

In order to get customers to act, we must engage them emotionally.

The Persuasive Power of

# Story



**By Edward Wachtman and Sheree L. Johnson**

**M**arketing is a discipline of building demand through persuasion. Every day, we as marketers face the daunting challenges of finding a competitive edge, discovering new ways of reaching people and capturing their attention—and most importantly, persuading them to buy our products and services. This challenge is increasingly more difficult, and our efforts are inconsistent at best. Consumers are ceaselessly bombarded with commercial messages, and are becoming increasingly overwhelmed with choice. Advertising is ubiquitous. Instead of being persuaded, consumers are responding by tuning out its messages.

Why? What happens when our persuasions fail? What goes wrong? Here are three simple scenarios from everyday life. They illustrate what happens when we rely solely on facts and opinions:

1. **A mother tries to teach her child about selflessness and generosity.** Billy comes home from school crying. Amy has grabbed one of his toys and refused to give it back. Mom says to Billy: “You should share your things with Amy. It’s not nice to be selfish.”
2. **A professor wants to encourage his students to carefully research an assignment.** After giving the assignment in class, Professor Peterson tells his students: “Don’t just jump to conclusions, support your ideas with research and adequate fact-finding.”
3. **A nonprofit community art organization is engaged in fund-raising.** Art for All is a four-year-old program providing art and music classes for 8,400 children in 450 Philadelphia elementary schools that otherwise

offer none at all. Send your donations today to help fund this outstanding program.

None of these is particularly persuasive, compelling or memorable, because they mainly state facts and opinions—and very little else. There is nothing in these scenarios to capture the imagination of the listener, little to catch his attention and make him want to really listen to what we are saying. And therefore there is little chance the behaviors and actions we are looking for will happen. Now let’s look at the same three scenarios, but approached in a different way.

1. **Selflessness and generosity.** One day a man was boarding a train with a number of friends, he dropped his glove between the train and platform. Unable to retrieve it, he took his other glove and threw it down by the first. Responding to the puzzlement of his friends, the man explained that a poor person who finds one glove is really no better off—what’s really helpful is finding a pair.
2. **Do your research, know your facts.** This is the transcript of a radio communication between a U.S. naval ship and Canadian maritime agency off the coast of Newfoundland:

**Americans:** “Please divert your course 15 degrees north to avoid a collision.”

**Canadians:** “Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees south to avoid collision.”

**Americans:** “This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship; I say again divert your course.”

**Canadians:** “I say again, you divert your course.”

## EXECUTIVE briefing

Consumers today are inundated with facts and figures. There is little attempt to capture their imagination, and make them want to really listen to what we are saying. And therefore there is little chance the behaviors and actions we are looking for will happen. To create strong and lasting bonds with consumers and get them to act to our advantage, we must awaken their emotions. Stories are the fundamental form of persuasive communication.

**Americans:** “This is a United States aircraft carrier. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers, and numerous support vessels. I strongly request that you change your course 15 degrees north, that’s one five degrees north, or we will be forced to make counter-measures to ensure the safety of this ship.”

**Canadians:** “We are a lighthouse; you make the call.”

**3. Nonprofit fundraising.** In 2001, fifth-grader Arlene Sherman was one of the first elementary school students in her Philadelphia district to participate in the Art for All program. Arlene, who had never before had art or music classes in school, discovered that she loved to sing—and had a talent for it. After three years in the program, one of her middle school teachers took Arlene to an audition for a city-wide children’s choir, and she made the cut. Four years later Arlene was the lead alto in that choir. She has recently started a choir in her own high school. Thanks to Art for All, Arlene has honed her singing talent. Even better, she’s spreading her passion and her knowledge with fellow students.

What makes these scenarios more persuasive, more compelling? Why might we want to pay more attention to these scenarios than the first set? The answer is simple. They do more than recite facts and opinions. Each is a little story. Each triggers an emotion. In the first scenario, we can imagine the feeling of surprise and gratitude a person might experience finding a pair of gloves. The second example adds a bit of humor and irony, but the moral is still crystal clear: Do your research, and don’t assume anything. And in the third scenario, we can almost see the pride and satisfaction on Arlene’s face as she steps to the podium in front of the choir she founded. We have stories, eliciting emotions, and the result is persuasive communications.

Let’s examine the relationship between stories and persuasion.

