

WHAT'S BIOLOGY GOT TO DO  
WITH MARKETING?  
STORYTELLING ISN'T BULL CRAP,  
IT'S BIOLOGY

Picture this: It's a fine Sunday afternoon in the crispness of late fall. Your nose tingles at the woodsy tang of your next-door neighbor's outdoor fire pit. You and yours are in the family room for your favorite team's first big rivalry game of the season. The gang is gathered around that 62-inch flat screen you're so glad you bought. The fireplace is hot and crackling, the fresh guacamole and chips are leaving just the right zing on your tongue, and the brews are going down icy cold with every sip, just the way you like them.

Then she appears, on that big screen. Her long, reddish-brown hair falls playfully over creamy cheekbones and down to her white football jersey. She's sort of half-laying, half-sitting on a big bed, playfully tossing a football while smiling into the camera. Then she speaks: "Watching football together is great. But I think women would agree, huddling with their man afterwards is nice too." Suddenly, there's more of a zing in your throat and it ain't the guac. You gaze around the room at your family, friends and your teenagers. A mixture of embarrassment and shame washes over you. You've not only been subjected to unpleasantness. You know it's a lie—the universe of women 20 years younger than men who might purchase Viagra for a little "huddling" is remarkably small.

Picture this: the following day, you're navigating the morning hustle with a gleam and a smile. The gleam comes from spend-

ing time with those closest to you yesterday, and the smile comes from the sunshine above. You feel the energy of the morning and contemplate the promise of a new week in which you lead your team to collaborate for success. Five minutes later, as the elevator pulls you toward your office, your smartphone is vibrating AND beeping. It can't be. Since the last stoplight, 14 emails already? And two calls. The doors open and you hear it before you see it: The gaggle of three waiting for you. There goes your plan. Your immediate reaction: Hit the down button and head for your car. A few minutes ago, a clear goal and sharp focus seemed so tangible you could taste it. Now you're overwhelmed by the noise of real life. You wonder how you can manage the chaos to move your team forward in the right direction.

Picture this: It's Friday night. The theater is dark and the murmur of anticipation transforms the crowd's conversation to background music before a huge, dark screen. As light fills the screen, a sea of heads spreads out before you. In your hands, the box of popcorn is hot and the buttery scent is compelling. On screen, a young woman wanders down a dark hallway, led by armed men. From the Dolby sound system, ominous piano music rains down as an interrogator recites a list of her crimes: armed insurgency, forgery of documents, and stealing, as scenes of mayhem play out. You lean forward in your seat. Off screen, an older woman's voice intones: "On your own from the age of 15—reckless, aggressive and undisciplined." The young woman responds: "This is a rebellion, isn't it? I rebel!" What are you thinking?

Three different days, three different scenarios. The same you. Which of these experiences engages you most? Which of them delivers a message you would notice and retain? And which of these will move you to think, act or feel differently once you were exposed to it?

What does each of our scenarios tell us about the answer to our question? And what does each reveal about effective (and ineffective) business communication?

While we watched our football game, we experienced one of the most enduring and classic iterations of marketing: The TV commercial. The one I picked for our little story is real and in the last few years has sold sexual enhancement medication for men during the regular NFL season and post-season. It was even parodied to hilarious effect by actor Ben Stiller on late-night TV (Stiller's version was a mirror image, with him as a man selling a product to women).

Classic advertising provokes a number of responses in us that this commercial illustrates. First, we expect advertising to lie to us. In ads selling sexual enhancement medication to men, the women making the pitch are invariably too young and too beautiful to realistically make the case. Frequently, to gain attention, advertising shares the lie by evoking a setting that grabs our attention, in this case an intentional sexual subtext (do we really want our kids watching the big game with us to see these kinds of ads?). Ultimately, while some of it is fun or humorous, classic advertising makes us defensive and puts us on guard.

Is it any surprise then, that over the last several years, the generation most important to the future of the organizations we lead—Millennials—has registered the lowest level of engagement, trust and support ever measured for classic advertising?

