Adapting Hollywood acting techniques to engage audiences

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Abstract  This paper shows how the principles of storytelling that actors use to craft compelling, believable performances lend themselves perfectly to the discipline of marketing. Drawing on the scene study exercise — an activity common to acting conservatories the world over — the paper shows how marketers can deepen their understanding of human behaviour and motivation. With this enriched sense of empathy, they can then go out in the world to craft more meaningful stories that drive action. This paper sets a framework for developing the skills necessary for human-centred storytelling. It starts by examining theories of human cognition to explain why storytelling is so effective. It then provides a vocabulary for human-centred stories, borrowed from the author’s work as an actor in Hollywood. Throughout, the paper makes direct and practical connections between the crafts of acting and marketing, highlighting concepts that marketers of all disciplines can consider for their content and campaigns.

KEYWORDS: content creation, acting, film, television, video marketing, psychology, storytelling

INTRODUCTION

In the world of marketing, ‘storytelling’ is having another moment. As Google Trends shows, search queries for ‘marketing storytelling’ skyrocketed in 2016 and have held steady all the way up to the time of this writing. Indeed, a quick search for ‘storytelling in marketing’ on Google today will return in excess of 106 million pages on the topic.

However, while storytelling retains its popularity as a buzzword, it remains ill-defined and vaguely understood in practical terms. What exactly is storytelling? How exactly does it work? And what must marketers do to bring it forth in their campaigns, content and communications?

To better understand the deep inner workings of stories, this paper explores one of the most popular forms of storytelling today: Hollywood acting.

WHY STORYTELLING WORKS

For the past decade or so, the term ‘storytelling’ has been inescapable in conference halls, job descriptions, meeting rooms and beyond. But what does ‘storytelling’ really mean for digital marketers?
Simply put, storytelling is the craft of communicating meaning rather than information. Meaning can be constructed by employing devices that enrich the message with context — devices such as narratives, character development, dramatic action and sequence. This ability to construct meaning is essential for marketers today.

In the modern digital landscape, everyone is inundated with content, notifications and infinitely scrolling feeds of ideas competing for attention. Given their already-overburdened cognitive load, it is unrealistic to expect audiences to figure out why a proposition is valuable.

To understand the imperative for meaning-making, it is worth looking at a few theories on how humans are wired to make information meaningful.

**Cognitive empathy**

While the concept of empathy is widely known today, this has not always been the case. Psychologist and philosopher Edward B. Titchener is credited with first introducing the word empathy into the English language back in 1909, when he coined the theory of cognitive empathy.3

Marketer Stacy Adams shares this theory in one of her presentations on telling compelling stories.4 The theory of cognitive empathy does much to articulate how people relate to one other. It also provides a lens through which to better understand why storytelling is such an effective mode of communication.

The theory establishes an important maxim that humans are able to experience a deep, authentic, second-hand emotion by watching another person experience it. Cognitive empathy describes the emotional and cognitive response that humans have when observing others’ emotional experiences.5

While the concept does not feel quite so novel now as it surely did in the early 20th century, the implications of Titchener’s work would have been monumental.

The neurotypical majority of people are walking around with a shared knowledge of human emotional experiences. We have developed the skill to recognise emotional experiences, identify them and transitorily experience them for ourselves, without any information being explicitly exchanged, conveyed or communicated. Guided by prevailing cultures, we have learned to sort and categorise these emotional experiences, assigning value and meaning to each of them.

This natural phenomenon offers a mine of untapped potential for reaching target audiences. When using stories, marketers are able to put emotional experiences at the forefront of their content, whether it is experienced by a character or signalled through rich media experiences. That emotional tone activates cognitive empathy, giving audiences an authentic experience of the brand story by allowing them to engage more deeply.

Many of the most memorable marketing campaigns are built almost entirely on the process of cognitive empathy. By way of example, consider Flo, the character introduced by Progressive Insurance. Despite advertising a notoriously information-heavy product (insurance services), Progressive Insurance has managed to connect with audiences in a memorable way for over a decade. It does this by personifying its value proposition into a cheery and likeable character. Suddenly, the offer is not only easier for audiences to understand, but more relatable too.

