

Chief Marketer B2B Special Report

Tell a Tale

Using storytelling to make your B2B brand more relevant and engaging

Think about the stories that you've loved. Whether you heard them as an adult or a child, they connected with you because on some level, they resonated with your desires and experiences.

To engage prospects and buyers, B2B marketers need to tell their brand tale in a way that is relevant to not only the brand's goal but the audience's needs as well.

"B2B brands are getting more attuned to the need to tell their stories, but they must understand they should tell their stories in the context of what their customers and prospects are interested in," says Gary Slack, chief experience officer of Chicago-based B2B agency Slack & Company. After all, if done wrong, stories can just be boring. "Brands need to resonate with those you work with now and those you want to work with in the future."



"Every brand is working on story, because it is the hot thing," says Mark Baltazar, CEO of New York-based marketing and advertising agency Broadstreet. "Many brands have three audiences—B2B, B2C and B2E, which is employees and everyone else. But there needs to be one story that comes through and resonates across all your audiences."

"PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE, NO MATTER WHETHER THEY ARE ACTING AS A CONSUMER OR A PROFESSIONAL. EVERYONE HAS EMOTIONS."

— MARK BALTAZAR, BROADSTREET

Too much B2B content is really just "brandfill," says Slack. Companies are just pumping out content without considering their customer needs. "Organizations are interested in telling their story, but they don't know how to make it relevant. Most of their content won't be remembered—if it even gets read."

Too much content is created by committee—PR, corporate communications and even customer service gets involved and the focus ends up being on spotlighting the company, and not providing anything of use. "It's like it was created by the sales prevention department, with an inability to be bold or stand out."

What can you do to make your content stand out? Start with your customers, says Slack, and do some research.

"I'm a big believer in having conversations with your

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MCGRAW-HILL'S NEW ONLINE BRAND STORY

Revamping the way it presents itself online helped McGraw-Hill Education reposition its brand to educators and students.

"We could have stayed in the traditional textbook business, but we knew reinvention was necessary, because many schools are now 100% digital," said Stacy Hansbury, vice president, digital channels, McGraw-Hill Education, speaking at the recent Adobe Summit. "We needed to change perception of McGraw-Hill from a textbook company to a digital learning company"

McGraw-Hill Education (MHE) had a goal of creating a consistent digital brand and ecommerce experience across the globe. It wanted to blend content and commerce functionality so its products were easy to find and purchase, and allow customers to create a single account they could use to manage their overall relationship with MHE.

There were significant challenges, however. The company had five different business units that had been operating in a siloed fashion—for example, those that dealt with the kindergarten-grade 12 market didn't communicate with the higher education folks.

The company also had over 450 separate marketing microsites internationally (each with different back end systems), and a variety of ecommerce and content systems spread over the globe.

Customer data was scattered across the various systems as well—if someone was using MHE products since they were in elementary school and were now entering college, it was tough to track them on their journey.

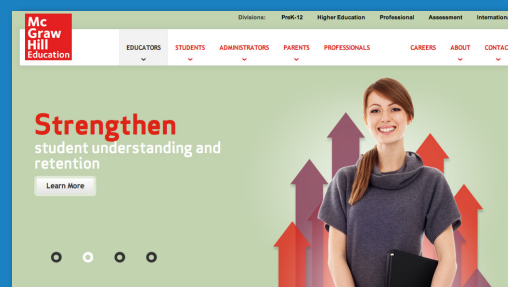
The company sat down and thought about the experience it wanted to create, with an eye towards creating learning solutions that delivered a personalized customer experience. It placed the customer in the center, rather than the author, and created a set of personas that would have different customer journeys with McGraw-Hill.

These personas came from both the B2B and B2C side, and included Able Administrators, Forever Freshman, Visionary Charter Champion, Tenure Track Researcher, Involved Elementary Parent and Enriching Educator. "We addressed customer expectations and created a new experience," she said.

Working with Adobe and Elastic Path Software, the first step was a new mobile optimized site for the higher education division, launched in only 123 days. It had an improved look and feel, with improved search functions and product presentations. The launch coincided with a new brand strategy and a new internal content governance process, as well improved site analytics.

Since the relaunch earlier this year, over 662,000 visitors have gone to the site, resulting in 2.5 million page views and a four percent conversion rate. Fifty-percent of the traffic growth has been from non-desktop devices. Some of these visitors are students, who in academia have a definite influence on the B2B purchase cycle.

"We have to remember that a lot of our users aren't our buyers—a student who goes to our site won't purchase a math program, but they do go back and talk [to their teachers]," said Hansbury. "I'm excited about the amount of energy we've had on that portion of the site."



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target audience," he says. "What are they reading? Where are they getting their information? What [sites] have become their daily and weekly habits? Then, pay attention and let that information guide you."

Too much content is created in a corporate vacuum, says Slack. "You can't just sit around a table with no real input."

