

Brand storytelling: A three-dimensional perspective

Received (in revised form): 1st March, 2019



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Abstract

Storytelling has become a buzzword in marketing and brand development. Many experts have suggested methods for using stories in marketing and advertising, but these theories do not paint a full picture. Brand storytelling is a three-dimensional process that requires understanding the customer journey, the brand identity and the market or context in which they coexist. When there is a disconnect between two or more of these story dimensions, the message falls flat and does not resonate with customers. This paper introduces the Storytelling Superpower framework, an approach that allows brands to identify their essential persona and craft a more authentic message that connects and resonates with customers. This storytelling rubric comprises four archetypes, and in this paper we study examples of marketing and advertising campaigns featuring each type.

Keywords

storytelling, marketing, advertising, brand positioning, psychology, customer experience

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling has become a buzzword in marketing and brand development. Inspired by research and theories surrounding brand storytelling¹ — including Donald Miller's StoryBrand² framework — many companies have embraced the notion that story may be used as a persuasive vehicle for a brand's sales or marketing message. Yet the Hero's Journey³ customer-centric storytelling approach used by many brands does not paint a full picture.

In the plainest terms, story is a narrative account of a character's journey within a given setting or world. Most traditional stories include all three components — character, plot and world — and removing

or altering one or more of these will result in drastic changes to the narrative. Many marketers, however, focus their storytelling efforts around only one element — the customer — and overlook the brand's role in the story. In order to understand how storytelling affects brand messaging and improve how we use stories in our marketing, we must look at both the literary sources and the psychology of storytelling.

Over the past several years, storytelling has been the point of focus in many research studies across several areas of psychology, including cognitive psychology,^{4,5} social and personality psychology⁶, and neuroscience.⁷ Results show that

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storytelling is an essential element both in human development, as well as in our interpersonal relationships. As humans, we use story to impose order and meaning⁸ to our life narratives, and the stories we tell ourselves are inextricably linked with how we see ourselves. Our identity is comprised of both stories we tell ourselves and stories told to us by other people. It stands to reason, therefore, that the stories we tell ourselves about companies and brands will similarly shape our impressions about those things.

Research in cognitive psychology has shown that story also serves a vital function in allowing us to develop more empathy.⁹ Story serves as a 'life simulator' that lets us experience situations outside our comfort zone, allowing us to develop empathy and understanding for people in those circumstances. But story is not simply a mechanism that helps us to understand difficult situations outside our experience; it also serves as a safe space where we may practice interpersonal skills and learn to better navigate the world around us. If we apply this concept similarly to marketing, storytelling becomes a way for customers to simulate the experience of product ownership or interaction with a brand.

Storytelling is an essential strategy for amplifying a brand's message and increasing customer engagement. Miller's StoryBrand¹⁰ approach shows how brands can use a customer-centric story to move the 'hero' (ie the customer) through a journey towards a sale. This method, while effective, overlooks the other two important components: the brand's side of the story and the market where the story takes place. This paper focuses specifically on the brand identity piece of the storytelling puzzle.

The Storytelling Superpower framework posits that story exists not in a one-dimensional but in a *three-dimensional* space (Figure 1) comprised of the character, plot and world in which the story takes place. The crux of brand storytelling is understanding that there are multiple layers of storytelling happening in the same space at the same time. A brand has a story it wants to communicate with the customer. The customer, in turn, has an internal story that shapes how he or she perceives the brand. Finally, the market, as a whole, has its own larger story that surrounds and impacts the customer story. Most models for brand storytelling focus primarily on the internal customer

