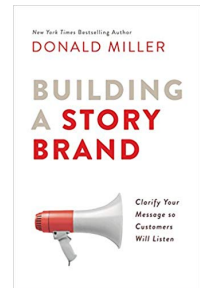


Building a Story Brand

Donald Miller (2017)

*Notes by Bob Evely
Wilmore, Kentucky; 2019.*



The key to being seen, heard, and understood (p. 3)

What if the problem isn't the product? What if the problem is the way we talk about the product? Words sell things. And if we haven't clarified our message, customers won't listen. Create a "communications framework" based on the proven power of story.

Once we get the message straight, we can create quality websites, incredible keynotes, emails that get opened, and sales letters people respond to.

Even if we have the best product in the marketplace, we'll lose to an inferior product if our competitor's offer is communicated more clearly. What's your message? Can you say it easily? Is it simple, relevant, and repeatable? Can your entire team repeat your company's message in such a way that it is compelling?

How many sales are we missing out on because customers can't figure out what our offer is within five seconds of visiting our website?

Marketing (p. 6)

The reason most marketing collateral doesn't work is because it's too complicated. The brain doesn't know how to process the information. Story helps because it is a sense-making mechanism. Story formulas put everything in order, so the brain doesn't have to work to understand what's going on.

Mistakes (p. 7)

Mistake #1: Failure to focus on the aspects of the offer that will help people survive and thrive. Our brains are constantly sorting thru information and we discard millions of unnecessary facts every day. The subconscious is always categorizing and organizing information, and when we talk publicly about our company's random backstory or internal goals, that information is largely discarded.

Mistake #2: Causing customers to burn too many calories in an effort to understand our offer. There's a survival mechanism within the brain that is designed to tune out anything that confuses them.

Story to the rescue (p. 9)

The most powerful tool we can use to organize information so people don't have to burn very many calories is story. Story is a sense-making device. It identifies a necessary ambition, defines challenges that are battling to keep us from achieving that ambition, and provides a plan to help us conquer those challenges. Using story, we create a map that customers can follow to engage our products and services.

If we haven't identified what our customer wants, what problems we are helping them solve, and what life will look like after they engage our products and services, we can forget about thriving in the marketplace. Our message must be clear. If you confuse, you lose.

Noise (p. 12)

The enemy of business is noise. What we often call marketing is really just clutter and confusion sprayed all over our websites, emails, and commercials.

Story – the secret weapon that will grow your business (p. 15)

Story is the one thing that can hold a human being’s attention for hours. Story is the greatest weapon we have to combat noise, because it organizes information in such a way that people are compelled to listen. A good story takes a series of random events and distills them into the essence of what really matters.

Prior to the theatrical version, a film has gone thru rounds upon rounds of edits, omissions, revisions, and deletions. Why? Because storytellers have filters to cut out the noise.

Apple (p. 18)

When Apple began filtering their communication to make it simple and relevant, they actually stopped featuring computers in most of their advertising. They (1) identified what their customers wanted – to be seen and heard, (2) they defined their customers’ challenge – that people didn’t recognize their hidden genius, and (3) they offered their customers a tool they could use to express themselves – computers and smartphones.

People don’t buy the best products; they buy the products they can understand the fastest. Apple has inserted themselves into their customers’ story like no other technology company.

Three questions potential customers have (p. 24)

There are three questions potential customers must answer if we expect them to engage with our brand. They must be able to answer these questions within 5 seconds of looking at our website or marketing material.

1. What do you offer?
2. How will it make my life better?
3. What do I need to do to buy it?

Story in a nutshell (p. 20)

A CHARACTER who wants something encounters a PROBLEM before they can get it. At the peak of their despair, a GUIDE steps into their lives, gives them a PLAN, and CALLS THEM TO ACTION. That action helps them avoid FAILURE and ends in a SUCCESS.

Three crucial questions: (1) What does the hero want? (2) Who or what is opposing the hero getting what they want? (3) What will the hero’s life look like if they do (or do not) get what they want?

Alfred Hitchcock defined a good story as “life with the dull parts taken out.”

Now we’ll consider each part of your story’s framework.

A CHARACTER (p. 29, 45)

A story starts with a hero who wants something. Before knowing what the hero wants the audience has little interest in their fate. This is why screenwriters have to define the character’s ambition within the first 9 or so minutes of a film getting started. Will the hero get what they want?

