

Lessons from Hollywood - storytelling for strategic planners

 By [Sid Peimer](#)

2 Oct 2003

In 47 BC, the Roman army under Julius Caesar soundly defeated the forces of King Pharnaces. After his victory, Caesar returned to Rome for a bit of R&R, but not before the citizens had to lend him their ears for his famous speech, made into a glorious summary by this son of Rome: "*vini, vidi, vici*" - I came I saw I conquered.

That's an entire story in three acts; a beginning, a middle and an end.

Here's another three-act story:

Act 1: My mom came round the corner

Act 2: Saw me taking a smoke behind the shed

Act 3: And klapped me stukkend *

* slapped me broken. Never mind.

Aristotle affirmed that everything in life is composed of three acts, even our existence on earth, which consists of: birth, advertising, death. His classic story structure was then adapted for the big screen by the doyen of modern screenwriting, Syd Field, who coined the phrases; 'setup', 'confrontation' and 'resolution' to describe the three acts.

As strategic planners, we tell stories all the time. We tell people about markets, what people in those markets are experiencing, what they like, what they don't like, what they're buying into or not, or why the presentation is two weeks late.

Nearly everything we communicate is in the form of a story, so it is prudent to get to know the three-act structure intimately. All your presentations should have a beginning, a middle and an end (except those where the client's cellphone goes and he 'must dash' - but that's another story).

Act 1

This is the setup.

You have one chance to make a first impression, and this is it. You are setting the 'context' of your story. There is nothing worse than listening to an AMPS-ababble or a detailed description of the trends in society since 1954. That is not the context of your story!! The client knows what country he/she is in (most of the time), and if I want to tell you a story, I don't start with once upon a time on a planet far far away. Act 1 is not to show how much you've done - it is merely to describe

the context, within which your story occurs.

In the movie Witness, the first 10 minutes reveals the world of the Amish. The death of Rachel's husband takes her and her child to Philadelphia, where the boy happens to witness the murder of an undercover cop. This leads to the relationship with the main character, John Book, played by Harrison Ford. The entire first act is designed to reveal the dramatic premise and the relationship between an Amish woman and a tough Philadelphia cop.

Everything in the first act is within that context - there are no serene beach scenes, hookers flaunting themselves with aimless accuracy, or a sleepy petrol-attendant leaning on his chair with his hat covering his face. Or even a demographic profile of Philadelphia. No. Everything is within the context of the story.

Once you have set the scene, your audience must now reply in the positive to the one question they will ask themselves, a question which will determine the worth of your presentation; "Do I care?".

Act II

This is the confrontation.

It will tell the story of how you are going to achieve the goals. During the second act, the main character (the brand) encounters obstacles that prevent it from achieving its dramatic need. 'Dramatic need' is defined as what your main character wants to win or achieve by the end of the story (in our case, mostly sales or market share). In a movie, this makes up the bulk of the film, composed of numerous attempts by the protagonist to achieve his/her goal. It is Erin Brockovich struggling to get the families their day in court, Clarice trying to rescue the hostage in Silence of the Lambs or Jim Lovell getting his crew safely home after a hurried "Houston, we have a problem".

You must find your brand's dramatic need, showing how the brand battles through all the options. As Syd Field says, all drama is conflict - without conflict you have no character; without character, you have no action; and without action, you have no story.

Act III

The resolution.

Here you resolve all the conflicting issues of Act 2. You take all the dramatic options your brand has been through, and you now choose the route that will bring resolution to your story. Your audience should not be left 'hanging' - you must provide the ending. Imagine if you went to a movie, and the last 10 minutes weren't there - wouldn't you feel cheated? The last act is your answer to how the brand will overcome all the obstacles to satisfy its dramatic need.

The role of the three acts is summarised in the diagram below.

Act 1	Act 2	Act 3
Beginning	Middle	End
The setup A review of the objectives (where the brand must go) and a market overview - the 'context' of your story.	Confrontation Anything that stands in the way of the brand achieving success. Why certain actions will or will not work - evaluating your options	Resolution The proposed route to success, including the media vehicles we will ride to victory on.

Rolf Jensen of the Copenhagen Institute of Future Studies states "Brands need to imagine their futures the way good novelists imagine their stories." It's not hard to make this leap, because if character is action, then it is what the brand does that establishes its role in the consumer's mind. And it's no good having these in-depth brand-watchamacallits, reflecting the inner soul of your brand, if you neglect Longfellow (the Poet's) words; "We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done." It's what the brand actually does that counts.

I'll now call it a wrap with the incisive words of Ruth Stotter, author of 'The Power of Personal Storytelling':

"Some people think that we're made of flesh and blood and bones. Scientists say that we're made of atoms. But I think we're made of stories. When we die, that's what people remember, the stories of our lives and the stories that we told."

ABOUT SID PEIMER

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