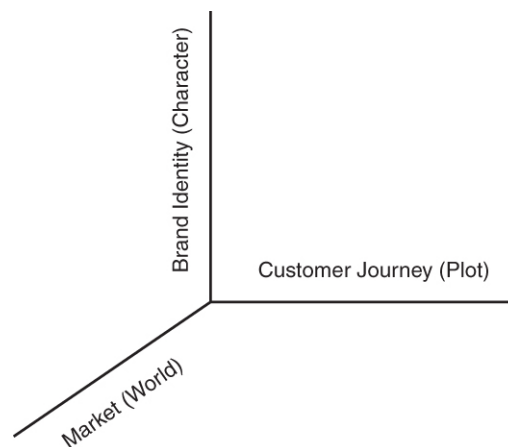


Figure 1 The three dimensions of story

story; this paper shifts the focus to the brand and presents an alternative model for brand storytelling. Before we discuss this alternative brand storytelling model, we must understand how these three story elements — character, plot and world — work within a literary context. In literature, these three components are crucial to the story, and if you change one or more of these elements it can result in a completely different story. Authors, film-makers and other artists who use story as a medium will often manipulate one of these three variables to create an entirely new story.

Consider, for example, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka. In this case, the author retells the well-known fairy tale from the point of view of the wolf, creating a new story altogether. Similarly, the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard follows two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, depicting all the 'missing' scenes involving those characters with a postmodernist flair. These examples show that shifting the point of view from one character to another can dramatically alter the story.

Of course, some narratives may omit one or more of these three components completely, relying on the remaining elements to carry out the narrative. For example, while many attractions at Disney parks use storytelling of some form to guide the audience (or visitor) experience, not all attractions tell a concrete story. Peter Pan's Flight in Disney World's Magic Kingdom is an almost identical, scene-by-scene mirror to the animated film. On the other hand, the Haunted Mansion, a similar ride in that same park, does not have a concrete story arc. In the early stages of this attraction's development, there was an intended story surrounding one of the ghosts (the bride), but this overemphasis on a concrete story trapped the designers in a creative slump.¹¹ Eventually, the imagineers

decided to remove the character and plot components from the ride entirely, and the final — extremely successful — version places all of the focus on the world. While Peter Pan's flight includes a character (Peter), a plot (his adventures) and a world (Neverland), the Haunted Mansion focuses only on the world component and creates an immersive experience. This entertaining romp through a spooky mansion filled with happy haunts is enough to capture the audience's attention, even without a focal character or a concrete plot.

If story comprises three components — character, journey and world — how does this concept translate to marketing or brand storytelling? The **character** represents the brand identity and how it resonates with customers. When we fully understand how customers perceive our brand identity, we can connect with them from a place of authenticity, instead of trying to force a brand to fit the customer's expectations. Many brand storytelling models place the customer and not the brand in this 'character' role. The problem with this approach is that it overlooks an important aspect of storytelling, which is the character's agency. While the customer may be the protagonist of his or her own life experience, a brand has no control over a customer's behaviour. Rather, the brand can only control how it presents itself to the customer and not how the customer reacts or behaves in response.

The **journey** (or plot) is where we shift our attention to the customer. Miller's StoryBrand method places the customer into the role of the character, but, as mentioned above, there is a flaw to this approach. It makes more sense to align the customer's journey with the plot and examine how a brand might influence this journey through storytelling. While Miller looks at the customer experience from a

Hero's Journey angle, the Hero's Journey is only one of many possible plot or story arcs we can use in our brand messaging. Further study could examine plot arcs aside from the Hero's Journey and how these alternative narratives impact the customer's experience.

Finally, the **world** is the market or context within which the brand identity and customer journey coexist. Because the greater market is not something that a single company can control, it makes sense to focus a study of brand storytelling first on an area where a company can have the most impact. In fact, both the customer journey (plot) and the market (world) lie at least partially outside a brand's control. For this reason, this paper focuses on the one dimension that has not been fully explored and that brand can influence, namely brand identity or character.

While the plot and world components fall beyond the scope of this paper, both of these areas — and how they intersect with brand identity — would benefit from future research. In particular, studies examining how the market affects customers' perceptions of brand storytelling could help inform how companies and other organisations shape their narratives.