The customer is the hero, not your brand. Recently a high-end resort featured in their marketing collateral images of their restaurant, front desk, and staff. But unless they were trying to sell their buildings they weren’t inviting customers into a story. What the customers wanted most was a luxurious, restful experience. So they moved to images of a warm bath, plush towels, robes, and trees blowing in the wind along a golf course. The main page said, “Find the luxury and rest you’ve been looking for.” When we identify something our customer wants and communicate it simply, the story we’re inviting them into is given definition and direction.

When we position our customer as the hero and ourselves as the guide, we will be recognized as a trust resource to help them overcome their challenges. Position yourself as Yoda and your audience as Luke Skywalker.

Once we identify who our customer is, we have to ask ourselves what they want as it relates to our brand. The catalyst for any story is that the hero wants something. The rest of the story is a journey about discovering whether the hero will get what they want.

The idea is that you place a gap between a character and what they want. Defining something our customer wants and featuring it in our marketing materials will open a story gap.

But pare down the customer's ambition to a single focus. We might ask, "Can't we mention all of them?" The answer is no; at least not yet. Until we've defined a specific desire and become known for helping people achieve it, we shouldn't add too many conflicting story gaps. Focus on one simple desire and then, as you create campaigns for each division and maybe even each product, you can identify more things your customer wants in the subplots of your overall brand.

Define something simple and relevant that customers want, and become known for delivering on that promise. Be sure to choose a desire relevant to your customer's survival. If you're vague, potential customers can't figure out why they need it.

What does survival mean? In the business world – conserving financial resources (saving money), conserving time, building social networks (our primitive brains want to be sure we're connected to a "tribe" in case the bad buys come knocking at the door), gaining status, accumulating resources (increased productivity, increased revenue, decreased waste), the innate desire to be generous, the desire for meaning (to participate in something greater than ourselves – a movement – a cause to champion). The goal for our branding should be that every potential customer knows exactly where we want to take them.

Has a PROBLEM (p. 30,57)

Every story is about somebody who is trying to solve a problem, so when we identify our customers' problems they recognize us as a brand that understands them. As soon as the conflict in a story is resolved, the audience stops paying attention

The more we talk about the problems our customers experience, the more interest they will have in our brand.

In its purest form, a story starts with a character who lives in peace and stability. Suddenly that stability is disrupted. A bomb goes off, or a disaster strikes. The hero then sets out on a journey to return to the peaceful life they once enjoyed.

Every story needs a villain to give conflict a clear point of focus. The stronger, more evil, more dastardly the villain, the more sympathy we will have for the hero.

When we talk about our products and services, we should position them as weapons that can be used to defeat the villain. And the villain should be dastardly. The villain should have personified characteristics. If we're selling time management software, we might vilify the idea of *distractions*. Could we offer our product as a weapon that customers could use to stop *distractions* in their tracks? Distractions are what's deluding our customer's potential, wrecking their families, stealing their sanity, and costing them enormous amounts of time and money.

The villain should be a root source. Frustration, for example, is not a villain – frustration is what a villain makes us feel. High taxes are a good example of a villain. The villain should also be relatable, and singular (one villain is enough), and real. But don't be a fearmonger. There are plenty of actual villains out there to fight.

Companies tend to sell solutions to external problems, but customers buy solutions to internal problems. Customers are much more motivated to resolve their inner frustrations. An external problem is often a physical, tangible problem the hero must overcome. But the person's internal desire to resolve a frustration is a greater motivator than their desire to solve the external problem. The purpose of an external problem in a story is to manifest an internal problem.

By assuming our customers only want to resolve external problems, we fail to engage the deeper story they're actually living. The external problems we solve are causing frustrations in their lives and, just like in a story, it's those frustrations that are motivating them to call you.

After Apple's near collapse, Steve Jobs came to understand that people felt intimidated (internal problem) by computers. The only reason our customers buy from us is because the external problem we solve is frustrating them in some way. If we can identify that frustration, put it into words, and offer to resolve it along with the original external problem, something special happens. We bond with our customers because we've positioned ourselves more deeply into their narrative.

For example, if we own a house-painting business the external problem might be an unsightly home. The internal problem, though, might involve a sense of embarrassment.

What frustrations do our products resolve?

There are also philosophical problems. What is the deeper meaning? People want to be involved in a story that is larger than themselves. When Luke shoots the photon torpedo thru the little hole in the Death Star, he actually resolves the external problem (destroying the Death Star), the internal problem (wondering if he had what it took to be a Jedi), and the philosophical problem (good versus evil).

Customers aren't just looking for a resolution to one level of problems; they're hoping to resolve all three. In the case of Tesla Motor Cars:

- ✓ Villain: Gas guzzling, inferior technology
- ✓ External: I need a car.
- ✓ Internal: I want to be an early adopter of new technology.
- ✓ Philosophical: My choice of car should help save the environment.