Our second story scenario reliably describes the world in which most of us live as business leaders. The 21st century bombards us with information, instantaneously delivered from hundreds of electronic sources from signboards to our cars to our smartphones. The immediate availability of information compels us to ignore or delete most of the messages we receive because we can't consume them in a way that helps make sense

of their meaning. We figure 90 percent of those messages are garbage, and we hope we can wade through the trash well enough to retain the 10 percent of messages we expect to be legitimate.

Let's consider our third story scenario. Our example is drawn from a real movie trailer for one of the recent chapters in the *Star Wars* saga. *Star Wars* is one of the most enduring movie franchises because it is a reliable, immersive experience in powerful storytelling. When we watch a movie with a good storyline, we are literally drawn in. We relax and we participate. We're receptive because we're engaged. We suspend disbelief and are willing to place ourselves, as the opening crawl for every one of the *Star Wars* movies puts it, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away ..."

Don't take my word for it—consider box office sales. The Numbers, a top film industry blog, says the box office for the first eight *Star Wars* films totals more than \$6.6 billion or \$828 million a film. Don't like *Star Wars*? What about Harry Potter? Or James Bond? Or Lord of the Rings? What about Marvel comic heroes? These film franchises are the top five highest grossing of all time. And all, as a group, are distinguished by powerful storytelling.

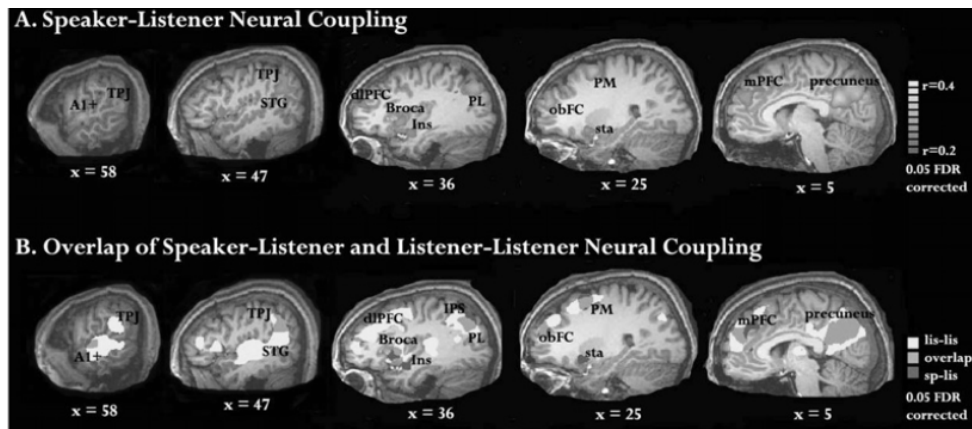
Don't like movies? What about bedtime stories? Every one of us who's ever heard the "Once upon a time" mantra as the opening of our favorite childhood story—or recited it 200 nights in a row as a parent—can attest to the immersive power of stories. E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, first published in 1952, has entertained generations and sold more than 45 million copies in 23 languages. It's also been adapted into two movies, a stage play, and yes, a video game.

What's going on here? Quite simply, a biological imperative. We don't develop a love for story. We are *born with it*, thanks to biology. This is true of us individually and as a society. It's been

true of societies since the beginning of time. Sharing your story to effectively promote your brand isn't a fad, trend or gimmick—it's biology. In fact, sharing your organization's story drives your brand and the other investments you've made in marketing.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and other brain scanning techniques, when combined with modern neuroscience, demonstrate definitively why stories work in communications.

Let's examine one example: In this Princeton University work chronicled a few years ago by Wired magazine, study researchers Greg Stephens and Uri Hasson discovered that effective storytelling literally creates something that the good Vulcan Mr. Spock could only fake in the Star Trek movies and on TV: a mind meld between the storyteller and the audience.



What do we see in the images above? Over the course of time, as an effective storyteller shares a story, good storytelling literally causes changes in the brain activity of the audience receiving the storyteller's message. It becomes like a great dance team—like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. First, the storyteller and audience begin (x-58), then the storyteller leads (x-47, x-36) and the audience ultimately responds and connects (x-25). Across this series of images, you can see how this plays out, the storyteller and audience playing off each other, sometimes coming together, sometimes moving in response to the other.

