

You've probably heard this story. In 1976 a college dropout started a computer company with a few friends.

As depicted in the 1984 commercial it was the computer that was going to smash the corporate conformity imposed by dull IBM computers. And the Mac would then liberate the minions and allow them to become artists, designers, and creators who would "Think Differently". And that's the beginning of the story of the Mac.

After the iconic "1984" ad, Apple would eventually outsell every other computer brand. But perhaps more importantly, the brand itself became identified with style and individuality. This branding and myth-making were a key part of the iPhone's success nearly a quarter of a century later.

Do stories actually sell products or services though? Very few people have ever walked into a store, proudly proclaiming themselves to be individuals who "Think Different." Though some might have, who knows.

Consider the Significant Objects Project (significantobjects.com). Journalist Rob Walker took cheaply purchased objects-the objects averaged \$1.25 apiece- and gave each over to a writer who then created a story around the object. The idea was that the story would give the object greater significance than it would have otherwise. To test the theory out, each object was sold on eBay.

The eBay description included the story of the object. In addition, buyers were told explicitly that the story was fictitious. Let me repeat, the buyers knew prior to buying each object that the object's story was made up.

So how did the objects do? The Project reports that \$128.74 worth of junk sold for \$3,612.51. That's easily over a thousand percent profit! What was the only difference between these objects and stuff you would find at your local yard sale?

A story.

Why Your Business Need Stories and Brands

Stories and branding helps your business in two important ways.

- Stories help you define a customer's problem and tell the customer how your product or service solves their problem.
- Stories help you build or connect with a pre-existing community or a "tribe" as Seth Godin would say.

Today it is more than ever to tell stories to promote your products. Why? Because the marketplace as become busier than ever. Thanks to the internet and companies like Amazon and Alibaba, there are more products and companies selling those products than ever. If you have a credit card and decent amount of credit can find a supplier that will sell them XYZ product in bulk that they can turn around and sell at a markup. As can your competitor.

And then the sales go to whoever has the lowest price. And that's fine-if your Walmart, Lowes, whoever.

But if can't compete on price, you have to compete some other way. One obvious way is to differentiate your product. In other words, my competitor is selling XYZ while I'm selling XYZ with a twist.

How do you create that twist? With a story.

Your solution?-A story says it all

What is a story? It's the relation between someone and their circumstances as that someone tries to solve a problem.

"I was out hunting and was attacked by a saber-toothed tiger. With brains and a little luck, I got away" said one cave man to another many thousands of years ago.

"I have all this clutter-soap, shampoo, towels- in my shower! I was beside myself until I got the best shower caddy ever. And a great deal to boot!" says one parent to another in modern America.

Each of the three statements above is the kernel of a story. Each has a protagonist-the person telling the story, and a plot or series of events that outlined the problem and solution. Stories have been around since dawn of humanity, and in today's world most of us spend our lives either hearing or telling stories or both.

Why? Entertainment, obviously. But stories also do something else. The one caveman listens to the other tell his story of missing the sabre tooth tiger. As that caveman listens he imagines what he would do if he were in the same situation. The friend listens to the parent's solution to a domestic dilemma. As they listen, they also imagine their own problems and apply the parent's solution to their own.

In short, stories help us survive and thrive. Every second, 11,000,000 pieces of information flood our senses. We can process maybe 40 of those pieces. What about the rest? Most lower animals don't bother. They rely on what we know as reflexes or instincts. Instincts enable animals to do mainly what psychologists sometimes call the "four fs": feeding, fighting, fleeing, and... mating.

But the lives of us humans are obviously way more complex. We form deep relationships with friends and family, write poetry and math theorems, build structures and businesses. The various enterprise people take on require focus, forming priorities, and making decisions. How does someone

take over a eleven million pieces of information and use that to build a house, a business, or a non-profit organization.

They use stories. “I want a house that is 3000 square feet, has a dine in kitchen, and sits on enough land where I can put my vegetable garden and start a beehive.”