Stories are so important because they spark emotions and help people make sense of the bigger picture, says Baltazar. "People are people, no matter whether they are acting as a consumer or a professional. Everyone has emotions."

A common mistake in business-to-business is that marketers think they have to always be serious and

talk results, only appealing to the left side of the brain. Everyone stiffens up and gets dry, and that's a mistake, says Baltazar. Brands need to tap into their business partners' emotions.

"People love brands with personalities, and that sometimes gets lost in B2B," adds Matthew Flachsenhaar, project producer, Broadstreet. "Facts are important, but people still want to be compelled and motivated."

Sometimes, B2B brands stay serious because they worry if they step down from their pedestal and be a bit self-deprecating they'll no longer look like a leader. But the reverse is true, says Flachsenhaar—showing a human side by being humorous or warm

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helps prospects and customers relate to your brand.

B2B marketers need to create content in a variety of formats, to share their story with as wide a potential audience as possible, he notes. Some prospects will respond better to ads, while others gravitate to articles or whitepapers. Others attention will be piqued with quicker bites of information like video or infographics.

"BRANDS NEED TO RESONATE WITH THOSE YOU WORK WITH NOW AND THOSE YOU WANT TO WORK WITH IN THE FUTURE."

— GARY SLACK, SLACK & CO.

"People's attention spans are so low that you need to communicate as painlessly and effortlessly as possible," says Slack. "Find quicker and faster ways to communicate your messaging."

THE ROLE OF VIDEO

This is a huge reason for the rise in popularity of video in B2B marketing, he notes. In years past, brands might create 15- or 20-minute videos to tell their story, using a "cast" of whoever was available around the office. Now, they're keeping it brief and using professional actors who are comfortable with being on camera. Done right, video can serve as the "shoe horn" that gets someone interested in a topic and ready for longer, more intricate content.

Brands need to remember that while technology helps them tell the story, technology isn't the story itself. Relevancy is key, no matter what the medium or platform you're using to get your point across, says Baltazar, and sometimes, technology can just get in the way.

For example, at live events sometimes companies create apps and games to engage attendees with the brand. But attendees zeal to get points and play along sometimes get in the way of the actual brand message and making human connections at the event.

"Sometimes, you need to let the 'power of live' just happen," says Flachsenhaar.

Remember too, that your brand doesn't necessarily "own" its own story. Everyone who interacts with your brand—your marketing team, the company's employees, consumers—interprets the brand story differently.

"You can't tell your whole story yourself, so you don't want to drive them to a single point," says Baltazar. "The way you manage it is to put a plan in place prior to activation with a picture of who your audience is and their needs, wants and desires—as well as what your objectives are. It may go off the rails, but at least you're framing the conversations."

People will go the way they want to, adds Flachsenhaar. "Person one might do something because it makes them feel one way, while person two reacts because they feel differently."

WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE?

Know your audience, says Baltazar. "Too many people don't take into consideration who they are talking to and how they will react. Know how they want to communicate."

"People have the duality of being people and business people at the same time," notes Gaston Legorburu, executive director and chief creative officer of interactive agency SapientNitro.

In today's highly connected digital world, marketers have a wealth of real time data that helps them see how people are responding and interacting, he says. This enables brands on both the B2B and the B2C side to test and shift their marketing accordingly. Some marketers have a tendency to cater to the left-brain, and others to the right, and it really needs to be a mix of both to truly connect.

Legorburu notes that his firm has done extensive research around digital shopper behavior. As shoppers are tracked throughout the day, it can seem like you're watching someone with ADHD who's had a few Red Bulls and no sleep. They go from responding to an email from their boss to looking at pictures of new cars to doing their taxes to checking out new hair color options, all in the blink of an eye.

"This empowered and erratic consumer is the same person who is in corporate America," says Legorburu. "They have this same level of multitasking and you need to build a portrait of this person."

A shift in marketing sensibility is sometimes required to make this happen. "Get people aligned to your customer experience, so they understand what you are trying to achieve," he says. "You need to move from a culture that embraces sameness to one that embraces a diversity of skills and perspectives." !



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Why So Serious?

Done right, humor can be a powerful B2B marketing tool

Dying is easy, comedy is hard—particularly if you want to sell someone something.

Using humor in B2B marketing can be challenging in several ways, says Tim Washer, senior marketing manager, social media, Cisco Systems. Washer himself is a seasoned comedy veteran, with writing and performing credits on “Late Night with Conan O’Brien,” “Last Week with John Oliver,” “The Onion Sports Network” and many others.

For one thing, it can be a challenge to simply get your team on board with the concept, and then get it approved by the powers at be. Many people in the mix may have no experience with producing comedy (or even, dare we say it a sense of humor), but still want to give their input.

Washer says the first time he pitched humor in a corporate environment was at IBM, where he as a speech writer. The company wanted to inspire the sales force and change their behavior. “It sounded like a comedy video, but to be honest, everything sounds like a comedy video to me,” he says.