This technology gives us a picture inside the brain of what most of us have experienced repeatedly in our lives but which we couldn't previously quantify: the speaker who had us in the palm of his hand, the movie that left us with profound images and thoughts days after we saw it; the concert that kept coming back to us in song, sound and picture a week after we attended it. How often have you (or someone you know), said something to the effect of "I wish that concert/movie/play never ended, I was so caught up in it and enjoyed it so much." That's what we're seeing in the series of pictures above.

This is the science that matches the powerful cultural history that advocates for storytelling in business. As humans, we've been sharing stories since before we had written language. There's been a historical, compelling anecdotal sense that we keep doing that for a reason—because it works. Thanks to MRIs and other tools that allow us to see our brains at work, we now have the scientific evidence to measure the anecdotal and prove the power of storytelling.

Findings like these have profound impact for the way business leaders need to be thinking about the power of storytelling in business. Business storytelling is no longer a matter of costumes and characters and entertainment in terms of how information is presented.

Business storytelling is now a powerful tool that's scientifically, demonstrably effective in communicating with the audiences that you most need to reach. In fact, the most important communications asset your organization owns is its story.

Storytelling has the power to engage the audiences you need to reach and deliver a message at the deepest human level, the power to create a memory. Story's power to create a memory comes from the ingrained power of our shared human experience. Great storytellers, including George Lucas, the man behind the *Star Wars* franchise, tap classic storylines and

character roles—known as archetypes—that are easily understood even in our information-saturated 21st-century environment because they have played out over and over in human history. They carry names and roles ranging from ruler to explorer to outlaw to everyman.

Think of Robin Hood, or Dirty Harry. Their archetype is The Outlaw. Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* is also a classic outlaw character. Each of these antihero/hero characters experience a storyline we will explore later in the book known as *the hero's journey*. It's not the only storyline that's relevant for us as business leaders—we will explore others later—but the hero's journey is an example of a storyline that packs an engaging and memorable punch. The importance of archetypes is the power they give us to share our story in ways that are unique, compelling and memorable.

Are you taking advantage of your story in your marketing efforts? How are you promoting your brand today? What's the ratio of money and attention you are devoting to classic advertising and lies, or colors and logos, as opposed to the powerful narrative that explains why your organization is the right choice for customers, employees, investors or strategic partners? Is it possible that you're missing out on a powerhouse at your fingertips—your story?

You don't have to be a great brand to unlock the power of storytelling. But let's start by looking at a few of the world's great brands of the last few decades and consider how we embrace their stories. Your own business may not be world famous, but we can learn and apply a great deal from the stories of those that are.

Nike is famous for athletic apparel that makes it possible for the weekend warrior to feel he or she is on a par with Tiger Woods or Michael Jordan. The swoosh logo and the "Just Do It" mantra

are easily remembered “brand assets,” and so are the relationships with star athletes including Jordan, Woods and others.

Those relationships and brand assets *represent* the Nike story—they are not the story. The story itself runs much deeper. The Nike story gives life and meaning to those relationships and those brand assets.

The real Nike story is Bill Bowerman, the legendary University of Oregon track coach who ruined his wife’s waffle iron trying to make a sole for a better running shoe for his athletes. Even though Bowerman was great enough to coach 31 Olympic athletes, 51 All-Americans, 12 American record-holders, 22 NCAA champions and 16 sub-4 minute milers, he couldn’t find a suitable running shoe for his athletes until he made one himself. And he couldn’t make that shoe a success until one of his former athletes, miler Phil Knight, helped him found the company we know today as Nike.

Today everything Nike does, from endorsements to slogans, is an outward reflection of the Nike story. It’s the power of the story that propels Nike forward, not its colors, logos or slogans. We may not see the relationship between the Nike story and its brand until someone points it out to us. Nike sees it. That’s why the company’s employee Number Four, Nelson Farris, carries the title of chief storyteller.

To revisit our discussion about archetypes a bit earlier, Nike represents a champion archetype—not in the sense of being the winning athlete itself, but in the sense of *being the champion that makes your individual success possible*, whether you are an Olympic athlete or a weekend runner.

