

DESIGN THINKING

FOR COMMUNICATIONS
PROFESSIONALS

How Design Thinking processes can help you
shape organizational stories that connect

pwr
new media

What is Design Thinking?



Design Thinking is a state of mind.

It's a human-centric, holistic approach to problem solving and business thinking that employs empathy, ideation, prototyping and experimentation to solve real-world issues. For organizations seeped in this approach, Design Thinking works horizontally across an organization to tear down silos, improve communications, and deliver new insights. It's been called "the search for a magical balance between business and art; structure and chaos; intuition and logic; concept and execution; playfulness and formality; and control and empowerment."¹ It's been called "the glue between disciplines."²

Here are a few things to love about Design Thinking:

- It insists business people keep focused on humans and human needs.
- It relies on both creativity and logic.
- It promotes a learn-by-doing approach and even suggests that failure is a good way to learn.
- It's crazy collaborative.
- And, it posits that the way a thing looks is not a secondary consideration; rather, things cannot function well if they don't appeal to our hardwired visual senses.

Oh, and did we mention it's a process?

The five-step Design Thinking process creates a collaborative and adaptable framework for problem solving—the framework itself is where the magical balance resides.

The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

– Alvin Toffler

Design is not just what it looks like and it feels like. Design is how it works.

– Steve Jobs

[1] Idris Moottee, Design Thinking for Strategic Innovation (2013), p. 32.

[2] Arne Von Oosterom, <http://www.designthinkingnetwork.com/video/design-thinking-is-glue-between-disciplines>

Design Thinking in five steps

The Design Thinking process is aimed at codifying the artistic or scientific way of thinking.

The steps are:



1. **UNDERSTANDING & EMPATHY** – This is where you learn as much as you can about your audience.
2. **DEFINING THE PROBLEM** – This is where you investigate myriad aspects of given problems and develop personas based on demographics, goals and objectives.
3. **BRAINSTORMING SOLUTIONS** – Often called the “ideation” phase, a bunch of ideas are tossed out while judgment is suspended and creativity is encouraged.
4. **PROTOTYPING SOLUTIONS** – Here you’re trying to quickly, and affordably, test your assumptions about people, materials and processes.
5. **TESTING THE SOLUTION** – Learn what works and what doesn’t so you can tweak to enhance.

Did we mention it’s iterative?

Design Thinking is iterative, which means you test assumptions then return to the prototype stage and modify it based on results and feedback. Iterate to learn lessons, sooner rather than later, then try again.

Design thinking is neither art nor science nor religion. It is the capacity, ultimately, for integrative thinking.

– Tim Brown

10 Principles of Design Thinking

Design Thinking...

1. Is action-oriented
2. Supports change
3. Focuses on the human
4. Develops foresight
5. Is dynamic and iterative
6. Promotes empathy
7. Reduces risks
8. Creates shared meaning
9. Relies on an adaptable process
10. Combines logic and creativity

Design Thinking proposes a get-your-hands-dirty, learning-by-doing approach.

Design Thinking promotes a focus on end-user's needs; thus, Design Thinking processes employ listening-based techniques to better unearth both acknowledged and unacknowledged needs.

Design Thinking processes are iterative, always changing and growing because the world is evolving faster and faster and any high performing approach must be adaptable and nimble.

What do Design Thinking Solutions look like?



“Growth needs a strategy, and every strategy needs a story.”

– Idris Moottee

Design Thinking solutions can be matched to specific business challenges.

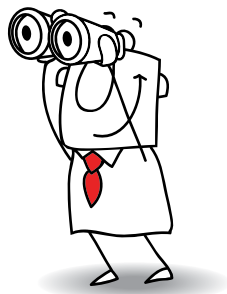
So for example...

Business Challenge	Design Thinking Solution
⚡ Growth	💡 Storytelling
⚡ Standardization	💡 Humanization
⚡ Relevance	💡 Value Redefinition

Let's zoom in on storytelling.

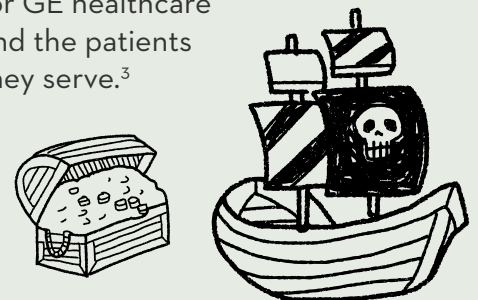
It is our topic after all! And you might be asking yourself how telling a good brand story leads to organizational growth?