### Why Stories Are Persuasive

Stories are persuasive because they are the fundamental form of human communication. We’ve told stories ever since our ancestors first gathered around the fire circle. We are hard-wired to respond to stories, and they are persuasive in a

number of different ways because of this:

**Stories teach.** For the vast majority of human existence before the advent of the written word, stories were the sole way of communicating knowledge from one generation to another. How would our ancestors have learned to gather, plant, hunt or create the first cities, if it were not for stories? Many so-called primitive myths are nothing more than stories that tell when to plant and when to harvest. In earlier times—before the advent of the written word—stories were the primary means of communicating everyday, practical knowledge from one generation to another. Stories are how we’ve accumulated and shared our intellectual capital for hundreds of generations.

**Stories bind us together.** They give us a sense of belonging. They are a priceless connection to others with similar beliefs and values. To share a common belief or experience is to share a common story. It is no coincidence that the scriptures of the world’s great religions are predominantly stories.

The collective values that define a community are often embodied in stories told and retold over the ages. These stories illustrate what is expected from each of us, and how we should behave in order to fit in. In his seminal work, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York, Vintage Books Edition, 1989), Bruno Bettelheim describes how fairy tales often serve as morality stories—graphically illustrating the community’s notions of good and bad, right and wrong and the consequences of behavior.

**Stories provide meaning.** Linguists, folklorists, psychologists, and sociologists have all come to include the study of story as an important key to the way that individuals and communities meaningfully think about themselves. Stories help us appreciate life in a larger context. As individuals or groups, stories show how we are part of something bigger; they place us within a larger and timeless context of what came before and what will be in the future.

**Stories incite action.** There is a reason we are drawn to the clichéd saying “the pen is mightier than the sword.” True or fabricated, stories have led nations to war, to conquest and to defeat. The United States entry into the Spanish-American War was strongly influenced by the journalistic jingoism of William Randolph Hearst’s newspapers. The powerful imagery of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (the 1852 anti-slavery novel) fanned the abolitionist flames of the Civil War.

**Stories are memorable.** R.C. Schank and R.P. Abelson state in their article “Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story” (*Advances in Social Cognition, Vol. VIII*, Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum, 1995), “We remember best by telling stories. Storytelling is not something we just happen to do. It is something we virtually have to do ... the stories we create are the memories we remember.” Stories help to trigger our episodic memory, generating multiple associations and stimuli. Episodic memory places us—as well as what we are trying to remember—within what is essentially a story, evoking a setting, a particular situation or event or a particular time.

**Stories are a connection to fundamental human truth.** Here, story moves into the realm of myth and archetype. Both are a rich source of the images and symbols that although unconscious, have powerful effects on our behavior. At this deepest level, the level of myth (not to be confused with a contemporary connotation of myth as falsehood or untruth), stories address fundamental human experiences: birth, death, growing up, and growing old; relationships and kinships; the privileges and responsibilities of belonging to a community, tribe, clan, and so forth. Mythic stories transcend time, culture and geography; they manifest themselves in ancient legends,

fairy tales and symbols that are still relevant and persuasive today. Connecting at the level of myth activates the deepest—and almost always unconscious—emotional energies. Mythic imagery and symbolism are a driving force in individual and collective behavior.

## Stories and Business


So what does the emotional story have to do with the rational world of business? In a word: behavior. If we can’t impact behavior in leading our businesses, then we don’t sell our products/services to customers, we don’t have productive employees and we don’t have the support of the public. Customers, employees, shareholders and the public are making decisions about their interaction (read: behavior) with us every day. And more than a generation of neurological research shows that many—if not most—of our so-called rational decisions are actually driven by our emotions. So we tell a story if we want to communicate in a way that captures peoples’ imagination, connects with them at a deeply emotional level, is persuasive and leads to the behaviors we desire.

Every day, consumers are faced with a constant array of efforts to persuade them to buy this or that product, service or

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brand. The vast majority of these communications are mundane, forgettable and totally unpersuasive. Occasionally, however, one of these communications catches our imagination and seems to speak to us personally. We are intrigued, and want to get closer and learn more. What is happening? Many times it is not the product or the brand that makes us sit up and pay attention, but the communication itself. And very often that communication takes the form of a story. Through story, the communication transcends the transactional goal of merely enticing us to buy. It resonates at a deeper, more personal level; it touches us emotionally. We feel connected with the product or brand in a very different way. An emotional bond is forged. The result is that we go from being merely customers to becoming passionately zealous advocates. Our personal story and the brand story merge into one; we participate with the brand.

Apple, Nike, Harley-Davidson, Volkswagen, and Jack Daniel's are a few of this select group that have harnessed the persuasive communicative power of story to fuel their business success. In fact, their stories are a significant factor in their success. Everything they do, every experience they create—with

employees, customers, and the public in general—supports and enhances their story.