Nike is hardly the only example of a well-known company that understands a great brand is a natural outgrowth of its story. Since its founding, Southwest Airlines has played the part of the underdog—another outlaw archetype example—in the airline



industry. Southwest's success today makes the company the most-valued airline in the world and one of the world's most valued public companies.

The Southwest story didn't start that way, and the company has never forgotten that beginning. Even before its first flight, Southwest's story has been about affordable air travel. In the beginning, co-founders Rollin King and Herb Kelleher wanted to make it as affordable to fly from city to city as it was to take the bus. At the beginning, competitors who'd grown rich and comfortable on federally regulated air travel saw the upstart Southwest as a threat, and they conspired to kill it, in court, in private arm-twisting with Southwest's bankers, and even in the U.S. Congress.

At every turn, as its much more powerful competitors tried to kill it, Southwest embraced the adversity it faced and made it part of the Southwest story. Just a few examples:

To deprive Southwest of traffic, competitors got regulators to force Southwest to fly out of old Love Field in Dallas, which at the time had just been replaced by what we know today as Dallas/Fort Worth International, a brand-new airport. Competitors hoped the move would kill Southwest. Instead, Southwest embraced Love Field and made it its own. In its early years, flying Southwest meant munching on Love Nuts instead of peanuts, and sipping Love Potions instead of cocktails. When Southwest's success made it a public company, Kelleher and his team knew the three-letter stock symbol they wanted: LUV, for Love Field.

Another example: Most fliers know Southwest maintains one of the best on-time records in the industry, but few know why. It's one of the most important aspects of the Southwest story and brand.

Even before Southwest had flown its first flight, its competitors had gotten to its bankers and convinced them to tighten the purse strings. Southwest, still several weeks from its first flight, had been lucky enough to lease four Boeing 737s for its fleet.

As its bankers bowed to Southwest's competitors and turned the screws, Kelleher and his team were faced with a terrible choice: Lay off a sizable percentage of its staff, even before its first flight, or give up a plane. Southwest called an all-employee meeting and took a vote. The result: get rid of a plane and commit to somehow figuring out how to make as many flights with three planes as Southwest had planned to make with four. This change pushed the Southwest team to innovate "turnaround" procedures that still lead the industry. They are also a core aspect of the company's story and culture. The same discipline Southwest applied to that adversity has become part of how the company has approached challenge after challenge.

So when we see TV ads that proclaim, "you are now free to move about the country," or see Southwest employees in airports "freeing" passengers from the tyrannical behaviors of other airlines, we are indeed seeing clever marketing and a memorable brand. There is no lying involved! We are experiencing the brand as something much more than cute. We see and hear the brand as we do because it is a direct representation of the company's story, as with Nike.

You don't need to be a big, recognizable brand for storytelling to work. Consider Blendtec, a 40-year-old company in Orem, Utah that just happens to make some of the most durable commercial and home blenders in the world.

Like far too many companies, Blendtec and its founder Tom Dickson toiled in relative obscurity for decades, growing nicely while focusing primarily on making indestructible, powerful machines. Everybody at Blendtec knew those powerful machines were the essence of the company story, the reason cus-

tomers bought and relied on Blendtec. Yet that story wasn't part of the company's marketing until George Wright joined the company. In 2006, while walking down the hall one day, Wright happened to see Dickson, a folksy gray-haired kid's vision of a mad scientist, wearing a white coat and tossing an object into a Blendtec blender to test it. Inspiration struck. Wright learned that Dickson tested the blenders by grinding unusual objects in them to prove their seemingly limitless power, thereby wowing skeptical potential clients. Wright saw that Blendtec had a story. And now they had a marketer who seized the story.

Within weeks, Wright and Dickson had collaborated to produce the first *Will it Blend?* video for the relatively new social media channel called YouTube. Dickson's videos, in which he's blended everything from rotisserie chickens and Coca-Cola to different models of iPhones, drove sales. Since 2007, *Will It Blend?* videos have been viewed 265 million times on YouTube and helped produce millions in sales. Dickson has become an international celebrity. He's demonstrated Blendtec blenders on NBC's *Today* and for many other media outlets. The cheeky comedic genius of how Blendtec markets its products has put the company in the spotlight time and again.