Growth requires creating a clear, consistent vision of the future. Growth can, of course, be measured by many different yardsticks. The most meaningful yardstick is the one that shows progress with respect to an organization's stated goals, whatever they are. Goals, by their very nature, are futuristic. And storytelling can paint a compelling and authentic picture of the future that gets audiences to see a desired ending.



Storytelling can solve even high-tech problems

Doug Dietz, head designer for GE healthcare, learned that the cutting-edge MRI and CT machines he designed terrified kids. So he used Design Thinking processes, working with parents, children and hospital staff to brainstorm solutions. Doug solved the problem by adding visual storytelling elements to the machines and scan rooms, turning them into kid-friendly adventures: pirate ships, submarines, campsite, underwater scenes and more. The “adventure series” scanners have been a hit, putting the human element back in the process—a truly meaningful move for GE healthcare and the patients they serve.³



[3] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jajduxPD6H4>

Why is brand storytelling so important?

“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”

– Rudyard Kipling

Stories not only paint plausible visions of the future, they also created shared meanings and grow human connections. And stories are a great way for brand storytellers to shape and share a company's true values and purposes. If told well, a story will embody a company's beliefs and personality but in a way that is entertaining and memorable for the audience. And stories are remarkably durable strategies and tactics can be disrupted by competitors, shifts in industry, and just bad luck, but stories are impervious to these outside forces.

When you get right down to it, we humans don't live our lives in jargon or in bullet points. So jargon and bullet points don't really sell a story...or a product...or a service.

We live our lives in color and narrative!

Well-told stories evoke emotions. And emotions trigger dopamine (logic doesn't). Dopamine is like a sticky for the brain – a sticky that tells our minds: “Remember this. This matters!”

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

– Maya Angelou

Remember this.
This matters!



“In a world when being strategic means being logical and fact-based, where do stories belong? They add an emotional dimension to business logic. They foster empathy and connectedness. They prioritize information and objectives...and they evoke our hardwired predisposition to process information faster and more holistically when presented to us in the form of a good story.”^[4]



Why should you care about Design Thinking?

Communications professionals should care about Design Thinking because you are the storytellers.

Using storytelling for better brand communications is hardly a new idea—many communications professionals, perhaps even you, have been doing this for a long time because you understand that telling your brand story as a narrative makes your brand more coherent and easier to connect with... emotionally!

Design Thinking frameworks and processes can help you achieve this. They're designed to shift the emphasis back to the human need for connectivity and meaning, back to empathy, exchange, participation, collaboration and understanding. And the Design Thinking approach provides specific tools for crafting stories that stick.

Now let's take a look at six Design Thinking inspired tips for telling a great story...

“We spend a lot of time designing the bridge, but not enough time thinking about the people who are crossing it.

– Dr. Prabhjog Singh

Those who tell the stories rule society.

– Plato”

Tip One: Make it Collaborative

Here's how a Design Thinking collaborative writing process might look:

1. First, you empathize by putting yourself in your audience's place. Use various listening techniques to better understand your audience and try imagining it's the first time they've ever heard of your organization and the solution you offer to their problem.
2. Then, you define the problem and brainstorm audience needs, touchpoints and emotional journey.
3. Create as many potential stories as possible, as quickly as possible, with as many stakeholders as you can engage.
4. Remember, there's no such thing as a bad idea when brainstorming.
5. Take the best idea and refine it using a classic story arc. Share the draft widely and incorporate feedback for polish.

Voila! You're on your way to blockbuster brand story!

Great things are
done by a series of
small things brought
together.

– Vincent Van Gogh



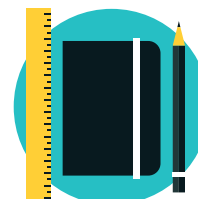
EMPATHIZE



DEFINE



BRAINSTORM



PROTOTYPE



TEST

Tip Two: Make it Human

“The shortest distance between a human being and truth is a story.”

– Anthony De Mello

Crafting and sharing organizational narratives and messages that drive business goals is a whole lot easier when you get back to the basics of human needs and human problems.

Why? Because when you get right down to it, whoever your audience is—journalists, bloggers, influencers, consumers, the C-suite, employees, even search engines—ultimately you’re trying to communicate and connect with people. (Not a lot of consumer blogging robots around yet!) And people are fascinated by people, by human challenges and pain and joy and triumph.