While approaches to brand storytelling focus on the narrative surrounding the customer's journey, there are, in fact, multiple stories happening at the same time. Both the brand story and the customer story coexist within the context of a larger market story (Figure 2). The brand and customer stories often do not overlap completely, and in order to communicate more effectively with our customers — and make more sales — we must focus on the intersection between these two stories. Because Miller has already explored the customer story in depth using his StoryBrand framework,¹² this paper focuses on the brand side of the story equation. Future research could extend the model discussed in this paper to the customer side of the equation, as well as examine the impact of the market on both the brand and customer stories.

STORYTELLING SUPERPOWER

The Storytelling Superpower began with a simple premise: to create a rubric for writers, so they could identify the types of stories they would be best at crafting. This means that from the beginning, the Storytelling Superpower has always

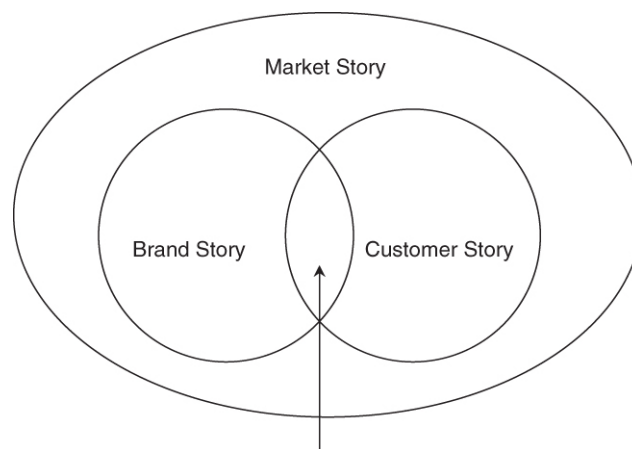


Figure 2 The intersection between brand and customer stories

been grounded in literary analysis. It has become clear, however, that this framework has applications beyond the study of literature and this same approach applies equally to crafting a brand's message as to weaving a literary narrative.

Two brand types

Recall that brand identity represents the character axis of our three-dimensional story framework (Figure 1). In order to understand brand storytelling, we must first examine the role of characters—particularly the main character or protagonist—in literature. From the ancient epics to contemporary stories, from the printed page to the stage or screen, we find only two fundamental types of protagonists: the regular Joe (or Jane) and the larger-than-life hero. Each of these two types of characters connect and resonate with readers in a different way. Brands similarly fall into two categories—relatable and aspirational—and to understand these brand types, we must examine the two character types in more depth.

The relatable brand type is akin to the regular Joe/Jane character type. This character is an everyman, a girl-next-door who gets caught in extraordinary circumstances over the course of the narrative. While these characters may seem ordinary, we see hints of their potential for greatness from the beginning of the story. We learn early in the Star Wars saga that 'the force runs strong' in Luke Skywalker's family.¹³ Bilbo Baggins outsmarts the stone trolls¹⁴ fairly early in *The Hobbit*. Katniss Everdeen goes from volunteering to take her sister's place in *the Hunger Games* to becoming 'the girl on fire'.¹⁵

Readers find these characters engaging because they are relatable, and readers can see themselves reflected in these unlikely heroes. When a regular Joe/Jane

overcomes an obstacle, readers might think: 'If she can do that, I can do it too'. Similarly, when a brand takes on a more relatable persona, customers will be able to see themselves and their experiences reflected by the brand. Examples of relatable brands include Progressive Insurance, Credit Karma, Subaru and other brands that anchor their messaging around regular people doing everyday things. This type of storytelling creates familiarity and a sense of connection, which imparts a feeling of comfort and increases the customer's trust in the brand.

In contrast to the relatable brand, the aspirational brand is one that represents not how customers see themselves, but how they *wish* they could be. This type of brand is analogous to the larger-than-life character. Unlike an everyman, these powerful heroes do not need to show potential for greatness because they are already great. Instead, it is by showing their humanity and vulnerability that these characters engage readers. Superman has kryptonite. Jay Gatsby has the pain of losing Daisy. Achilles has his heel, the only part of his body that was not immersed in the waters of the river Styx, the only part of him vulnerable to harm. It is in their vulnerability that these characters become the most compelling.