**Embodied cognition**

Embodied cognition is a somewhat emergent school of thought that counters the established model for human cognition. One can think of that established model as a kind of Potato Head system: where the brain acts as the commanding centre of all cognition, collecting information and issuing orders through the nervous system. In oversimplified terms, dominant thinking tends to consider the brain as a kind of puppeteer for the rest of the body.
Embodied cognition, by comparison, ‘is the surprisingly radical hypothesis that the brain is not the sole cognitive resource we have available to us to solve problems’. The theory asserts that the rest of the body also heavily influences how people make sense of the world around, accommodating sensory modes of cognition and not just rational ones. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain, ‘there is no such fully autonomous faculty of reason separate from and independent of bodily capacities such as perception and movement’.

If one leaves room for the possibility of cognitive empathy and embodied cognition to be true, it could have huge implications for how people understand storytelling. If audiences are able to understand abstract concepts in a sensory way (and not just rationally), and they are able to fully feel an experience by watching another human go through it, there is a huge opportunity to communicate profound meaning using human-centred stories.

These stories can be as simple as a photograph of a fried egg being tipped out of a nonstick pan. By communicating through motion — even motion suspended in a single frame — marketers can garner an emotional connection from audiences by inviting them to imagine the weight of a pan shifting in their hand as they serve the perfect egg with ease.

These stories could look like high-definition, glossy footage of foam atop a cold glass of cola, evoking the feeling of popping bubbles misting your lips as you go in for that first sip.

By incorporating dynamic movement that recalls physical memories in audiences, marketers can incite embodied cognition to create more compelling calls to action.

ACTING AS A MODEL FOR STORYTELLING

When accounting for cognitive theories of empathy and embodiment, the power of the performing arts becomes plain to see. Theatre, film, dance, music and more all communicate ideas in the form of story. They craft rich media experiences blending visuals and sounds across the dimension of time, allowing audiences to process information emotionally (and not just rationally). They use human (or human-like) characters and actors so that audiences may relate to, and experience, the story for themselves.

Imagine marketing to audiences with that same captivating power. As a craft, digital marketing is somewhat different from performing. Nevertheless, marketers can learn a lot from actors who have singularly specialised in the art of telling media-rich, human stories to engage audiences.

Actors can communicate complexity with as little as a glance. That richness of meaning is precisely what marketers need to cut through the noise of today's digital landscape.

Acting is a discipline that has been around since antiquity. As a result, digital marketers have their choice of countless frameworks, theories and exercises to deepen their own craft of storytelling.

SCENE STUDY

Scene study is a common acting school activity for deep script analysis. It gives actors an opportunity to better understand a piece of dramatic text, putting empathetic connection ahead of literary analysis. Typically, scene study exercises look like a coach or director guiding one or two actors to perform the text, sometimes line by line. Intermittently, the actors are challenged to answer powerful questions, like the famed nine questions of acting coach Uta Hagen:

- Who am I?
- What time is it?
- Where am I?
- What surrounds me?
- What are the given circumstances?
- What is my relationship?
- What do I want?
- What is in my way?
- What do I do to get what I want?
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Because the scene study exercise is more interested in empathy than analysis, it tends to guide actors to a profound understanding of the human dynamics at play within a given scene. Very often, the director’s questions force the actor to make decisive interpretations of the text where the script leaves unanswered questions.

Digital marketers can benefit from these exercises by adapting them to understand audiences better. In the example of Hagen’s nine questions, one could examine a target buyer by asking:

- What role do they play when using a given channel?
- When do they pay attention to that channel?
- Where are they when they are using that channel?
- What surrounds them when they are using that channel?
- What might bring them to that channel on that day? What do they expect?
- What role does the brand play in that channel?
- What does the buyer want when using that channel?
- What is getting in the buyer’s way when using that channel?
- What will the buyer do next to get what they want?

Achieving a high degree of specificity and empathy is critical to engage audiences, whether as an actor or marketer. Emotional clarity begets authenticity, and authenticity begets meaningful connections with audiences.

The sensory nature of this activity makes it difficult to adapt directly into text. Instead, this paper highlights a few of the myriad decisions that actors make over the course of a scene study exercise. By making rational work out of these irrational concepts, the aim is to develop new tools to apply as marketers and storytellers.

**Objective**

Acting — like marketing — is a discipline that most people on Earth have witnessed first-hand. As a result, acting — just like marketing — is a craft that is often misunderstood and underestimated.