But be careful. A large problem with many is they want to include three villains and seven external problems and four internal problems. Stories are best when they are simple and clear.

And meets a GUIDE (p. 32,73)

Customers aren't looking for another hero. They're looking for a guide to help them. That's why storytellers thru the centuries have created another character to help the hero win.

If a hero solves their own problem in a story, the audience will tune out. The hero wouldn't have gotten into trouble in the first place.

The customer wants to know – how are you helping me win the day? Always position your customer as the hero and your brand as the guide. The story must always be focused on the hero.

Yoda is the perfect guide. He is the endearing character who understands Luke's dilemma and empathetically coaches him to use the Force.

People trust those who understand them. Empathetic statements start with words like, "We understand how it feels to ..." or "Nobody should have to experience ..." or "Like you, we're frustrated by ..." But empathy is more than just sentimental slogans. Real empathy means letting customers know we see them as we see ourselves. Customers look for brands they have something in common with.

But this empathy would go nowhere were it not for Yoda's authority as a Jedi himself. Authority means competence. A hero trusts somebody who knows what they're doing. The guide needs to have serious experience helping other heroes win the day. But beware – nobody likes a know-it-all, and nobody wants to be preached to.

How can we demonstrate authority?

Testimonials. Let others do the talking for you. But avoid stacking 10-20 testimonials; or you risk positioning yourself as the hero. Three is a good number to start with. And avoid rambling testimonials that heap endless praise on your brand.

Statistics. Awards. Logos (of known businesses you've worked with).

Who gives them a PLAN (p. 33, 85)

Customers trust a guide who has a plan. What customers are looking for is a clear path we've laid out that takes away any confusion they might have about how to do business with us.

When a customer is deciding whether to buy something, we should picture them standing on the edge of a rushing creek. It's true they want what's on the other side, but as they stand there they hear a waterfall downstream. What happens if they fall into the creek? We need to place large stones in the creek, removing much of the risk and increasing their comfort level about doing business with us.

A process plan can describe the steps a customer needs to take to buy our product, or the steps they need to take to use our product after they buy it, or a mixture of both. Ideally we would have 3-6 steps. We might think 20-30 steps, but when we bombard customers with information buying decreases. The plan is to alleviate confusion. Having more than 4 steps might actually add to, rather than reduce confusion. Simplify their journey!

If process plans are about alleviating confusion, agreement plans are about alleviating fears. CarMax resolves the customer's agitation of having to deal with a used-car salesman. With their agreement plan, you never have to haggle. And they include a quality certification seal to address the fear of buying a lemon. Whole Foods' list of values has attracted millions to their stores.

In your agreement plan, list all the things your customer might be concerned about as it relates to your product or service, and then counter that list with an agreement plan that will alleviate their fears.

Consider giving a title to your process or agreement plan that will increase the perceived value of your product or service. "Easy installment plan", "customer satisfaction agreement", or "our quality guarantee."

And calls them to ACTION (p. 34, 95)

Customers don't make major life decisions or take action unless they are challenged to do so. Human beings take action when their story challenges them to do so. A call to action involves communicating a clear and direct step our customer can take to overcome their challenge and return to a peaceful life.

There should be a "Buy Now" button in the top right corner of your website, and it shouldn't be cluttered with a bunch of other buttons.

When we try to sell passively, we communicate a lack of belief in our product. Customers aren't looking for brands that are filled with doubt. They're looking for brands that have solutions to their problems. If we can change the customer's story for the better, why shouldn't we be bold about inviting them to do business with us?

There are two kinds of action – direct and transitional. Let’s say we ask a customer to buy but they don’t. We can deepen that relationship thru transitional calls to action. Inviting people to watch a webinar or download a PDF are good examples. The transitional call to action earns trust and positions us the guide to their story.

Some transitional calls to action?

Stake a claim as the leader in a certain territory before the competition beats you to it. Create a PDF, a video series, or anything else that positions you as the expert to establish authority.

Create reciprocity. Don’t worry about giving away too much free information. The more generous a brand is, the more reciprocity they create. Give freely.

Position yourself as the guide. When you help customers solve a problem, even for free, you position yourself as the guide.

Free information might consist of a white paper or free PDF educating customers about your field of expertise. Educational videos, podcasts, webinars, live events, testimonials, samples, and free trials.

That helps them to AVOID FAILURE (p. 35, 107)

Every human being is trying to avoid a tragic ending. What’s at stake? If nothing can be gained or lost, nobody cares. Simply put, we must show people the cost of *not* doing business with us.