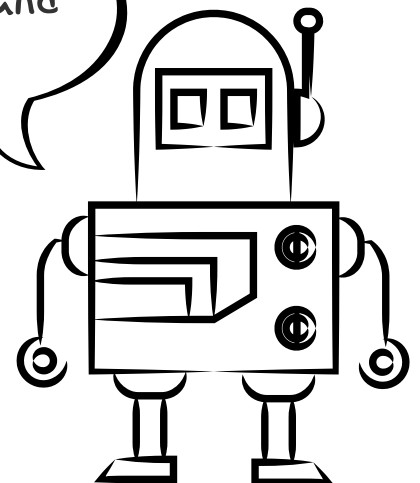
So putting people—real or imagined human protagonists that your audience can identify with—at the center of your brand stories is just more effective.

Creating stories about real people that will tug the heart strings of your audience starts with a clear understanding of your audience and continues with character and plot development that is authentic and believable and delivered in a fresh, entertaining style.

“Data is no substitute for intimacy.”

– Roger Martin

Please understand me!



Tip Three: Make it Structured

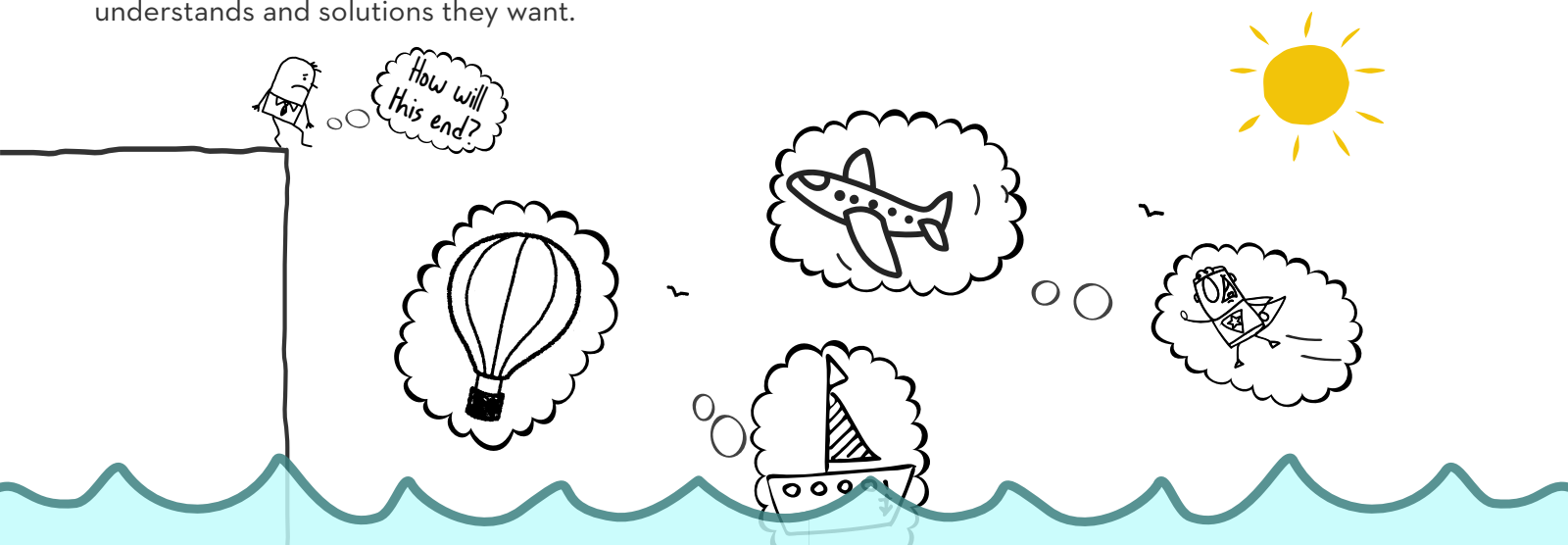
People understand stories that have a beginning, a middle and an end. Because we live our lives in narrative, employing this familiar linear structure in brand stories makes it easier for your audience to identify with your story's challenges, relationships and solutions.

Most organizational stories are true tales about how your company's product or service solved a problem for a customer, how you met a real need. (These used to be called case studies.) The goal of these brand stories is to establish credibility and connection by casting your organization in the role of hero, rather than sloppy salesperson droning on and on about your products or services in isolation. A hero tale trumps a sales pitch any day of the week because sharing and solving is good, but shilling is bad.

Following a beginning-middle-end structure enables you to create an ending that explains how your product or service solves real world problems—problems your audience understands and solutions they want.

A good story must:

- Be about a specific person or a small group of people rather than a whole company.
- Draw out a basic human emotion such as frustration, hope or excitement.
- Feature struggle and require the character to change or learn something.
- Embrace details (these set one story apart from another).