Similarly, aspirational brands become most engaging not when they seem most out of reach, but when they show hints of being attainable. We often see aspirational brands when we look at luxury items, like cars (Mercedes-Benz and Tesla) or technology products (Apple). These brands resonate with customers not because customers see themselves reflected in them, but because these brands represent something customers want to become. These brands might be aspirational, but they must also have a hint of vulnerability, a sense that the customer's desire is attainable.

At the heart of each character type is a contradiction; both the regular Joe/Jane and larger-than-life hero must show the potential to be the opposite of what they are. This is the **Opposite is Possible Theory** of character development,¹⁶ and it helps explain the change that occurs in characters over the course of most stories. Similarly, the analogous brand types must demonstrate a potential for growth, except that instead of growth occurring in the brand itself, it will be in the customer. The relatable brand tells a story that allows customers to see themselves as they currently are. When that story gives a hint of heroic potential, customers will see that story — including the sense of possibility — as reflective of their own experience.

Conversely, an aspirational brand's message reflects not how customers actually are but how they *would like to be*. If the brand story seems too out of reach, it will not resonate with customers. This means that aspirational brands must weave a sense of attainability into the message so customers can believe that there is a possibility of reaching their goal. Thus, the Opposite is Possible Theory applies both to literature and to brand messaging.

Two brand promises

Now that we understand the two brand types, we must examine the brand promises. Every story has two essential points in common: it must have a character, and the character must want something. A text might have intricately woven images and flowery language, but if there is no character, then it is not a story, it is a vignette. Furthermore, if that character does not have deep desire that he or she pursues throughout the narrative, then we have a character study, not a story with a narrative arc.

If we examine literature across various genres and time periods, we will find that

there are only two primary desires a main character might have. That character wants to either change something (in himself or his surroundings) or preserve something. Both Luke Skywalker and Bilbo Baggins are in search of adventure and want to leave their respective humdrum lives on Tatooine and in the Shire. Superman wants to protect the world and his beloved Lois Lane, while Batman wants to restore order to Gotham City. While some characters' desires might be complex, at the heart there is always a singular driving force either to change or preserve something in themselves, their circumstances or in the world around them.

These same two categories — change versus preserve — also apply to the result that a brand promises to its customer. Some brands promise change by emphasising messages of innovation, success and freedom (eg Credit Karma and Apple). Other brand messages focus on safety, comfort and care, themes embodying preservation (eg Subaru and Mercedes-Benz). Just as we put brand types into categories analogous to character types (ie relatable and aspirational), we can also sort the brand promises into two such categories: change and preservation.

FOUR ARCHETYPES

Now that we have established the two brand types and brand promises, we can derive four Storytelling Superpower archetypes: Underdog, Disruptor, Survivor and Protector. By understanding how these archetypes function in literature, we can determine themes and narratives that brands may use to engage their customers.

The underdog

This archetype is a relatable character whose primary motivation is to change

something in themselves or in the world around them. Luke Skywalker, Bilbo Baggins and Katniss Everdeen are all classic underdogs — ordinary people caught in extraordinary circumstances that force them to live up to their heroic potential. This archetype often appears in stories about overcoming adversity. This includes rags-to-riches narratives as well as ‘big guy versus little guy’ conflicts. Comeback stories can also be typical of underdogs, though now the character is a fallen hero who must regain his former glory. People love to root for these characters because they are relatable, and when the underdogs succeed readers think: ‘Maybe I can overcome my own obstacles’.

When it comes to brand storytelling, underdog narratives often emphasise themes like striving for success or reaching for freedom. Consider, for example, the recent television campaign for Credit Karma. In a series of ads¹⁷ we see characters who want to find a new living situation. In one ad, the character is a daughter who wants to move out of her parents’ house. In another, it is a woman with a selfie-taking, hashtag-obsessed roommate. Still other ads feature a couple who want to move away because of a new neighbour’s crazy antics (in one case a lady who has several dozen cats, in another a man obsessed with wind chimes). All of these commercials are variations on the same theme: the brand — Credit Karma — is the vehicle that allows regular people to change their unfortunate housing situations.