For example, Nike isn't just selling sports gear. It is selling a persuasive and emotionally rich and value laden story: a story of hard work, sweat, and perseverance—the perseverance associated with doing our very, very best. It is a story that is incredibly persuasive, enticing consumers to participate—*Just Do It*—in a personal quest for excellence and fulfillment.

Imagine the scene as the 6,284th finisher crosses the line of the Boston Marathon. She is spent and exhausted, but in her mind's eye is no less a champion than the first place finisher. Nike has not just provided her with shoes. Through the consistent communication of the story, Nike has facilitated her participation in a larger, age-old story—a story that is revisited hundreds of thousands of times daily, as Nike's loyal customers lace up their running shoes or grab their golf bags and head for the links. It is a story of achievement through effort and its subsequent rewards. The Nike story also connects people to a uniquely American story: Success goes to the persistent, the hardworking and those willing to struggle today to reap tomorrow's reward. The Nike story bonds consumers to the



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brand in a way that escapes competitors like Adidas and New Balance. It is a cult-like bond that is difficult, if not impossible, to break. Nike's communications (be it ads, promotions, or spokespeople). And of course the name itself—Nike, goddess of victory—consistently recapitulates this story over and over.

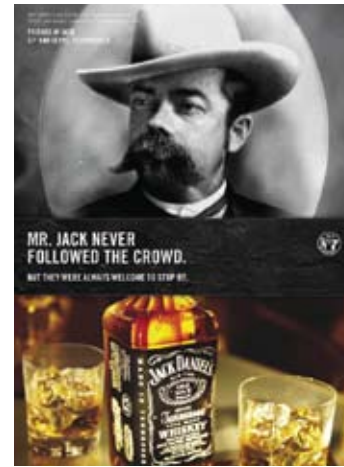
Or consider the Jack Daniel's story. It is a different story, although as powerful and persuasive in its own right as Nike's. Everything about the Jack Daniel's story communicates a sense of a less complicated, more innocent time. This is a time when the values of a young America—self respect, self-sufficiency, individualism, hard work and determination—prevailed. It was a time when the dignity and conviction of that uniquely American icon, the Common Man, reigned supreme. The image of the Common Man (and Woman) speaks to something very deeply meaningful in all of us. He or she is that ordinary individual who when placed in extraordinary circumstances reacts sensibly, decisively and with true conviction. The Common Man would never senselessly pick a fight, but can be counted on to do what must be done if faced with no reasonable alternative. He does what he can as best he can, expecting his just due and nothing more. Although utterly human in his flaws—and the Common Man is by no means a saint—he has a strong sense of right and wrong. And in the end, we know he will stand firm in his beliefs. The Common Man is a popular theme in American film. Some well-known Common Man characters include: Jimmy Stewart's portrayal of Jefferson Smith, in the 1939 classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*; Meryl Streep's Francesca Johnson, in *The Bridges of Madison County*; the first *Rocky*; and any number of the Tom Hanks movies. In the Common Man or Woman, we sense a rugged reliability.

From the perspective of today's fast-paced and complex world, the story communicated by Jack Daniel's is persuasively tantalizing. It is about simplicity and authenticity: What you see is what you get. Jack Daniel's small town Tennessee origins, the simple monochrome label and the square-hard bottle are all essential parts of this authenticity. There is nothing effete about Jack Daniel's—no wasted words, no unnecessary frills. It is meant to be drunk straight or with those other American icons, Coke or lemonade. Ordering "a Jack" is acknowledging pride in our roots, connecting us to a past that we view as more carefree and genuine than the harried and multi-tasked lives we live today.

Observing both Nike and Jack Daniels over the past decade, we see that the communications are persuasive because they help consumers share in something bigger than their day-to-day lives. This something is intangible, but deeply felt. It is separate—and greater—than the features and benefits of the product itself. It is about meaning and belief and participation and it helps consumers understand and explicate their lives—their personal stories—in ways that a mere product cannot. Both Nike and Jack Daniel's deliver something that is meaningful, comfortable and deeply desirable. It is a persua-

## ■ Exhibit 1

### Jack Daniels—Innocent Times



sive story, a story that consumers want to share and make their own. Once a brand or product has established its story, it owns it and the emotions surrounding it. Because of the persuasiveness and authenticity of this story, it is extremely difficult for competitors to replicate, and its balance sheet potential is immeasurable.

## Features, Benefits and Stories

In Marketing 101, we learned about features and benefits. Features are the attributes that physically describe your product or service. But features aren't what entice customers to buy. Benefits describe how a product or service will actually help the customer solve his or her problem, or meet specific needs. In other words, what's in it for me? Consumers might be intrigued with features—and admittedly "cool" features get our attention—but it is the benefits that persuade them to buy.

