diet of two Subway sandwiches a day.¹⁸ Jared and his original 62 inch jeans became a symbol and spokesperson about the menu choices at Subway and, more generally, about healthy eating, with appearances in events, TV shows, and advertising. His story was extended in many ways. The menu was modified and repositioned to provide substance to the lower calorie, healthier fast food menu. A subset of sandwiches was branded as FreshFit to guide ordering and to help illustrate the quest for healthier items. Subway’s tag line “Eat Fresh” was simple but told the healthy eating story supported by the fresh bread (baked on site) core Subway attribute. As a result, the content of the Jared story was in large part transferred to these programs so that when Subway disengaged from Jared, the central ideas of the Jared story were able to live on.

Third, a symbol can help keep a signature story alive by acting as a trigger.¹⁹ There is a stature of the original L.L. Bean boot in front of the home office and a vehicle with a huge likeness of the same boot that travels around the country. One of the sledgehammers used by Zhang at Haier is on display at their headquarters. The story of how Bill Hewlett and David Packard started a company by making products that practicing engineers needed is vividly symbolized by the still-standing HP Garage. You just have to see the garage to recall the story and the customer-driven innovation it represents.

Fourth, use events branded by the story to bring it back. For example, Apple’s 30th Mac anniversary celebrated the original Macintosh, the story behind it including the famous 1984 ad, and the innovative Apple products that followed the Mac vision. As part of the anniversary, a short film shot entirely with the iPhone 5s in a single day in 15 countries highlighted how people use the Macintosh, iPhone and iPad to accomplish incredible feats in their everyday lives. The anniversary not only reminded people of the heritage story and the Apple personality, but also provided a vehicle to link the heritage to the products and values of today’s Apple.

Managing a Story Set

The signature story, as noted at the outset, can involve a set of stories under an umbrella theme that may have a tagline or image associated with it. A flow of stories provides freshness and energy but it can also cause people to get overwhelmed with story overload resulting in a lack of motivation to process them. When no story stands stand out, the default strategy of an audience member becomes spending time on none of them. How can the flow be made appealing enough to process and how can it be leveraged?

One tactic is to create a cadre of regular viewers that are motivated by outstanding, arresting content. It always comes back to content. It helps to use social media and other push options to provide a way to notify them of new content and entice them to access it.

Blendtec and Red Bull regularly create new stories that are able to keep a set of regular viewers on board, loyal to both the story flow and the brand. Such a core group is not only of value of itself it also provides a base from which others can be stimulated. Blendtec was successful in developing new stories for its “Will it blend” challenge all with the familiar tension and “surprise.” Red Bull, the energy soda, sponsors dozens of sports like wakeboarding and motorcycle racing, events like the Red Bull Air Race, and athletes like Ashley Fiolek--motocross star. All have stories that reflect the power of ignoring physical limits in accomplishing incredible goals. The Red Bull story set demonstrates the energy and core personality of the brand.

A second tactic is to make the stories accessible to audience members. Story overload can be reduced, for example, if there is a way for audience members to screen stories so that the most relevant stories for a segment or person can be easily obtained. The Skype stories, for example, are organized into the most popular stories, “Workplace” stories showing how Skype makes the workplace more productive, and “play” stories that show innovative Skype uses outside of work. If the content is screened and focused, the story relevance will be enhanced and the effort of the target audience to find stories of potential interest will be reduced.

A third tactic is to periodically have a story that breaks out of the clutter, that goes viral at some level, that has a life beyond the website because it is so unusual and newsworthy in some way. The “jump from space” stunt was such a story for Red Bull. On Sunday October 14, some 9.5million watched live (and another 30 million watched later) Felix Baumgartner rise more than 24 miles above the New Mexico desert in the 55-story ultra-thin helium “Red Bull Stratos” balloon, jump off, and reach 830 mph during a 9 minute descent. This stunt created the ultimate break-out story for Red Bull but it also provided visibility for the other Red Bull stories in part by stimulating visits to the Red Bull web site. Thus, a strategy is to look for, indeed cultivate, the big story. When a break-out story occurs, it should be promoted via all the available social media assets and other media vehicles as well. It is more important that the process be creative and smart rather than have a large budget.

Find Your Signature Story

Signatures stories can become strategic assets, playing a key role in representing your brand vision, bases of customer relationships, set of organizational values, and business strategy. while inspiring both customers and employees. To find and develop signatures stories that play that role, you need to understand what you now stand for in the minds of the target audience and how you want to be perceived in the future. Where are you now and where are you going?

When candidate stories emerge, make sure that they are not just a list of facts (or features, data, or lists) but, rather, a narrative that appears intriguing, is perceived as authentic, engenders involvement, and has a strategy message. And make sure that it is managed like the asset it is.

Abstract

A signature story, as opposed to a tactical story or a set of facts, is an intriguing, authentic, involving narrative with a strategic message that enhances the brand, the customer relationship, the organization, and/or the business strategy. It is a strategic asset that can be leveraged through time providing clarification, inspiration and direction both internally and externally. The challenges are to find or create signature stories, evaluate them, and then actively manage them to impact over time.

Author's Bio

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- ¹⁸In 2015 when Subway disengaged from Jared after he was tarnished with a federal child pornography and sex conviction, their challenge was to rely on the programs supporting the core message of Subway's healthy fast-food mission and menu and to allow Jared's association to fade. The strength of the message and the substance behind it made the task feasible but still difficult. The Subway experience rather dramatically illustrates the downside of a powerful spokesperson.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the power of triggers in promoting word-of-mouth communication see Berger, *op. cit.*, Chapter 2.