Another theme that comes up in underdog brand messaging is the ‘big guy versus little guy’ conflict, often in marketing campaigns where the underdog brand wants to set itself apart from the big, bad competitor. Consider, for example, the early Progressive Insurance television campaign with the now-iconic

Flo character. In these ads we see a stark contrast between the quirky, friendly Flo and the ‘other guys’ who are inflexible and speak in garbled jargon. While these ‘other guys’ make insurance impossible to decipher and understand, Flo (ie Progressive) is friendly and helpful and will even help customers save money. While more recent ads have shifted away from this us-versus-them dynamic, Flo has maintained a central role in Progressive Insurance campaigns.¹⁸ Newer ads have even introduced new characters like Jamie, who is even more of an underdog than Flo.

We see a similar us-versus-them approach in the ‘Mac versus PC’ television campaign that ran from 2006 to 2009.¹⁹ These ads represent the PC as a man wearing a suit and glasses, while the Mac is the hipster with a scruffy beard and shaggy haircut. The message in these ads is clear: PCs are stuffy and boring, while Macs are cool and better at ‘life stuff’. It is no coincidence that this campaign ends in the fall of 2009, just as competitors are beginning to gain a footing in the smartphone market and only a few months prior to the launch of the iPad. At this stage, it made sense for Apple to shift towards more disruptor-style messaging, embracing the archetype that better fits its image of innovation and creativity. This series of underdog ads is actually an anomaly for Apple, a brand that in the past has been known for daring campaigns like the ‘Think Different’ commercial of 1997 and the bold, graphic iPod print ads of the early 2000s.

The disruptor

In literature, disruptors are heroic characters who want to rebel against the status quo. At their best, these are charismatic characters who are not afraid to speak

their mind and stand up to tyranny. At their worst, they are narcissistic, impulsive and cross the fine line from daring rebel to menacing bully. Examples of this archetype include Elizabeth Bennet from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the title character in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Tris Prior in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series. While disruptors take on many different forms in literature, they all have one thing in common: this archetype often lends itself to being unlikeable and alienating to readers.

For this reason, it is especially important to show a hint of vulnerability with disruptor brands. After all, it is difficult to convince customers to make changes if the result feels too far out of reach. While disruptor brands have an aspirational quality that inspires and motivates customers, it is also important that customers be able to see some small part of themselves reflected in the brand story. If customers cannot see themselves achieving the promised result, then their trust in the brand will dwindle. Disruptor brands are most successful at persuading customers when they use their marketing to share a meaningful message.

Recently, beauty product brands have used disruptor-style storytelling to share a message of empowerment. For example, in the Dove 'Real Beauty Sketches' ad,²⁰ a forensic sketch artist draws two sketches of various women, one based on how each woman describes herself and the other based on another person's description of her. The result is stark, with far more appealing sketches coming from the other person's description rather than the woman's description of herself. The contrasting sketches imply that women are far more beautiful than they think they are. Similarly, the Always #LikeAGirl campaign²¹ reframes the phrase 'like a girl' as a message of empowerment, rather than as a putdown. These campaigns use disruptor

messaging to challenge cultural assumptions about beauty and femininity.

Disruptor brands do not have to focus only on social justice; sometimes a brand can present a disruptor persona simply through creativity and innovation. Apple's 'iPod Silhouettes' campaign²² does not have a lofty message at its centre. Instead, these ads extend themes from earlier Apple campaigns. The bold background colours echo the bright candy 'flavours' of the 1999 iMac and, in contrast to the Sony Walkman ads of the 1980s,²³ the product itself is barely visible in the iPod ads. Instead, what we see is the result of using the product with silhouettes dancing to music. The iPod silhouette ads sell not so much a product as a feeling, which is very different from comparable tech gadgets of the time.

The survivor

Until now we have looked at brand archetypes that promise change; at this point we shift direction and look at archetypes that focus on preservation. In literature, survivor characters strive to preserve life as they know it. Whether theirs is a life-and-death battle or a desire to survive an awkward social situation, survivor characters are regular people caught in difficult circumstances, and all they want is to keep things as they are.