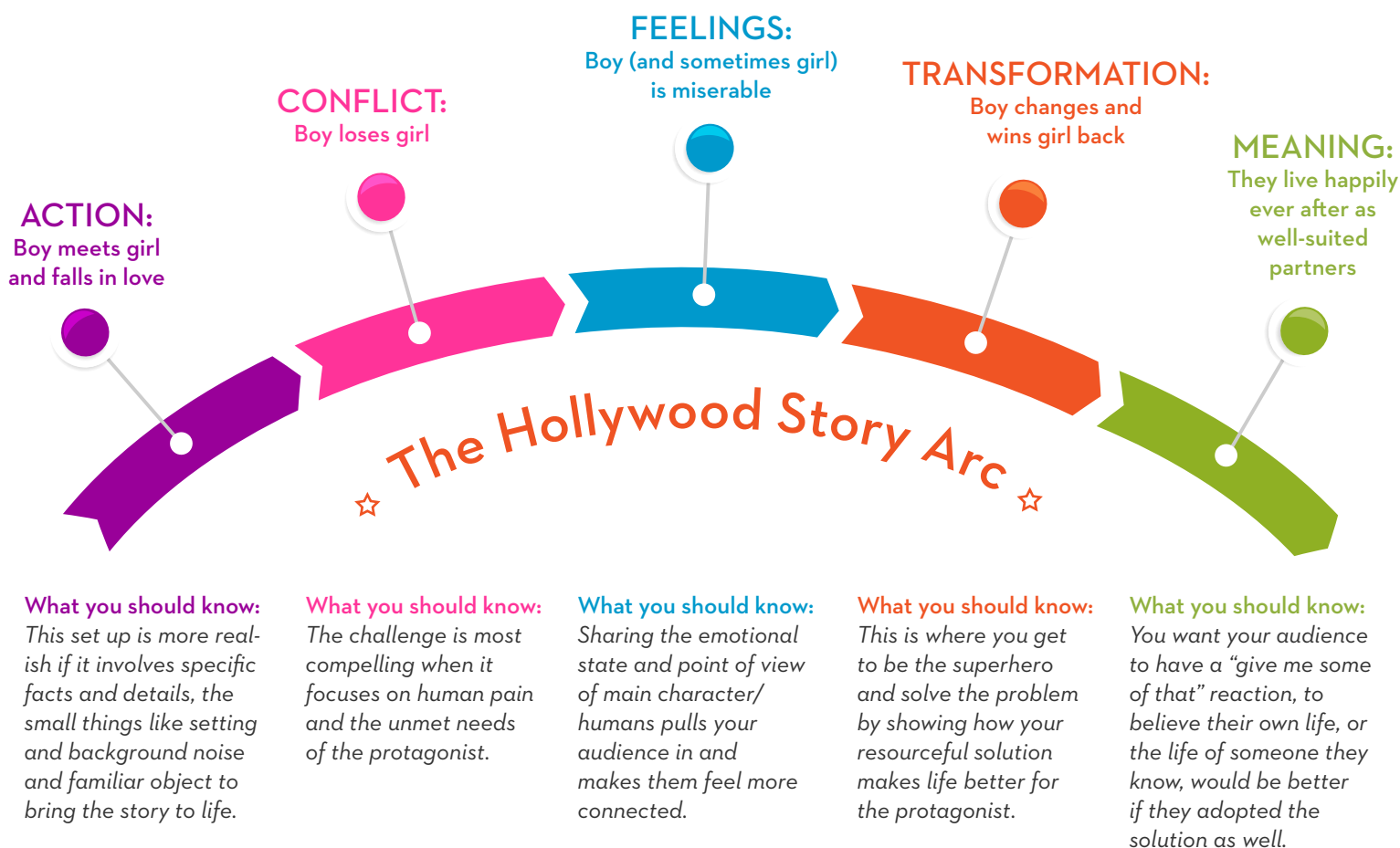
Tip Four: Make it Real(ish)

Many organizational stories feature real people, but sometimes your organizational stories aren't updated case studies, but rather, fictive accounts of fictive customers or other actors, which is perfectly fine as long as you're transparent and not trying to fool your audience. "Fictiveness" refers to how true a story seems, how plausible it is.

Stories are more real(ish) when peppered with small details so don't forget to add the little things that bring a story to life: scenery, smells, sounds, and familiar object.

Details should infuse your story with life at each point of the story arc, making it easier for your audience to imagine your protagonist's path from the beginning (the time the action starts), to the middle (when your protagonist faces a challenge and has an emotional reaction to it), to the end (when your protagonist transforms and the problem is solved; thus giving meaning to the story).

