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Introduction

So, you are interested in creating brand stories and marketing messages that will prove irresistibly attractive to potential customers.

Me too. As a professional copywriter I've helped huge numbers of very different businesses rise to this challenge - from big consumer brands like Colgate Palmolive, Heinz and Dairy Crest to small engineering companies, software developers and boutique hotels. What's more, unlike most copywriters, and indeed most people in marketing, I've been employed in sales. Face to face with real prospects you quickly receive short sharp lessons in what they want to hear, and what they don't.

I'm not telling you this to blow my own trumpet, just to reassure you I have gained some valuable experience and knowledge.

Why do I want to share this now? Because I see so many businesses, full of great people giving it their all, making a horrible mess of presenting their offering to potential customers.

Instead of preparing their brand story in a systematic and strategic fashion they just dive in and start kicking ideas around. Rather than asking sensible preliminary questions like "what's our offering?", "how does it differ from that of competitors?" and "what do potential customers most want to hear?" they skip straight to "we need a website", "let's do AdWords" and "we must get busy on social media". They start discussing *how* to communicate their message before first working out *what* it should be.

This is a sure-fire way to create chaos!

An old man is walking along a beach. He sees a boy at the waterline who is saving stranded starfish by throwing them back into the sea. The old man says "What's the point, there are so many – you'll never make a difference." The boy throws back

another and replies “I just made a difference to that one!” Over the years I’ve made a difference to many businesses, one at a time. But now I’d like to try and make a difference to larger numbers.

In this book I share a simple, practical and proven process for preparing a brand story that works – one that says the right things, to the right people, in the right order and in the right way for maximum impact. It’s less about how to write and more about how to think.

If you are frustrated that your marketing is not producing the results you’d like, and worried that your brand story is too weak to punch its way out of a wet paper bag, then this little book will be a big help.

Chapter 1. KEY INSIGHTS BEFORE WE START THE PROCESS

Let’s begin by getting in the right frame of mind. In this chapter I share a few ideas and principles that will prove helpful.

What *is* a brand?

Everyone is familiar with the brand word but I think it means very different things to different people.

Personally, I like this definition, proposed by leading brand consultancy Wolff Olins:

A brand is a set of ideas a company or product stands for in people’s minds.

These ideas are shaped by the actions of that company or those products. But they are also given recognisable shape and form through the words and visual style the company and product uses to express itself.

If you buy into this definition you accept that a brand is not a single fixed entity. It is multifarious, intangible, and ever-changing – it exists in the mind as a collection of impressions, perceptions and feelings. These are partly created by what the company or product says about itself, the story it chooses to tell people and the marketing messages it decides to communicate.

The key question, for you and your brand, is what story you propose telling. What should you include, what should you leave out, and what is the best way to shape it?

Why isn’t my marketing working?

If you're confused by marketing in general, and frustrated by your own efforts in particular, then you are not alone. Marketing has never been simple or easy – and now is even less so. Like so much else, it has been turned upside down by the digital revolution. New technology promised to make things easier and the process more cost effective. In many ways it has had the opposite effect.

- New media and clever targeting tools mean customers have become punch drunk with information. To retain their sanity they've turned off, tuned out and retreated behind personal firewalls, both digital and mental. In theory people may be easier to reach but in practice they're harder to engage.
- Life is so fast paced and full-on that people simply don't have the time or brain space to get excited about whatever it is you are promoting.
- Most people have virtually everything they need – car, smartphone, and dishwasher. Every market, from professional services to potato products, is jam-packed with virtually indistinguishable offerings desperately vying for attention from people who are spoilt for choice and suffering from decision fatigue.
- Marketing has become more complicated and fragmented. There's such a profusion of new channels, tools and techniques that it's impossible to keep up – if you are struggling then you are in good company!

To overcome these challenges a brand needs a very simple story which immediately strikes the target audience as relevant, meaningful, engaging, motivating and memorable. Creating such a story is a very demanding task, one that requires time and effort.

Despite this obvious truth, and the fact that “brand story telling” is a term that has become very popular, a lot of business owners, managers and marketers are focused elsewhere – the message is the very last thing on their minds. Their attention is directed almost exclusively towards three other areas:

- **Media** - look at all these new ways to reach people! Let's try AdWords, pay-per-click, a website refresh, videos, retargeting ads, content marketing, an email campaign, our own app, Google+, LinkedIn, affiliate marketing....
- **Mechanics** – how do we get the best out of all these new tools and techniques? Let's learn more about SEO, getting likes and shares, Mailchimp, proximity marketing, Vimeo, automation, QR codes, purpose-driven marketing, WordPress, UX, infographics, whiteboard animation...
- **Metrics** – if we measured more we could improve our effectiveness. Let's get busy monitoring views, like and shares, click rates, bounce rates, customer retention rates, lead quality scores, subscriber numbers, retention statistics, customer lifetime value....

These three things are getting lots of attention, because they are new and exciting. And they *are* important. But at the same time you cannot afford to ignore the fourth M - message. What you say is at least as important as how you deliver it, how you amplify it and how you measure it. Doing a great job of broadcasting, augmenting and evaluating a rubbish message is a very expensive waste of time and effort.

Yet this is exactly what's happening. The words, the message, the story, are now dismissively described as "content". Why? Because with so many marketing projects it's only at the very end, when everything else has been put in place, that someone notices that the template is empty. The "Where's the content?" question is very much an afterthought – at which point a copywriter like myself is invited to "fill it up".

Am I exaggerating? No – many businesses, and the marketing professionals they hire, see nothing wrong with this approach. I'm repeatedly shocked at the number of times I've asked "What do you want to say and what information can you give me?" only to receive a blank look or a reply that suggests I'm being difficult. A few years ago I was writing a major report for an international NGO based in Geneva. When I requested more information the reply was "Your business is called 'Stories that sell', can't you just make something up to fill the gaps?" They weren't joking, and were unamused when I replied that "I only do non-fiction".

Words are cheap

I recently wrote a simple website for a financial services start-up. When the client involved an SEO consultancy they quoted £5000 a month and insisted on a 12-month contract. Their monthly fee was almost 10 times my one-off cost. The client eventually accepted another quote of £300 a week, £1200 a month – still twice my fee, and not payable once, but 12 times a year. This shows you how little value, relatively speaking, is placed on the message itself.

So, concerned that your marketing isn't working as well as you'd like? Ask yourself whether you have become so absorbed by media, mechanics and metrics that you've dropped the message ball. And, if you suspect this is the case, how can you begin to put things right?