The last thing a survivor character wants to do is shake up the status quo. Like underdogs, survivors are relatable, so readers see a part of themselves reflected in these characters and feel inspired when they persist against all odds. Examples of survivor characters include Hazel Grace Lancaster in *The Fault in our Stars* and the humble pig, Wilbur, in *Charlotte's Web*. There is also something inherently hopeful in this archetype. Even in their darkest hour, these characters truly believe that

they can overcome the odds, and they hold fast to the hope that survival is possible. Survivor narratives include themes like safety, security, nurture, comfort and nostalgia.

The Subaru ‘They Lived’²⁴ ad and ‘I Survived’²⁵ campaign are great examples of a survivor brand story. These ads depict regular people who owe their lives to the vehicle that kept them safe during a horrific crash. These heart-wrenching ads push the survivor archetype to the extreme, depicting a product — in this case a car — that allowed regular people to survive a terrible outcome.

Survivor brand stories do not have to portray such life-and-death situations, however. Often these stories simply show regular people going about their lives, trying to keep themselves and their loved ones safe and healthy. Insurance companies and infant product manufacturers are good examples of survivor brand archetypes. For instance, this Allstate commercial²⁶ does not show a major calamity and instead emphasises reliability and trust. To underscore how ubiquitous the company is, the ad states that there is a local Allstate Agent for every Park Road in America. The reference to ‘Park’ as the most common street name in America also taps into a feeling of small town nostalgia. Allstate comes across as a company that is ingrained in the fabric of local communities.

On a slightly different theme, the Pampers ‘Love at First Touch’ ad²⁷ shows a relatable experience — a mother holding her baby for the first time — and emphasises the themes of safety and care. Manufacturers of infant products (such as vitamin supplements and diapers) as well as companies that produce cleaning products (like Clorox or Lysol) often use survivor narratives where regular people use the product to keep their family safe and clean. In fact, cleaning products often

stress how effective they are at ‘killing 99.9 per cent of bacteria’, thus emphasising that the product can help preserve a family’s health and well-being.

The protector

Whether or not they wear capes, boots and spandex, protectors are larger-than-life heroes who see the world in danger and want to protect it. As with survivors, this archetype is driven by a desire to preserve rather than to change things, but in this case we have a heroic character rather than an everyman. Whether they are true superheroes like Iron Man or Wonder Woman, or simply a militant nerd like Dwight Schrute in *The Office*, these characters show almost superhuman fortitude in their quest to protect what they believe in. Protectors also often come across as more likeable than their disruptor counterparts. While both archetypes are larger-than-life heroes, it is far easier for readers to root for a hero who is trying to *save* the world than one who wants to *take over* the world or *change it* in his favour.

Protector brands often emphasise themes like luxury, achievement and excellence, so it is no surprise that high-end fashion, jewellery and car brands often fall into this category. With this archetype, it is especially important to show a hint of vulnerability and humanity. Humour goes a long way to achieve this result. For example, in the Mercedes-Benz commercial ‘Switcheroo’²⁸ Santa Claus secretly swaps his sleigh and flying reindeer for a red Mercedes-Benz. In another commercial, ‘Pit Stop’,²⁹ Santa’s red Benz (led by a caravan of eight silver Mercedes) stops suddenly to let a puppy — presumably a child’s Christmas gift — duck behind some trees for a pit stop. Like their disruptor counterparts, one of the dangers with protector brands is that the promise can

feel too far out of reach. The story must feel aspirational but also *attainable*, and infusing the narrative with humour or a hint of vulnerability helps it resonate better with the audience.

