

# How to do brand storytelling

 By [Jason Stewart](#)

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Word of mouth is very much experience-based: yours or someone else's. We love stories. They grip us. We can visualise scenarios and place ourselves in the same situation, but, most importantly, we start to believe in them.

## Cultural tool

Storytelling has long been a cultural tool for explaining and understanding complex ideas and theories about existence, resulting in customs and beliefs successfully being orally transmitted from generation to generation.

If a brand can intertwine itself with the daily storytelling patterns of its consumers, it's more gripping and achieves mass awareness. If that story is sufficiently compelling to lead to action, then the result is mass sales. That is one of the most important objectives of marketing practices - to get people telling their friends about a particular brand.

There have been many organisations which have tried to create a story formula to entrench its talkability, such as "Be Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credible and Emotional". From my experience working with brands and seeding hundreds of stories into the market, I have seen that it's simply based on how well a brand knows its target market.

## Qualifying questions

Here are some qualifying questions to help judge the potential uptake of a story:

1. Does the story relate to the brand and include the product?
2. Is this something that people would want to hear about and, more importantly, would they want to share it? Although the answer to this is subjective for every brand and each segment within its respective target market, it usually is reflective of how the story is told and packaged.

Telling guys that by using a certain deodorant it will make them smell fresh and clean for 24 hours is very different to telling guys that it will make them irresistible to women, because "since using the product, we noted James hooked up with Natasha". A crude example, perhaps, that illustrates the point.

3. Pictures tell a thousand words, videos even more so. If rich media is right for your target market, then tell your stories that way. It doesn't need to be expensive and can be consumer-created. The bottom line, however, is that it must be honest, real and compelling.

It has been proven that, if a story is completely unbelievable, it is perceived as not worth sharing with someone else. However, if it's only slightly incredible, as in close to normality, but with a flip, then our interest is nabbed and we want to share the story with our friends. So keep it simple, close to what is expected, but do push the boundaries.

## **Boils down to two things**

Brand storytelling boils down to two things: really understanding your consumer, plus some trial and error! We have generated hundreds of stories for brands and only around 30% stick and often the consumers will generate their own version.

The important point is that this is not a once-off thrust into the market. It is an ongoing experiment into having a conversation with those who are interested in your brand.

Howard Schultz, Starbucks CEO, said, "A retailer's success depends on their ability to tell a story. What people, hear, see, smell or do when they enter a space guides their feelings, enticing them to celebrate whatever the seller has to offer." The brand's 'job' is to ensure that, at every point of contact with the consumer, a bit of a story is told in a way that makes the consumer want to share it.

## **Participation in an already happening conversation**

But storytelling goes further by generating participation in a conversation that consumers are already having with each other. This is a great opportunity to generate further word of mouth using existing momentum. It's easily done online using social media tracking tools that show who is saying what, where and to whom. Engage with your consumers and review your own online brand presence to assess your WOM leveraging.

Part of being a good conversationalist is being a good listener, although it takes time and is obviously not as much fun as talking about yourself. Brands that are learning this very important bit of social etiquette are generating more conversation and deeper relationships with their fans than those which are still to learn that it's rude to simply shout out the same boring USPs about yourself time and time again.

To complete this "social etiquette" exposé - if you are good with people, you will be good at managing a brand. If you know how to make people feel good about themselves, you should be using the same principles in your marketing.

Start looking at how, when, where and with whom your brand can tell its story. Use the stories that are already being told about it. Create your own folklore and give your consumers a reason to say "Have you heard..." about your brand.

## **ABOUT JASON STEWART**

Jason Stewart is the co-founder and MD of HaveYouHeard ([www.haveyouheard.co.za](http://www.haveyouheard.co.za)), a communications agency immersed in culture to influence it. With 11 years' trading experience and offices in Johannesburg, Cape Town and London, HaveYouHeard uncovers unique insights to create innovative ideas that influence the audience by bringing the brands it partners with to the centre of culture.

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