“I have this great idea for a business. If I could get business to follow my system they would save so much money All I need is some capital- an investor or two. know this guy-I need to set up a meeting”

“The world would be a better place if we had more people and attention given to this cause. “

Or

“This is given me so much problem. I can’t believe someone hasn’t invented something to take care of this for me!”

Or.

“This problem is really putting a crimp on production. It might be worth it to somebody to get someone or something done here to care of this for the company.”

Are You starting to see how this might work? If the solution of your story coincides with the problem in their story then you can create interest and an angle for what your selling. That in turn will arouse the curiosity of a potential customer, and hopefully lead to a sell.

Let’s say you own a therapeutic massage business in a particular part of town. There are lot of massage therapists around. I’m sure a lot of them are licensed. It’s a good bet that they use the same type of equipment that you do: massage beds, oils, incense, music, etc.

And they probably perform the same types of massages as you: Swedish, Deep Tissue, and so on.

But do they do it all in the part of town that your practice is in? Maybe you're from that area, and have grown up their all of your life-and you know the people there and what they need. Or maybe you're from somewhere else and you loved the area and noticed that they were no therapists in that part of town that do what you do. Hopefully, you connect with and empathize with your customers. Your establishment gives off a New Age kind of vibe which attracts a customer base that is growing in that part of town. You call your establishment-and I'm terrible with names-Zen Massage Therapy.

And that is all part of story. You, the business owner, are the protagonist. You saw a problem(s) that needed to be solved: sore muscles and ligaments that needed healing. And you moved to fix it. In establishing your business, you had challenges to overcome: you first need to understand the principles and the techniques for helping others with tight muscles (anatomy, physiology, etc). There's always the challenges of setting up a new business, and educating new customers, etc. And you, as the business owner, may have suffered from the maladies you help correct. Maybe you have a bad back or sciatic, and you have a special empathy for people with similar problems. And because you are especially motivated to help this community.

But you have risen up to the challenge, established the business, and await any opportunity to help customers with their problems and challenges.

In the above particular example, using a personal story both draws people in and builds rapport. Rapport is important because it builds trust and trusts. And trust is crucial for building your *brand*.

What is a brand?

Consider what Harvard professor Paul Cherington wrote in an issue of the *Rotarian*, in 1915.

“...take a can of corn. If it has no label, it is simply a plain white tin can...If, however, I put a label on it...and if it also bears a distinctive name, and the name of some responsible company packing or selling it, it takes on an entirely new aspect...The consumer...not only buys the merchandise, but he buys and pays for all the claims made for it, and...for the possibility of securing another can just like it whenever he wants it.”⁴

Douglass B. Holt further describes brands as “a psychological phenomenon which stem from the perceptions of individual consumers.”

I would say that a brand is essentially a shortcut for everything that you say your product or service can do for a customer. And that shortcut is a summary of all the stories that you and your customers tell about your product or service. Zen Massage offers relaxing, therapeutic massages by a competent, caring specialist. All done in a calm, distraction-free environment.

When people think of the Zen Massage brand they need to think: relaxing, therapeutic, competent caring, calm, distraction-free. That is your brand.

Everyday countless claims are made about an equal number of products. Claims may or may not be true (here's hoping yours is). If you are not a rugged man already, smoking a pack of Marlboro cigarettes won't make you one. Owning a Mac may not make you an artist, but there is a preponderance of Mac's in the creative fields. As Holt went on to say about brands was this “What makes a brand powerful is the collective nature of these perceptions; the stories have become conventional and so are continually reinforced because they are treated as truths in everyday interactions.”

How would Zen Massage have their story of relaxing massages become a brand? As Holt said by having stories told and reinforced. And who tells and reinforces stories? Communities.

How Stories Build Community.

Remember the story of the caveman and the saber-toothed tiger? Now imagine the caveman sitting around a fire telling his story to the rest of his tribe. They all easily identify with the caveman as the protagonist in the story. An attack by wild animals is something they all share, and they eagerly take in the solution offered by the caveman.