Newcomers tend to approach acting from the outside in — performing emotions as they appear on others. They will screw up their faces to cry to show how sad their character is, crack a goofy grin when the character is happy, or furrow their brows when the character says they are frustrated.

This is not acting. This is emoting. These outside-in approaches fail to capture what matters most in acting. The lack of nuance results in a performance that feels two-dimensional, contrived and unbelievable.

So, what matters most in acting? The answer lies in the word itself: *action*.

The difference between good acting and bad acting is actually very simple and it all comes down to a razor-sharp, crystal clear understanding of the character’s action. This is best distilled into the simple concept of an objective, which is not-so-coincidentally one of the first principles to typically come out of a scene study exercise.

Coaches will ask actors to articulate what their character’s objective is, and the answer must always be a clear and attainable result. This is no time for metaphor. Objectives like ‘feeling heard’ or ‘getting respect’ are too abstract and general and will drag the actor right back to emoting. Objectives like ‘getting the other character to hand me their watch’ are much more helpful.

An actor will only be able to layer in all the rich, fun, artistic nuances of their performance *after* they have established a foundational understanding of, and empathy with, the core objective of their character.

Marketers can rip this principle straight out of the actor’s studio and pull it into their everyday language. By developing the ability
to articulate objectives, marketers can create clearer purchase journeys and write stronger calls to action.

Start by figuring out what objective you wish to motivate in buyers. What should they pursue after seeing your message? Try speaking like an actor preparing to play the part of the customer: ‘As a [persona], I want to [objective].’

If one was selling instant coffee, it would be easy to answer this prompt with objectives like:

- As a [busy professional], I want to [buy the best instant coffee].
- As a [busy professional], I want to [have a slow morning as quickly as possible].
- As a [busy professional], I want to [get efficient energy].

These objectives, however, are not drumming through the minds of busy professionals each morning. A stronger, more empathetic objective might look like:

- As a [busy professional], I want to [clear my inbox].

When a marketer is able to centre the buyer as the main character in their content, they can create much more authentic and meaningful messages.

One can apply the concept of objectives to goal setting, and build campaigns that result in defined, attainable action — not just ‘delight’.

**Motivation**

Once an actor is able to articulate their character’s objective in a given scene, they can then begin to layer in more dynamics to deepen their character’s relationship to the dramatic action, the environment and the other characters. One of those dynamics is motivation.

Many a scene study goes awry when motivation gets introduced to the exercise. Usually, this happens because the actor — or sometimes, the director — has a muddled view of objective and motivation.

Outside of the actor’s studio, objective and motivation can almost be treated synonymously. As a result, it is not uncommon to have actors describing a motivation when asked to articulate their objective, or vice versa. It is important, however, to be tediously specific about the distinction between these two concepts, as each is an important piece of information that the actor will need in order to deliver an authentic performance.

This paper has already defined a character’s objective as *what* they want to achieve. Their motivation, by comparison, is *why* they want to achieve it.

Returning to the imaginary scene study where we (as the actors) decided that our character’s objective was to get the other person to hand over their watch, the next step would be to deepen our understanding of the character by asking *why* they want that watch.

Does our character simply need to check the time? Or are they trying to prove to the other person that their meeting was supposed to start five minutes ago? Perhaps our character is motivated to get hold of the watch because it is a treasured family heirloom, or maybe the watch contains a ticking bomb that needs to be disarmed.

As demonstrated by the range of options above, any number of motivations could be driving a character’s pursuit of a single objective. A performance that was based on any one of those motivations would be very different from the rest. The point of this exercise is not necessarily to let our imaginations run wild; rather, the aim is to use all the clues the script has to offer to identify a reasonable motivation for our character given the context.

To engage audiences effectively, marketers need to develop a similarly rich understanding of *why* they want what they want. The point of conversion should satisfy
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the audience’s objective, so the content being used to drive them toward that conversion will need to resonate with deeper, shared motivations.

**Tactic**

To recap, in acting, a character’s objective is *what* they want. So far, we have decided that our imaginary character wants to get the other person to hand them their watch.

Then, motivation is defined as *why* a character wants the given objective. In this instance, let us say that our character wants the other person to hand them their watch because they need to check the time.

As actors, that information provides a huge head-start to deliver a specific, action-oriented performance that supports the dramatic arc of the scene. If we stop there, though, our performance might still feel somewhat flat.