While often corny and sometimes gimmicky, the Blendtec *Will It Blend?* effort works because it is a natural (if quirky) outgrowth of an essential tenet of the company's story. Dickson represents yet another of our classic—and successful—story archetypes, the jester. He makes us laugh—and helps us to buy.

Compare the Blendtec approach to that of our TV commercial at the beginning of this chapter. Tom Dickson is nowhere near lying when he's selling blenders. Can there be anything more authentic (and fun) than using your product to bring to life every four-year-old's dream of smashing practically anything you want and getting paid to do it? It's magic.

If someone could give you a magic button that unlocked the essential power of your company's story so *you* could convince people to buy, would you push it? What if I told you that you already have that button? It's been in your proverbial pocket for some time. Since most of us view marketing as some variation on classic advertising or "interruption marketing" techniques, we've never bothered to push it.

It's time that we do. As our examples illustrate, some of the world's most successful companies have been pushing the story button and winning for quite some time. Every organization has a magic button that can unlock the power of its story. Nike's power comes from being a champion. Southwest's power comes from being an outlaw. Blendtec's power comes from a willingness to play the jester.

Where does your company story draw its power? You might not think your story is that powerful—but it is. If you don't know if your story is that powerful, it's time to uncover it.

These companies understand that the power of their story attracts and engages their best-fit clients. As our Blendtec example illustrates, you don't have to be a mega company or have a dramatic history to deliver results. You just have to understand the power of your authentic story.

So what exactly *does it mean* to be authentic when storytelling?

First and foremost, your story must be rooted in fact and transparently genuine. In film or literature, great works pull us in so deeply that we suspend disbelief about the ability to fly, travel through time and many other seemingly impossible situations that, in real life, would be entirely inauthentic.

As business leaders, we work in real life, so we must use the powerful tools of fictional storytelling with great care. This is especially true in our 21st-century, social media-driven culture.

Inauthenticity earns swift and painful rebuke in our wired world.

So how does this work in real life? If you and I witness an auto accident from opposite corners of the same intersection, it's likely we see different aspects of the event. When a police officer interviews us about the accident, and we share different versions, does that mean one of us is telling the truth and one of us is lying? No. Our recollections, based upon the same set of facts, are equally authentic. They are just different.

This is a critical distinction lost on far too many business leaders who want to share their story. In nearly any situation in life, there is more than one version of the same story. And that's OK, as long as it's rooted in fact and genuine, meaning that while it may be structured to persuade an audience, it's easy to trace that persuasion to an interpretation of facts that's genuine.

Our hearts and minds are always searching for authenticity, the interpretation of facts that gives us a clear picture, the language that rings right, the experience that makes us feel comfortable. This is why the scene in which Dorothy's dog Toto pulls back the curtain in the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*, is so well remembered—it illustrates this timeless human principle of authenticity. In the film, the larger-than-life, loud and frightening Wizard is revealed by Toto's yank at the curtain to be a fairly ordinary man using a machine to make himself something he is not.

As a former journalist and now public relations executive for the better part of the last four decades, I've been continually exposed to the full power of *authentic* story in practically every conceivable format.

I came of age journalistically in the era of Woodward and Bernstein, the two Washington Post reporters who broke the story of the Watergate break-in scandal in 1973. That scandal

ended the presidency of Richard M. Nixon when their reporting and Congressional hearings revealed that the story the president and his staff told the American people about the break-in of the Watergate offices of the opposing political party was a lie—it was the president and his campaign staff who undertook the break-in, contrary to what they had claimed. Their story was a lie, and Nixon resigned in disgrace, remembered for uttering the phrase, “I am not a crook.”

The Watergate fallout made the profession of journalism and its demand for authenticity, an important concept we’ll define later, exceedingly popular. I proudly wore a T-shirt in those years that proclaimed: “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.”

In the decades since, the public view of journalism has swung wildly. Today many news consumers may hold some level of contempt for the news media, while still consuming “news.”