Another way to make this archetype seem more attainable is through a narrative where we see the hero's growth in retrospect. If the story follows a character from humble beginnings to a victorious outcome it will feel like an underdog story; but if you show the hero in present day looking back at his or her origin, that same narrative will feel like a protector story. An example of this technique is a recent campaign for Modelo Especial beer. In a series of ads, we see people who have achieved high levels of success or have performed heroic feats, like football legend Anthony Muñoz,³⁰ military pilot Olga Custodio³¹ and Helicopter Crew Chief Eddie Jimenez.³² In all of these stories, the main character is shown as having already achieved success or heroism, and the ad looks back on that journey. Furthermore, all of these larger-than-life 'everyday heroes' are shown using their success and status to help others reach similar goals. The slogan 'brewed with a fighting spirit' further cements this campaign as a protector narrative. If the story were simply about someone fighting for their own success, then it would be a disruptor narrative, but that is not the case here. These characters have already reached success themselves, and now we see them paving the way for others to do the same. Fighting on behalf of others is a classic characteristic of

the protector archetype, and this approach makes the larger-than-life brand persona more appealing to customers.

HOW TO USE THE STORYTELLING SUPERPOWER

There are various ways to use the Storytelling Superpower in marketing and brand messaging. One way is to examine where on the Storytelling Superpower matrix (Figure 3), the major brands in a niche tend to fall. If an industry dominates a particular archetype, an easy way to set a brand apart would be to modify the messaging towards a different archetype.

Consider, for example, two of Modelo's competitors, Corona and Dos Equis. All three are Mexican beers, but Modelo takes a different position in the market from the other two brands. Corona advertising tends to emphasise images such as luxurious tropical vacations, and even when the ads depict more mundane events — like sitting in a crowded airplane³³ — the implication is that the beverage transports you and makes it feel like you are on an exotic adventure. This is a typical disruptor narrative. Dos Equis also adopts a disruptor style of story, particularly in its almost decade-long campaign featuring 'The Most Interesting Man in the World'. Like Corona ads, the emphasis is on adventure, but now instead of the location being the point of focus, the story centres on the 'Most Interesting Man' character and his larger-than-life persona.³⁴ This campaign is also a typical disruptor story.

	Relatable	Aspirational
Change	Underdog	Disruptor
Preserve	Survivor	Protector

Figure 3 The Storytelling Superpower matrix

The Modelo ads, on the other hand, use larger-than-life characters who have achieved status or success through hard work and perseverance. While these characters are clearly heroic, we also see hints of their humble beginnings, which makes the aspirational element feel less out of reach. What is more, these heroes are not seeking success or status simply for their own sake; they are using their status to help elevate others. This type of protector narrative is more appealing to audiences because these characters are likeable and are using their larger-than-life heroism on behalf of others.

In order to shift a brand's Storytelling Superpower positioning, it is more effective to move laterally on the matrix than to move along a diagonal (Figure 4). For example, if an underdog brand wants to shift to a protector space in the market, the most effective strategy would be to either move down into the survivor space or shift right into a disruptor position. To shift from underdog to survivor, the brand would need to adjust the promise from change to preservation. For example, Credit Karma has released a newer ad, titled 'Here's to Progress', that shows how improving their credit score allowed a young couple to move into their dream home and start a family.³⁵ On the surface, it might appear that the overarching story is the same as other Credit Karma ads, where people improve their credit so they can buy a new home. In this ad, however, the emphasis is on how this family finally feels complete and settled

in their new house, as opposed to a more underdog-style narrative that underscores the desire for change. In other words, a nuanced difference in the point of view of the ad can be enough to shift the narrative from one archetype to another.

Once a brand has established its new place on the matrix, it should keep that message consistent for a time before trying to shift the narrative yet again. The reason for these slow, lateral moves is that audiences develop an emotional relationship to brands, and if the narrative changes too abruptly, it can stretch or even break the customer's trust. By making lateral rather than diagonal shifts, audiences need to change their perspective around only one element of the brand's persona: either its type (relatable versus aspirational) or its promise (change versus preservation). If a brand were to change both of these elements simultaneously, it could become confusing and unsettling to audiences.

The Lincoln car commercials³⁶ featuring Matthew McConaughey are an example of what happens when a brand tries to move diagonally across the storytelling matrix. While Lincoln is the luxury sub-brand of Ford, it does not have the same high-end status as Mercedes-Benz, BMW or Jaguar. In many ways, Lincoln is the underdog of the luxury cars, which tend to cluster in the protector category. It makes sense that Lincoln would want to position itself as more of a protector archetype, but shifting from underdog to protector makes the messaging feel forced and inauthentic.