The audience remains in suspense as long as the storyteller keeps the hero teetering on the precipice of success and failure. What’s at stake for the hero? Every conversation, every chase scene, should serve the movie in the same way – it must either move the character closer to or further from the tragic result that might befall them.

Imagine a story in which nothing bad could befall the hero. Keep in mind the “so what” question every customer is secretly asking.

What will the customer lose if they don’t buy our products? People are motivated by loss aversion. People hate losing \$100 more than they like winning \$100.

We must begin by making the listener know they are vulnerable to a threat. Then, since they’re vulnerable, they should take action to reduce their vulnerability. Then there must be a *specific* call to action that protects them from the risk. And then we should challenge people to take this specific action.

Fear is salt in the recipe; but just a pinch will do. Too many warnings about imminent doom will turn the customer off.

Consider the fear preying upon your customers. For Perkins Motorplex (used cars) it is getting ripped off by a user-car salesman, being stuck with a lemon, or feeling taken advantage of.

And ends in a SUCCESS (p. 36, 117)

Never assume people understand how your brand can change their lives. Tell them.

People want to be taken somewhere. There must be a compelling image of an achievable future. Make it clear what life will look like if somebody engages your products or services. Offer your customers what they want most – a happy ending to their story.

The story’s ending should be specific and clear.

Before your brand – What do they have? What are they feeling? What’s an average day like? What is their status?

And after your brand – What do they have? What are they feeling? What’s an average day like? What is their status?

Images are also important. Whatever you sell; show us people happily engaging with the product.

Let’s consider key desires people (your customers) have.

Winning power and position (the need for status). Offer access (membership, points, the occasional free latte). Create scarcity. Offer a premium (preferred membership, diamond member, bypass the red-tape as a member). Offer identity association (premium brands like Mercedes and Rolex sells status as much as luxury).

Union that makes the hero whole. The need for something external to create completeness. Reduced anxiety. Reduced workload. More time.

Self-realization or acceptance. The need to reach our potential. Inspiration. Acceptance (helping people to accept themselves). Transcendence (participation in a larger movement that offers a greater, more impactful life along with your products and services). Tom’s Shoes offers stylish shoes while simultaneously giving a pair to somebody in need in what they call a “one for one” model.

People want your brand to participate in their TRANSFORMATION (p. 131)

The greatest single motivation your customer has is to transform into something better; better versions of themselves. What does your customer want to become? How do they want to be described by others? Can you help them become that kind of person? Can you participate in their identity transformation?

In the case of StoryBrand, we want customers to return to the office and have people wondering what happened to them. How did they get such marketing savvy? How did they become so clear in their thinking? Why are their ideas suddenly so good?

Dave Ramsey changes people. Starbucks changes people. Apple changes people.

Building a better website (p. 145)

Your messaging must show up on websites, in email campaigns, elevator pitches, and sales scripts. You must edit existing marketing materials and create new and better materials.

A great digital presence starts with a clear and effective website. People may hear about us thru word of mouth or social media, but they definitely go to our website to learn more. When they get to our website, their hopes need to be confirmed.

Keep it simple. Your website should be the equivalent of an elevator pitch. It should contain:

1. An offer above the fold (what you see before you scroll down – images and text).
The promise of an aspirational identity, (“We will make you a pro in the kitchen.”) or the promise to solve a problem (“We can help you make beautiful websites.”). State exactly what you do.
2. Obvious call to action.
At the top right, and again in the center of the screen above the fold. The “Buy now” button should be a different color than any other button; brighter so it stands out. Both “Buy now” buttons should look exactly the same. Transitional call to action should also be obvious, but not distract from direct call ... a less bright button next to the direct call to action.
3. Images of success.
Many of us need to display our products, but if we can feature those products in the hands of smiling people, our images have more power.

4. A bite-sized breakdown of your revenue streams.

Find an overall umbrella message that unifies your various streams. For one delivering life-planning and strat-ops facilitation, we recommended above the fold the following text: “The Key to Success is a Customized Plan.” As potential customers scroll down they would see two sections to choose from, personal life plans and corporate strategy plans. Each of these buttons leads to new pages with messages for each.

5. Very few words.

People don't read websites anymore; they scan them.

Use stories to transform your company culture (p. 157)

Transform *employee* engagement. Customers aren't the only ones who get confused when the message is unclear. Employees get confused too.

An engaged associate gives more discretionary effort than someone who is not engaged; and they're less likely to become a turnover statistic. Just because YOU know the story doesn't mean your Team does.

