

Headspace: Storytelling & your evolving brand's narrative

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Headspace – Tienielle Maris

by Tienielle Maris. Storytelling has been around for centuries; it's become engrained in human behaviour and has the ability to infiltrate the psyche by conveying messages in emotive and powerful ways.

Neuroscience has just begun demonstrating an understanding of the effects of storytelling on the brain but the verdict is out: stories have the innate ability to affect us at an incredibly deep intellectual and emotional level. According to neuroscience researcher, Dr Paul Zak, storytelling can cause the brain to produce the neurochemical oxytocin, which produces emotions such as kindness and empathy that are then encoded into long-term memory.

Higher involvement

According to a study published by Kantar Millward Brown on media and digital trends for 2018, content that tells a story is more likely to elicit an emotional connection and higher involvement from viewers vs those with no story. Beyond lending itself to some beautiful and shareworthy content, storytelling — *when done well* — may also generate profit, loyalty and a long-term legacy for a brand.

It therefore comes as no surprise that brands with a clearly defined story are the ones that are really connecting with consumers, and the reason that so many brands are baking storytelling into their strategic approach. Brands with a clear purpose and story — such as Apple, Tesla, Red Bull — are undoubtedly among the most successful in the world because their consumers are taken on a journey, time and time again, to experience their brand purpose.

So, if none of this is new news, then why all the sudden hype around storytelling? Simply, the penny is starting to drop for more and more brands that, in order to make a lasting impact in the minds of consumers and engender long-term brand saliency, there needs to be a very clear *reason for being* that shines through an ongoing conversation between the brand and its audience.

Consistency and simplicity

While many brands may believe that they do, in fact, have a story that they're trying to tell, they fall short when that story is relayed in an ambiguous and overly complicated way. With the endless amount of noise from brands, consumers certainly don't want to have to work hard at uncovering your message for themselves: what you're saying had better be crystal-clear or you're going to lose the people you're trying to connect with from the onset.

If a brand is to embark on the journey of telling a specific story to its audience, everything that that brand does should link back to that same story and brand purpose in an authentic way. If not, those actions will not only be schizophrenic and random at best but will dilute a brand's meaning in the lives of those who matter.

A change in approach

With the increased emphasis placed on storytelling, it comes as no surprise that one of the biggest focus areas for brands right now is on *starting with the story*: instead of beginning with preferred media channels and platforms, marketers and advertisers are starting with defining the story that will best bring that brand's purpose to life. Only once that story is clearly defined are touchpoints selected that naturally support in telling that story.

What this all means is that we need to shift the focus from advertising — and the associated definitions and processes — to creating distinctive and uninterrupted brand experiences for consumers.

Getting it right

Airbnb's brand purpose comes through powerfully through all that it does: wanting to make people feel that they can belong anywhere. It's a shining example of a brand that demonstrates a consistent and seamless alignment of its internal values and external behaviour through the story that it tells.

Through curated travel stories, people are placed at the centre of all brand activity to, in turn, invite others to experience travel in a distinctive way.

“Great content and storytelling is so important now for any brand. As a community-driven company, we don't want to just talk about our product, but instead put our community front and centre of any campaign.” —Jonathan Mildenhall, Airbnb CMO

By reaching audiences on an unconscious level, brands have the ability to elicit emotions that will ultimately make the brand more-distinctive and -memorable in the minds of consumers. We marketers and advertisers need to constantly challenge our clients and one another on whether we are *really* staying true to the story we set out to tell. We need to constantly be asking:

“What is my (brand) story?”

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