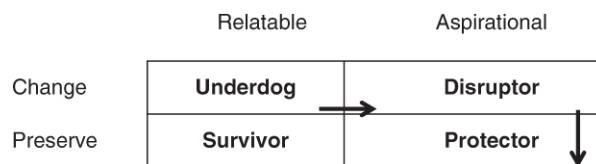


Figure 4 How to shift positioning

On one level, this campaign does take certain risks and strays from the conventional car commercial formula. For example, while many competing ads will show the car from various angles driving along winding roads, these Lincoln ads hardly show the vehicle at all, and the few moments when the car does appear, it is only a passing glimpse. Clearly, the focus of these ads is on the actor himself and all the trappings of luxury that he conveys, like the fancy suit, expensive watch and luxury home.

The problem with these ads comes from the disconnect between the story the brand is telling versus what the audience perceives. One such disconnect has to do with the actor and a mismatch between the roles he is known for and the persona he depicts in the Lincoln commercials. McConaughey has played a diverse range of roles, from goofy characters in films like *Dazed and Confused* or *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* to more intense characters in *Dallas Buyers Club* and *True Detective*. The disconnect does not stem so much from an issue of believability — we all know that this actor is fully capable of playing any number of challenging roles. Instead, the problem lies with a brand trying to reposition itself from an underdog role to a protector, using a narrative that oozes privilege and luxury, and takes itself far too seriously.

The narrative becomes even more absurd in a later ad titled ‘Bull’, where McConaughey has a stand-off with a bull and decides to take the long way home³⁷ rather than risk taunting the animal. What makes this ad particularly confusing is the narrative arc, which does not achieve the protector image that the brand seems to be striving for. We see McConaughey in his car, stopped in the middle of the road opposite the bull. We hear him say what he imagines the bull might be thinking: ‘Eighteen-hundred pounds and do whatever the

heck I want’. He then follows up with his own words: ‘I can respect that’ and decides to take the long way home. The problem with this narrative is that McConaughey’s character *backs down*, which works with a protector archetype only if that character is already so powerful that the act of stepping down is seen as a magnanimous gesture. For a brand that is striving to establish itself in a position of luxury, this narrative falls flat. While some might argue that the Lincoln campaign did lead to an increase in sales for the company, it is unclear as to how much of that is a result of the ads themselves. It is possible that the numerous spoofs that came from this campaign led to higher visibility for the brand.

A comparable protector narrative that works well is the recent Nespresso ads featuring George Clooney. Both this and the Lincoln campaign feature high-profile actors promoting a luxury product, but the Nespresso ads use humour to make the central character seem more appealing and relatable. In one Nespresso ad, for example, Clooney is a knight who has slain a dragon,³⁸ and as his reward he decides to break the fourth wall, step out of the film and get a Nespresso. In another ad, Clooney is on location filming in the middle of a rainstorm, with no decent coffee anywhere to be found.³⁹ He decides to travel home — making cameo appearances through several well-known road trip film scenes — just so he can have his Nespresso. Both of these ads use self-deprecating humour to convey that while Nespresso might be serious about good coffee, the brand does not take itself so seriously that it cannot have a good chuckle.

CONCLUSION

The goal of the Storytelling Superpower framework is not to compartmentalise or limit the scope of storytelling. Instead,

this rubric strives to establish a common vocabulary for understanding story, so that copywriters, marketers and other storytellers may craft compelling narratives that engage and resonate with customers. Currently, this framework is theoretical, but using quantitative methods, researchers may be able to create a coding system or assessment that would allow brands to determine their archetypes. Empirical research could also investigate the prevalence of these narrative archetypes in literature of different cultures and nationalities in order to better understand which narratives might resonate best with different markets. While this framework lays a foundation, there is still much room for both quantitative and qualitative future research.

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