



Why Marketers Should Tell More Stories

BY KEVIN HOULIHAN, CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER

As author and marketing luminary **Seth Godin** once famously observed,

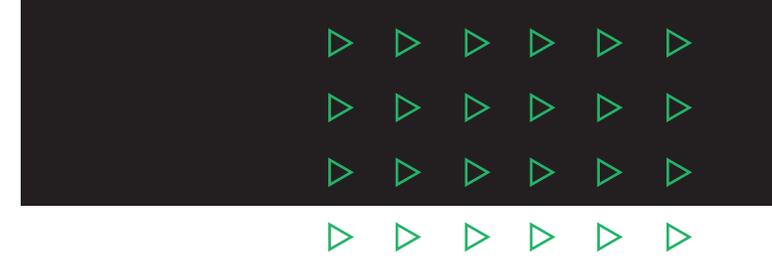
“Marketing is no longer about the stuff that you make, but about the stories you tell.”

Sharing information through narrative has always been one of humanity’s greatest tools for learning, connecting and community building. Even during a pandemic, while circumstances keep us physically apart, we can see the power of story and passion for storytelling in the historic levels of content we create and consume.

Take, for example, Amazon’s recent holiday commercial. The spot captures the frustration many feel surrounding the uncertainty of this pandemic and offers hope by showing how humanity, community and technology can help bring us all together. With a runtime of two minutes, the unhurried storytelling draws us into the protagonist’s world, and we feel a connection.

Now more than ever, storytelling is an effective marketing tool that brands use to cultivate deeper connections with their audiences and ensure their messages leave a lasting impact.

As social creatures, our desire to share and receive stories is embedded in our DNA. For thousands of years, humans have found ways to share stories with one another, from cave drawings and oral traditions to the creation of music, movies, television shows, podcasts and social media. And while today’s ever-evolving tech landscape has inspired brands to connect with their audiences in innovative ways, for the stories we tell to be effective, they must be authentic.



The Art and Science of Storytelling

There are many ways to define what a story is, but at its simplest, it’s an account of incidents or events, according to Merriam-Webster. But the task of crafting a compelling story begins with establishing an emotional connection with your audience.

In a 2018 New York Times piece, journalist Daniel McDermott emphasized the importance of telling personal anecdotes as a way to easily reach people from all walks of life. “When you hear a story like this, when you can relate your own experience and understanding to a speaker, it triggers a reaction, a kind of recognition that leads toward empathy,” he wrote.

In fact, science has shown us that stories that trigger an emotional response have the power to influence audience behavior. Research by Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences found that study participants who were shown emotional scenes experienced a 47% increase of oxytocin—a hormone associated with trust and empathy. Additionally, researchers found that participants with increased levels of oxytocin were more likely to take action by making charitable donations.

Just as there are plenty of ways to define stories, there are multiple ways to construct them. The most impactful stories, however, share a common structure that relies on characters, conflict, resolution and an underlying message. Whether the story is set in the faraway galaxy of Disney’s *The Mandalorian* or inside the Georgian-era society of Netflix’s *Bridgerton*, the underlying elements of storytelling remain the same. You’ll also find them in Amazon’s holiday spot, which happens to be called *The Show Must Go On*.



The Storyteller's Job

While there's no one-size-fits-all approach to telling a great story or a special formula that can kick-start the success of a product, our goal as storytellers is to use creativity, humanity, narrative and technology to deliver the right message when and where our audiences need to hear it most.

Although navigating a global pandemic has shifted the way many brands approach marketing, it has also challenged us to share human stories to establish deeper, more meaningful connections with our audience. And when a story not only emotionally engages our consumers but empowers them to take action and make meaningful changes in their lives, we know we've done our job as a brand storyteller.



About MERGE

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Kevin Houlihan **Chief Creative Officer**

Known for his relentless creativity and business common sense, Kevin leads a growing team of talent working across categories on all types of assignments. Kevin brings humility, practicality and know-how to every project. Getting to the finish line is not only more rewarding but always more fun when Kevin's around. His advertising philosophy is that collaboration leads to bigger ideas: The more open the dialogue between clients and agency, the greater the freedom to challenge thinking and build powerful selling ideas.

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