Here's a typical movie plot we've all enjoyed a million times—a plot that follows the established Hollywood story arc:



A movie about a boy who met girl, fell in love and just got married without conflict wouldn't be very compelling! Why? Because it's the change and transformation and pain of surmounting obstacles that really grabs us and tugs our heartstrings and helps us identify with the characters and the solutions. It's the solution, the hero, that puts your organization in the role of problem-solver.

Tip Five: Make it Visual & Engaging

The medium can make or break the message. Explore different mediums for your story, imagining how it plays out across different mediums and platforms.

Stories that trigger all of our senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell—can take your audience someplace new, someplace familiar but fresh. Visual storytelling tactics are particularly essential in today's visual world. A “Show, don't tell” approach triggers an emotional response and also promotes sharing, conversation and engagement of content by appealing to our hard-wired visual senses.

Here are some mediums to consider:



Video



Images



Infographics



Apps



Slideshows



Animations



Whitepapers



Webinars



Podcasts



Ebooks

Employing diverse mediums turns your story into great branded content. And great content makes emotional connections (i.e., puts stickies right onto the brains of the people you want to connect with!). To create content of this caliber, you must understand your buyer's journey. You must understand context. You must understand a secret many marketers don't: A brand exists in peoples' hearts, a brand exists in peoples' guts, a brand never exists in a logo!

99%

of all sensory information
is filtered out by the brain
immediately.

THAT MEANS **ONLY 1%**
OF INFORMATION ACTUALLY
GETS THROUGH!

Of the information
successfully transmitted
to the brain,

90% IS VISUAL.

*In fact of the brain is devoted to visual
functioning and, of course, our eyes
are extensions of the brain.
That's probably why 65% of the
population are visual learners.*

Tip Six: Make it Tangible & Performative

People like stuff they can see, touch and use in some way. Interactive is fun and tangible. So think about games or simulations that enable an audience to experience a story in a self-guided fashion.

And a performative story doesn't just speak or write the words, it brings the story to life by leveraging dramatic techniques such as body language, tone, voice, and timing. Matching tone, timing, voice and language to the platform is a must.

For example, if you're crafting a brand story for video, pay special attention to:	When crafting a story for text like blog posts and whitepapers, consider:
🎥 Eye Contact	📄 Rhythm and Pace
🎥 Hand Gestures	📄 Order
🎥 Facial Expressions	📄 Style and Voice
🎥 Volume and Tone of Voice	📄 Punctuation and Grammar
🎥 Pace and Pausing	📄 Readability (use small paragraphs and bullets)

This doesn't mean you lose the consistency of your brand—consistency is important for all relationships, personal and professional. But being consistent doesn't mean being boring. For example, any brand voice, for example—be it humorous or scientific or quirky or buttoned-up—can be adapted to different mediums by playing with small details like order, rhythm, and pace.



When processing facts, two areas of the brain are activated. But a well-told story can engage many additional areas, including the motor cortex, sensory cortex and frontal cortex.

And the
Communications
Professionals lived
happily ever after

“Marketing is no longer
about the stuff that you
make, but about the
stories you tell.”

- Seth Godin

How does this translate into familiar daily tactics like websites & news releases?

Okay, so you've employed Design Thinking processes to craft a few great brand stories. Your stories are full of human warmth; they're structured and real-ish; and you've even adapted stories to different engaging and visual mediums like videos, whitepapers and slideshows. Your content is ready.

Now what? Amplification is another topic for another whitepaper, but the short answer is: You amplify your message via various audience-appropriate platforms such as...



Email



Websites



Blogs



News Releases



Newsletters



Social Media



Microsites



SEO

But remember, more is not always better. Not all brands need to communicate with target audiences across all platforms. Figure out what works for you (start by figuring out what platforms your audience spends time on). Make sure your stories are transferable and sharable and send them out into the world. The stories that tug heartstring and add to our understanding of the world are the stories that people want to share with their networks, that journalists want to pick up and write about, and that search engines want to prioritize.

Your brand rocks. You rock. And your stories can rock too. So start the process and feel free to reach out to team PWR if you need some help.

Our own little Design Thinking story...



Team PWR is particularly geeky about news releases. Many years ago, our founders used Design Thinking processes to reconsider how news releases are crafted and shared. Above all, we discovered that traditional wire services were serving technology (they're a wicked good SEO tool) but no longer serving humans: the journalists, bloggers, influencers and even consumers who use releases.

In an effort to put humans back at the center of news release tactics, we researched audience needs (read: we talked to an awful lot of journalists and bloggers to learn how they want releases and what they want in them) and went on to build a business by using great design, email best-practices, and, increasingly, media-friendly content to take news releases to the next level.

The End