With good narrative, ordinary jobs become extraordinary adventures. The hiring manager describes the company the way you might describe Lewis and Clarke preparing to tame the western frontier. Business goals sound like plot twists. There are mountains to climb and rivers to cross. There are storms to weather.

When your culture tells a great story, everybody wins.

A true mission isn't a *statement* – it's a way of living and being. A Storybrand culture turns the entire Team into a sales force. You filter out all the noise, and let each stakeholder – every day – know why they're doing what they're doing.

Marketing Roadmap (p. 171)

Refine your website. We consider this the first and most important step you can take to grow your business. Then roadmap the most effective next step.

1. Create a one-liner.

People are wondering how you can make their lives better. Use imagination and intrigue. (1) The character, (2) The problem, (3) The plan, (4) The success. Your one-liner doesn't have to be a single sentence, nor does it need to be four sentences. Think of it as more of a *statement*.

Have your team memorize the one-liner. Include it on your website. Repeat it in every piece of marketing collateral possible. Print it on your business cards (perhaps on the back). Include it in your social media bios. Print it on your packaging. Use it in your email signature.

2. Create a lead generator and collect email addresses.

No one wants to sign up for your newsletter. Nobody wants to sign up to “stay in the loop.” Offer them something valuable; something more valuable than the vague offer of a newsletter; to get their email address in return.

Your lead generator must do two things. (1) Provide enormous value for your customer. (2) Establish you as an authority in your field.

Downloadable guides/documents (PDF), free video series, online courses or webinars, software demos, free trials, free samples, live events. Be sure to give it an irresistible title.

Feature your lead generator liberally on your website.

3. Create an automated email drip campaign.

Every month our top customers were being reminded that we existed. Our logo is continually flashing across their eyes, even if they throw a letter away. Content is important,

but the point is – there is great power in simply reminding our customers we exist. They may not need our product today, and they might not need it tomorrow, but on the day they do need it we want to be sure they remember who we are.

A *nurturing campaign* is a simple, regular email that offers valuable information as it relates to your products or services. You continue positioning yourself as the guide, and you create a bond of trust and reciprocity with potential customers. There will come a time to ask for the sale, but this isn't the primary goal of a nurturing campaign.

Email #1 can be a nurturing email. Same with email #2 and #3. Then email #4 can be a *sales email* with a call to action. Repeat this sequence month after month.

In the nurturing email, (1) Talk about a problem, (2) Explain a plan to solve the problem, (3) Describe how life can look for the reader once the problem is solved. Include a P.S. Often the P.S. is the only thing somebody who opens a mass email will actually read.

Every third or fourth email, offer a product or service. (1) Talk about a problem, (2) Describe a product you offer that solves the problem, (3) Describe what life can look like for the reader once the problem is solved, (4) Call the customer to a direct action leading to a sale.

4. Collect and tell stories of transformation. How we've helped our customers transform.

To help customers tell you their testimonial story, ask them:

- a. What was the problem you were having before you discovered our product?
- b. What did the frustration feel like as you tried to solve the problem?
- c. What was different about our product?
- d. Take us to the moment when you realized our product was actually working to solve your problem.
- e. Tell us what life looks like now that your problem is solved or being solved.

5. Create a system that generates referrals.

Invite happy customers to become evangelists for your brand. To make it easier for your customers to share their story with others, consider creating a PDF or video you can send them that they can pass along. "We've put together a little video that will help your friends solve X problem. If you have any friends with X problem, feel free to send it along to them.

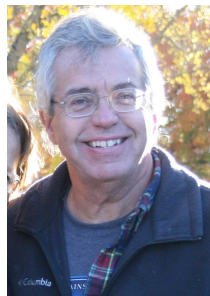
Create a system that invites and incentivizes them to spread the word. Perhaps an affiliate program – offer a 10% commission on the orders they bring to you.

Creating your brand's story (p. 38)

Create one story that represents your overall brand. Then one for each division of your company. Then for each product within each division.

Be sure your messages are simple, relevant, and repeatable. Remember: simple, clear messages that are relevant to your customers result in sales.

Notes by Bob Evely



Evely Enterprises LLC


Bob Evely, President

(p) 859.967.9955






bob@EvelyLLC.com

www.EvelyLLC.com

www.linkedin.com/in/bobevely

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A CHARACTER

WHAT DO THEY WANT?

AND MEETS A GUIDE

EMPATHY

AUTHORITY

AND CALLS THEM TO ACTION

DIRECT

TRANSITIONAL

THAT ENDS IN A SUCCESS

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WHO GIVES THEM A PLAN

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