

Telling more compelling stories

Many marketers approach the task of messaging as an act of mere communication, distilling features, benefits, and proof points into anatomically correct descriptions of their solution's purpose and value. But the real challenge in our info-glutted world is one of persuasion—the ability to convey a story that captures the heart as deftly as it comforts the analytical mind.

Choosing the right narrative

Through the ages, many types of stories have emerged to inform, entertain, and inspire. A host of semiotic structures have been explored in arts and literature, yet certain narratives are used more often in the corporate world to share knowledge, build culture, motivate teams, and drive change.

- **Origins**—Origin stories, like that of HP's garage, articulate the legacy and traditions associated with a person or organization. These heroic tales convey how past triumphs inform the present and build trust that tried-and-true values continue to drive current and future success.
- **Adversities**—In the dark forest of difficult times, stories can help calm fears and restore faith in an organization's ability to solve problems. Through honest disclosure of the challenge at hand and a clear plan of action, adversity stories can coalesce energy around resolution rather than rumination for successful turnarounds.
- **Possibilities**—From a political candidate's stump speech to a CEO's thought leadership keynote, stories of possibility inspire and align people around a shared vision of the future. They can also make a new concept more understandable, such as illustrating the potential uses of an innovative technology in a hypothetical application.
- **Outcomes**—Results-focused stories illustrate the tangible effects created by a solution, process, or initiative. Whether in the form of a customer success story or an annual report, outcome stories demonstrate impact in a vivid, concrete fashion.

"Scratch the surface in a typical boardroom and we're all just cavemen with briefcases, hungry for a wise person to tell us stories."

—Dr. Alan Kay, technology visionary and Walt Disney Imagineering and HP Labs fellow

3 THINGS YOU CAN DO NOW

1. **Research memes.**
Scan industry trends and pop culture movements for memes to frame stories around. Align with au courant, not passé—e.g., "growth," not "do more with less." Know what's next and catch the wave early.
2. **Collect artifacts.**
Examine existing stories—customer successes, vision decks, history archives, "urban legends" of the corporate culture—for vivid anecdotes. Watch what patterns emerge to indicate a larger narrative arc.
3. **Be creative.**
Practice nonlinear narrative structures and experiment with unexpected creative devices and perspectives. Begin at the end instead of the start, try non-business metaphors, and use an image and three powerful words instead of bullets on a PowerPoint slide.

Know your context

- Start with the end in mind: What belief or behavior do you want to create?
- Understand your audience: Know their goals, pains, fears.
- Be relevant now: Tap into current memes and topics.

Concentrate your power

- Communicate specifically: Use concrete examples, not generalities.
- Cut ruthlessly: Keep it contained to three or four well-supported ideas.
- Package creatively: Bring it to life with vivid imagery and a rich theme.

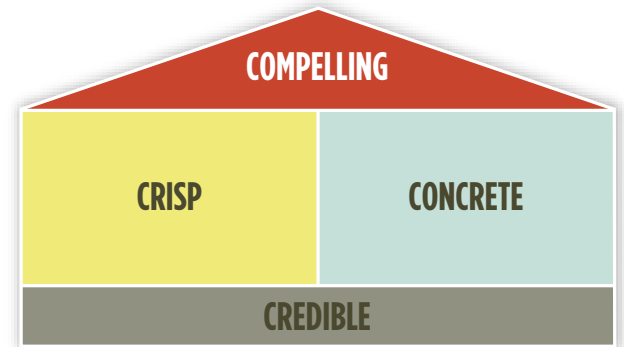




The four Cs of stories

Persuasion is an art requiring a master's grasp of nuance and narrative skill backed by the discipline to discard that which only clouds the true power of the tale. Apply these four tips to craft stories that break through the clutter and resonate long after their first telling.

- **Compelling:** Spark curiosity with provocative, unexpected concepts and phrases. Tap into memes with emotional resonance, such as heroic themes of “change,” “freedom,” or “opportunity.”
- **Crisp:** “KISS” is especially true for stories. People can remember five things plus or minus two, so keep the number of main ideas small and throw out anything that isn't absolutely essential to the plot.
- **Concrete:** Steer clear of abstractions, because humans are wired to feel connected to real people, places, and things. Use specific examples that your audience can relate to.
- **Credible:** Authenticity is key to establishing empathy. Use real, accessible language and be truthful with your facts. The more your audience trust your story, the more likely they will be to tell it to others.



“When facts become so widely available and instantly accessible, each one becomes less valuable. What begins to matter more is the ability to place these facts in context and to deliver them with emotional impact.”

—Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind*, 2005

“You can get a long way toward a sticky message just by building in the right properties. Is my message simple enough? Is it concrete? Is there a story I could tell? You’ll be able to see faces light up when you hit the right example.”

—Chip Heath, *“Crafting a Message That Sticks,”*
McKinsey Quarterly, July 2007

Key elements of a story

- **Framing:** Establish context about the topic and convey relevance to the audience.
- **Engaging:** Connect with hearts and minds through a compelling narrative.
- **Illuminating:** Deliver the aha! moment that informs and inspires your audience.
- **Concluding:** Confirm the call-to-action that creates the outcome you desire.

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