

Editorial

How to Align your Brand Stories with Your Products

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Abstract

The role of stories and their influence on communication have been widely discussed, yet despite recent advances, the elements that constitute a good brand story and their alignment with product types remain unclear. This study uses four between-subjects experiments to test hypotheses pertaining to the appropriate stories for both search and experience products. Authenticity, conciseness, reversal, and humor are generally useful in engaging readers, though brand story elements influence customer attitudes differently for search versus experience products. Authenticity is more important for experience than search products; conciseness has a significant influence on brand attitude only for search products; reversal is more critical to improve brand attitude for experience than search products; and humor exerts a relatively greater influence for search than for experience products. These findings provide insights for marketers who want to design brand stories that align with their products.

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Introduction

Stories can resonate with customers and thus create competitive advantages for a company. For example, the Walt Disney Company has a long history of telling delighting and inspiring stories about every product. Its storytelling ability even has become a core value for the international corporation, increasing the level of inimitability it enjoys over competitors (Boje 1995). Theoretically, stories provide an effective way to communicate with audiences, because contents conveyed in story form tend to be more affective than those presented in a list format (e.g., Mattila 2000). That is, stories create emotional connections with and understanding by receivers, which increases comprehension, communication, and judgment, according to research in a wide range of disciplines, such as psychology, linguistics, education, and sociology (West, Huber, and Min 2004; Woodside 2010). Researchers also have examined story comprehension and persuasion in the fields of advertising, leadership, and information processing (e.g., Deighton, Romer, and McQueen 1989;

Escalas 2007). Such studies indicate that consumers interpret their exposure to and experience with brands through stories.

Despite these advances, some questions remain. What elements constitute a good brand story? How do customers respond to specific story aspects? In particular, some story elements appear in previous conceptual studies related to narratives (e.g., Taylor, Fisher, and Dufresne 2002), yet we know little about the relationship between brand story elements and customer attitudes. From a business perspective, understanding the elements of brand story and how these elements influence customer attitudes can help managers design a good brand story and increase consumer confidence.

Furthermore, customers evaluate products differently, often because market offerings appear on a continuum ranging from “easy to evaluate” to “difficult to evaluate.” Researchers have argued that the influence of communication practices depends on the level of information asymmetry, or the search/experience classification paradigm (e.g., Weathers, Sharma, and Wood 2007). Wright and Lynch (1995) also demonstrate that advertising is superior in communicating search attributes, whereas direct experience succeeds in communicating experience attributes. This classification distinguishes search products, dominated by attributes about which customers can acquire full information before purchase, from experience products, which are those that customers can evaluate only after some consumption experience (Nelson 1974). Several studies (e.g., Hsieh,

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Table 1
Previous research results supporting the story elements.

	Authenticity	Conciseness	Reversal	Humor	Others
Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer (2000)				Humor is one of the most commonly employed communication strategies in advertising.	
Aristotle (1987)					Stories should have a beginning, a middle, and an end; they should include characters and a lesson learned.
Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink (2008)	The brand seeks of authenticity.				
Boozer, Wyld, and Grant (1992)		People have little time to attend to the magnitude of messages for attention.			
Bruce (2001)	Speak with an authentic human voice.			Use humor whenever you can.	
Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003)	The search for authenticity is one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing.				
Bruner (1994)	Authentic means credible and convincing, and it is important to produce a believable image to the public.				
Casebeer (2008)			Narratives follow a general pattern: the story begins, a problem arises that leads to a climax, and the problem is resolved in the end.		
Deighton, Romer, and McQueen (1989)	Drama must meet the test of verisimilitude with regard to the depicted events.		A story comprises a stable state of affairs, breached to induce a crisis, and finally redressed.		The transition from demonstration to story is added to by the concept of character.
Franzosi (1998)			The events in the story must disrupt an initial state of equilibrium that sets in motion an inversion of situation.		
Guber (2007)	A great storytelling does not conflict with truth or authenticity.				
Hearon (2004)	Writers must collect rich and varied facts to a story.				
Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan (2008)	The company facilitates experiential authenticity such that postmodern consumers feel more in touch with their sense of self.				

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