He wrote a draft script for a presentation at an internal sales meeting and got a VP to sign off on it. Because this was for internal use only, the risk was lower than something that would go out to the general public. It played well to the home team, so the next year, they put the video online.

Humor can be scary, because especially in today’s age of social media, if people are offended, they’ll let you know—and fast. But it can be an even bigger risk to just play it safe with talking head videos, and making no impression on anyone.

TAKE A RISK

“Humor is subjective, and it will generate feedback” he says. “If you put a boring piece of content out there, the nice thing is no one will comment on it—because they won’t watch it or they won’t care.”

Social can be a simple and inexpensive way to test putting humor and personality into your marketing. Tweets around an idea or corporate character can get the ball rolling, as can things like funny captions for images on Instagram. Employees can be a great resource here, and can provide fodder for your social stream of content and ideas.

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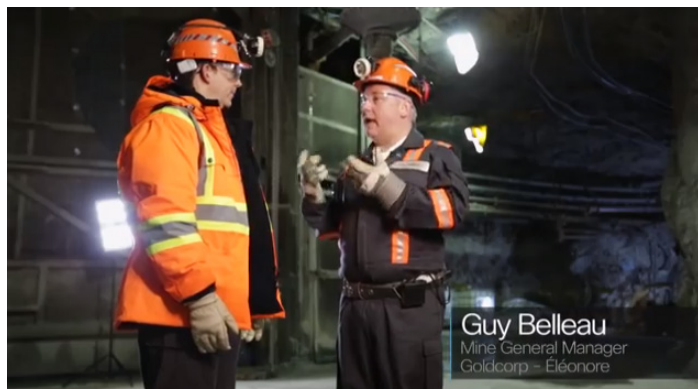
Who cleans the 21,000 windows at the 70 story “building of the future” at Penzoil Place? In this video, Washer discovered it was an intern with a squeegee.



For a series of Cisco interviews with CIOs, Washer posed as an overly friendly waiter asking questions about everything from beer to analytics.



Washer went on-site in a mine to learn how Cisco helped implement wi-fi for the property.



Guy Belleau
Mine General Manager
Goldcorp - Eléonore

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"Humanizing the brand is where the real value is," says Washer, who will be a featured speaker at the Business Marketing Association's annual conference in Chicago this May. "If you can make someone laugh in a business context, that's the most intimate connection, particularly if the laughter comes from an industry pain point. Show that you understand customers and communicate that you know their struggles and what they are going through."

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A humorous post can include a link back to a more straightforward blog post about how your solution or product can help solve your target audience's problem. Of course, sometimes it doesn't matter what you say—someone will be offended, and it can be hard for the corporate office to remember that the negative comments shouldn't necessarily outweigh how the campaign actually performed.

NOT EVERYONE GETS IT

Washer remembers that he once worked with someone who would constantly work metaphors about farmers and ranchers into conversation. It was funny, and he used it in a script. Someone took it completely the wrong way and thought the company was making fun of farmers, which it wasn't. "You'll get those kind of comments and you have to write some of them off. The lesson is that you have to be careful to not be misunderstood as pointing at a particular group."

The recent Starbucks "#RaceTogether" debacle is a great reminder to avoid hot button topics like religion or politics—"anything that can explode easily."

Testing is always a good idea, and when using

humor is in the mix—particularly if people are nervous and this is new for your brand—it's a must. If you have a new video, before putting it up on YouTube for the world to see, show it live to a group at an internal meeting. "Seeing how people respond and seeing them laugh will give your vice president confidence to push it out," he says.

And while you may have some folks in your office who are hilarious around the water cooler, Washer recommends investing in professional actors who are used to performing in front of a camera. "Many times, solid scripts fall apart because someone doesn't have a rhythm for comedy."

GO FOR A PRO

Many B2B brands like to showcase their customers in videos, to add personality to the brand. Consider hiring an improv actor or comedian who knows how to be professional, work clean and think on his or her feet, he suggests. This will add a bit of spontaneous humor to your videos. A video with your customer (and your brand) laughing in the moment shows you're not trying to control the message and that your brand is indeed staffed by actual human beings.

Washer has successfully done that with several Cisco clients. For one series of videos, he interviewed several customers one on one, posing as a very inquisitive and overly friendly waiter in a restaurant. It got everyone out of a conference room, looked different and was fun for everyone involved, even the CIOs who might not necessarily choose to be in front of the camera.

In another video with Goldcorp Eleonore, he went on-site in a mine to showcase a ventilation system's wi-fi component that Cisco helped implement. In the quick moving video, Wasser asked questions that were serious but keeping it fun. He asked the company to reveal the most closely guarded secret in mining, which it did—as a loud drill blared drowning out the sound.

"Interviewing a customer and adding levity is a safe approach, because it keeps the humor tightly connected to a customer's story," he says. "It feels relevant and not tacked on." —BNV

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