

The most important story of all



By [Louise Marsland](#)

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Telling stories is as old as time. Before mass media, bards would go from village to village singing the news and market day in any century was a place to catch up on the latest gossip.

The advent of the printing press enabled books to be more widely available and there was enlightenment - give or take a few centuries.

You have to admire the brand and advertising agencies which claim to have just invented storytelling to sell products and services. They tell a good tale!

Call it storytelling, story collection, content marketing, custom publishing, branded content, narrative intelligence (this is my favourite, it sounds cool)... it is also plain old advertorial (paid-for content) dressed up for a new decade in designer duds for brands desperate to connect with the new consumer who is distracted by anything new and shiny that comes along.

In this reality TV-obsessed, social-media-dominated media environment, it is a necessary strategy. Everyone loves a good story.

One of the best ways that brands can engage with the hyper-connected new consumer is by involving them in their brand story, making them a lead character in the product 'plot'.

'True life stories'

Stuart Rothgiesser, the founder and managing director of Roth Communications, recently addressed PR-Net in Cape Town on 'narrative intelligence', describing it as the kind of stories that make up organisations and a new definition of brand stories. These days it is all about "true life stories, as told by ordinary people.

"The new brand stories no longer have a turning point, a conclusion or a climax. They take their cue from those told by ordinary people and spread virally."

Cape Town-based Roth Communications promises to "help organisations discover, tell and share their stories". Their brand literature quotes Peter Guber, former head of Sony entertainment as saying that "success in the Information Age demands that we harness the hidden power of stories".

Rothgiesser explains that telling stories internally and externally is a sector-wide trend internationally. They include product

stories, employee stories, customer stories, management stories, stakeholder stories and advocacy stories. Anything that makes up an organisation.

Tell your story, or risk your brand's future

"Narrative intelligence can be assessed and it is the most important story of all."

In fact, Rothgiesser went on to say that those leaders who failed to realise the impact of their stories, were setting their brands up to fail.

So how do you build and encourage positive narrative intelligence - as opposed to disasters of epic proportions like the BP Gulf oil spill that changed BP's story for this generation? BP used to punt itself as being "Beyond Petroleum" and an environmental custodian. Recent BP branding makes no mention of the environment. It had to change its corporate story for the brand to survive and try to build trust in the future.

Building positive narrative intelligence requires brands to be open and honest about their values, to portray those values publically and to demonstrate integrity and authenticity internally and externally. Companies need positive real life stories to build their customer base these days, Rothgiesser says.

"Stories gain insights into the internal and external aspects of a company."

Keep an eye on the agencies muscling in on what was traditionally publishing territory - but also the former custom publishers which have rebranded themselves as content marketing agencies, going head-to-head with the branding and advertising agencies.

It is a very exciting field to be in right now - it is certainly a new chapter for brands and media!

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

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