Any script worth performing will be written to include obstacles that stand in the way of the main character achieving their objective. Obstacles are an important device to build the dramatic tension that makes the piece so exciting to watch. (Will they get what they want? Or won’t they?) Collectively, those barriers comprise the dramatic action and plot structure through which a story is told.

To achieve their objective (in service of their motivation), our character will need to overcome any number of obstacles. Let us say our scene partner is hesitant to share the watch, because they worry we will steal it.

Our character will need to try a number of tactics in order to get what they want. They may try yelling at the other person to scare them into giving them the watch. If that does not work, they might switch tactics, crying to make the other person feel bad for them.

During the scene study exercise, an actor may want to build up an arsenal of tactics that their character could employ in order to achieve their objective. By pursuing that objective with a variety of ever-changing tactics, the actor can deliver a more believable and specific performance. More importantly, that work can help their scene partner by (eventually) giving them a good reason to hand over the watch.

When watching a film or television show, it is worth thinking about this concept of tactics. It can be a helpful exercise to try and name exactly *how* the character is trying to get *what* they want, and to track how this changes across the course of a scene. Studying human interactions through this lens will help build up an arsenal of techniques for calling audiences to take action.

**Intention**

The actor in the hypothetical scene study has already answered a number of questions from their pushy acting coach, who is likely cloaked in a black, moth-bitten cardigan covered in flaky crumbs from a mid-afternoon croissant:

- *What* does the character want?
- *Why* do they want it?
- *How* are they going about getting it?

Next — in between swigs of room-temperature, black coffee — the teacher might ask, ’what is your character’s intention?’.

At this point, the hypothetical actor is likely to spin out into panic much like the first time they were asked about their motivation. After all, it was hard enough to make the razor-thin differentiation between objective and motivation. How is intention any different?

Intention is the connective tissue between motivation and tactic. If a character’s motivation is *why* they want a given objective, and the tactics represent *how* they are going about getting it, their intention is *how they think* they are going about getting it.

Now, this may feel like a layer of absurd and unnecessary complexity. But such complex absurdity is exactly what guides capricious humans in their everyday behaviour. Famed acting coach Konstantin Stanislavsky first introduced this idea of
a character’s intention being distended from their actions,9 coining the concept of subtext. It was that very idea of subtext that led to the rise of realism through the nuanced writing of playwrights like Anton Chekhov.10

This paper does not set out to recount theatre history, however. Rather, it seeks to highlight the importance of intention in creating realistic stories.

Humans sometimes lie — even to themselves — in pursuit of their objective. As a result, their actions may not fully reflect their authentic intentions. To create human-centred stories that feel believable, authentic and compelling, marketers must reconcile with this truth that humans are not always truthful.

It is no coincidence that the trend of ‘intent-based marketing’ is named exactly that, and the more a marketer can develop an understanding of how an audience’s intention might be detached from their behaviour, the stronger the marketer’s own tactics will be.

A great example of this appears in form of a pop-up on the website for a product called Rollworks. Placed on the web page to schedule a demo,11 the site launches a pop-up window when it detects exit intent: ‘Not ready to talk to sales? Watch a 5-minute Rollworks demo video to learn how it all works’ — a profoundly empathetic understanding of their audience’s intention.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER
So far, this paper has explored:

• cognitive processes that explain storytelling’s efficacy;
• the performing arts as a model for deepening storytelling skills; and
• four principles that emerge when going through a scene study exercise.

Now, how can marketers pull these concepts together and apply them in their work?

At a basic level, marketing teams (of one or 100) can borrow these concepts to create a shared vocabulary that centres emotional, human experiences. By building an ability to recognise the dynamics that actors work with every day, marketers can likewise build a capability for creating story-driven content that resonates with audiences.

Marketers can build content around characters — real or fictional — with which the audience can connect. While developing that content, marketers can ask themselves powerful questions to develop a more enriched story:

• What does this character want?
• Why does this character want it?
• What is standing in this character’s way?

This same line of enquiry can — and should — be applied to customer or audience personae. By asking these questions, marketers will not only deepen their customer empathy, but will be able to craft content with stories that are representative of their target audience.

Such enriched empathy is precisely what today’s marketers must learn from actors. They do not need to mimic the pageantry of Hollywood; however, they must adopt storytelling as a means to meaningful audience engagement.

References
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