It’s easy perhaps to focus on the messenger and miss the importance of the message. The message is what this book is all about. No form of communication better carries a message than story. And no source of stories is more vibrant in terms of the vast expanse of human experience than journalism, regardless of how you or I or your Uncle Burt might feel about journalists. We’ll talk in later chapters about the emergence of “user-generated content” that often competes with news content. And we’ll touch on the true meaning of authenticity.

In recent years, the emergence of what has been branded “fake news” has added another layer of confusion to understanding the importance of authenticity and stories rooted in fact. This is a book about the human experience, so by its very nature we will deal with definitions of truth and a lack of truth appropriately. This is not a political book, nor is it a polemic or commentary on the division and distrust that we see in today’s popular culture and civic society. It’s not my intent to engage in that

debate. There are other authors with far more experience (and many with far more charged opinions) who can dissect the trajectory of our political discourse and provide levels of insight specific to that debate.

The relevance of journalistic storytelling for our purposes is two-fold: It's our richest vein of stories relating the human experience. I've been immersed in that world for the better part of four decades. This gives me a particularly deep well of personal experience to draw on as we explore the kinds of stories that connect best with the audiences we must reach to drive success in our organizations.

All the foment about “fake news” makes authentic storytelling—and your story—more important than ever. The cynicism and skepticism that's permeated the brains of any audience you hope to reach now demands proof of authenticity and a commitment to truth telling. In this regard, the core subject of this book has never been more important. We are already bombarded by too much information, coming at us too quickly. Political division has created another critical imperative to share your authentic story.

In the 21st century, public opinion polls show that a majority of Americans expect politicians to lie. This is not just our political reality—it's the reality we face in business as well.

If anything, the world of marketing is worse. Some of the best in the business playfully and disingenuously write books with titles such as *All Marketers Are Liars*. Is it any wonder that the same polls that place politicians, government and journalists in low regard find more than half of the public distrustful of classic advertising?

Far too many marketers busily wrap liars and lies in new skins to worm their way into our minds and pocketbooks. This is exactly what our world doesn't need. It is in direct conflict with

the needs of our information-soaked, always-on 21st-century world. Transparency is the new buzzword to describe the concept that if you lie, we will all be on the internet in five minutes to find out you're lying now, that you lied before and that your momma always thought you were gonna be a liar.

I became a public relations and marketing practitioner in part because journalism taught me that some of the best stories of people and organizations in this world will not be shared unless someone makes the effort to understand the authentic storyline at the heart of every great organization.

What does a successful company story look like? The most successful stories are what I call Capital S Stories. There is a profound difference between a Capital S Story and all others.

In the old days, when people actually read newspapers in hard copy, *small s* stories were those read one day, then fed into the bottom of the birdcage the next. In today's world, the *small s* stories are those that fly by on social media, the ones you can't remember 10 minutes later.

Your Capital S Story answers the most central question of your company's existence: Why should someone buy from you, work for you, invest in you or partner with you. Your Capital S Story answers fundamental questions about these relationships that go far beyond features and benefits. They speak to the very character and commitment of the organization and its people. Capital S Stories are the ones with staying power. They continue to command attention over time. They are at the heart of our journey ahead. And what does that journey hold in store for you?

We've been sharing stories as human beings since before we had written language. Now you have the opportunity to turn biology, culture and science to your benefit, engaging your best-fit clients.



As you'll see in the pages to come, business storytelling is a powerful tool that's scientifically, demonstrably effective in communicating with the audiences you most need to reach.

### **StoryCrafter's Toolkit** **Chapter 1**

*If you're reading the printed edition of the book, access these links and resources through your web browser at: [www.capitalstory.com/storycrafterstoolkit](http://www.capitalstory.com/storycrafterstoolkit).*

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- [The 25 most popular bedtime stories of all time](#)
- [Wired Magazine article on Princeton University research](#)
- [Goodnight Moon back story, from Wikipedia.org](#)
- [History of the Nike 'Just Do It' campaign](#)
- [Top-performing movie franchises, ranked](#)
- [From Forbes: Millennials don't respond to ads](#)
- [OneSpot: The science of storytelling infographic](#)