The Apple iPhone Web site succinctly lists the product's features including phone, iPod, Internet, and high technology—and the benefits associated with those features. For example:

**Internet features.** iPhone features rich HTML e-mail and Safari—the most advanced Web browser ever on a portable device. iPhone automatically syncs bookmarks from your Mac or PC. For convenient searching, Google and Yahoo! are built right in. And iPhone multitasks, so you can make a phone call while emailing a photo or surfing the Web over a Wi-Fi connection.

**Internet Benefits.** With its advanced Safari browser, iPhone lets you see Web pages the way they were designed to be seen. Zoom in on a page by tapping the multi-touch touch screen display with your finger. Create a Web clip that appears on your home screen for one-tap access to your favorite Web sites

and Web apps. And customize up to nine home screen pages to organize your Web clips.

Some of Apple's television ads for the iPhone focus on benefits. Here's a transcript of one ad: "What's so great about having the Internet in your pocket? Well, then you can see the trail map, when you're on the mountain. Find a good place to eat in town, when you're hungry. And change your flight when you're just not ready to go home. That's what's so great."

The rational benefits are unquestionably more compelling than communicating the features alone, however, taking the next step to emotional benefits adds an even more powerful level of persuasiveness. And the best way to talk about emotional benefits is through stories. (That's why testimonials are so effective.) In the iPhone Elliott-Meredith ad, Elliott convinces you of the emotional benefit of having the Internet in your pocket with his brief story: "I was sitting in a restaurant with my girlfriend. We were going to meet her boss and her boss's

## The deeper, emotional benefits of your products and services are more persuasively communicated through stories.

fiancée. I'd never met either, but she couldn't remember the fiancée's name. And they were coming in like three minutes. And then I said 'wait, it's on their wedding Web site.' So I took the iPhone out under the table and I was like pulling up the wedding Web site. And just scrolled down to see the name. 'That's it!' So just then we got up and we confidently introduced ourselves. Her boss and fiancée don't know that I don't remember their names. I think it was Meredith."

Notice how throughout this story, Apple has reached out to an emotional benefit: You won't be embarrassed by not knowing important information at a critical time, you're confident and you're knowledgeable. You can easily put yourself in Elliott's shoes, and feel what he was going through. The story:

- makes you (the customer) a character in the story;
- reveals a plot line (action) that leads to the emotional benefits, even though they may not be explicitly stated; and
- teaches how the product can work for you.

Story telling cuts through the mass of information surrounding us. So, instead of being bombarded with facts, names, figures and other chunks of information that dull your audience's interest, a story makes what you're trying to say seem personal and exciting. The deeper, emotional benefits of

your products and services are more persuasively communicated through stories.

### The Rewards of Story Telling

Most brands/products today have not been able to stake out and own a persuasive and emotionally rich story like Nike and Jack Daniel's have. Finding your "one story" takes research, insight and consistent messaging. The journey is definitely worth the time and effort. By communicating our brands, companies and experiences as stories, we accomplish several purposes:

- We mirror a fundamental and unconscious structure that gives meaning to our lives.
- We create an opportunity for people to identify their personal story with the brand or company story, and thereby strengthen the emotional bond between consumer, employee and brand or company.
- We can tap into a vast realm of unconscious, emotional and powerful images that have profound impact on our individual and collective behavior.

More and more research is done today on the brain and emotions. People can't make decisions without emotions being involved. As this article discusses, stories ignite emotions in all of us. Using stories to communicate our message to our stakeholders is a persuasive route to eliciting the actions our businesses and organizations need to thrive. We need consumers to buy. We need employees to go above and beyond. We need volunteers to sign up. We need people to make donations. We need the public to support our choices.

By using stories, we can cut through the overwhelming amount of facts and opinions that are out there today, tap into emotional benefits and get our stakeholders to act in ways that support us. Identifying and communicating the emotional benefits is critical to financial success. If we can't impact behavior in leading our businesses, then we don't sell our products/services to customers, we don't have productive employees and we don't have the support of the public. We must connect with our stakeholders at a deeply emotional level, in order to elicit the behaviors our businesses and organizations need to survive and thrive. In tough economic times, this is particularly important. A company needs any and every edge it can get to minimize the impact of a downturn. The stronger the emotional bonds are between a company and its stakeholders, the less likely that bond is to break. Stories help create indestructible bonds. ■

#### About the Authors

**Edward Wachtman** and **Sheree L. Johnson** are co-founders and partners of StoryTellings Consulting based on Bowen Island in British Columbia, Canada. They may be reached at [edward@storytellings.com](mailto:edward@storytellings.com) and [sheree@storytellings.com](mailto:sheree@storytellings.com).