As Walt Kuenstler writes, "The evolutionary function of the tribe is the survival of the group." Our species owes its success to our willingness and ability to act in unison with others. Tribes passed on to its members vital information such as which plants to eat, and how to hunt certain animals. Our desire to belong comes from these ancient ties, and humans still form groups that resemble tribes in certain respects.

However, over time, tribes gave way to the fluid modern society of consumers that we have today. When the modern consumer society began, it demanded that we drop our tribal tastes and aesthetics and accept what mass production would give us. We could have any car as long as it was black, to paraphrase Henry Ford.

Mass production began to supply more black cars than consumers could or would buy. Products began to have to compete for customers. Tribalism began to reassert itself.

However, it is different this time around. In the ancient world, the tribe one belonged to was determined by birth. Likewise, language, dress, and culture were all determined by what tribe you belonged to. Today tribes are less formal and more fluid. Through much of modern society, people

choose tribal affiliation along the basis of shared idea and cultures. One often cited example of a modern tribe are the followers of the Grateful Dead-called Deadheads.

Starting in the seventies, the same fans, or “regulars” starting showing up at consecutive concerts. These fans would often follow much or even an entire Grateful Dead tour as the band played from one night to the next. This fanbase came to form a tribe, and its members dressed in the now familiar tie-dyed t-shirts, shared the same slang, and often the same ideas. The concerts came to be more than events meant to distribute a product: the music that is. Jerry Garcia, biographer, quoted drummer Mickey Hart as saying that “The Grateful Dead weren't in the music business, they were in the transportation business.” The way Hart saw it, the band did not sell music to an audience like any other product. Rather Hart saw the band as conveyers, transporters if you will, to what was considered a religious experience by many fans. And the music of the Grateful Dead was a vehicle to that experience.

Community and a sense of the transcendental via music are just two of the benefits that come with being a member of the “Deadhead” tribe. And when a fan buys a concert ticket, a tie dye, or veggie burrito in the venue parking lot those two intangibles go along with the purchase. In fact, Apple and the Deadhead brand share something in common. Purchasing a product associated with either Apple or the Grateful Dead conveys a sense of individuality, and not being part of the humdrum mainstream.

This gives the Grateful Dead brand an authenticity that's hard to reproduce. But that doesn't mean your business can't be authentic. Like the Dead and Mac do, your storytelling has to appeal to something larger than just the product itself.

Chick-fil-a is doing it with their “Coffee with A Story” promotion. The idea that you can buy a product and not just put money into the pockets of a faceless entity has a certain appeal for many consumers. According to Chick Fil-A, their coffee comes from a select group of farmers. “Coffee with a Story” lets each farmer who sells coffee to Chick Fil-A give a testimonial as to how well they are being treated by the

company. In addition to buying great coffee, the story goes, the customer helps facilitate this beneficial relationship the farmers have with Chick-Fil-A.

What if your business doesn't have the resources of an Apple or Chick-Fil-A. All a business needs is a loyal following of customers willing to give a testimonial. Upon opening Zen Massage puts ads in print and on the web telling their story. Many would be customers of therapeutic massage are also into other alternative health practices. You, as the owner of Zen Massage, probably rub shoulders with people in the Reiki, yoga, slow food, and communities who live and work near Zen Massage. They are your potential customers-do right by them and they will validate your claims and spread the message about your business.

That's right, you don't need expensive ads marketing your business if your customers do it for you. If they tweet about you, like your Facebook page, and put favorable comments on your Facebook and website home page. If a customer has an experience that does not align with the business story, i.e. a bad experience, you address, fix it or make the customer whole some other way, and let everyone know that what you did.

By using the internet, email marketing, social media and so on, your business does not need a big budget to get your story. But the story has to be true, and it has to connect with your customers, and when your business grows (as yours and all businesses should) the story has to be flexible enough to accommodate your growing customer base's wants and needs. Maybe there are other treatments that your customers need and want: reiki, acupuncture, chiropractic, Rolfing, whatever. Maybe it goes from being Zen Massage Therapy to Zen Massage Holistic Services. That's up to you and your community of customers.

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