THE ART OF THE NARRATIVE ARC

For years, storytelling has been the backbone of the best marketing campaigns. Now, as a surfeit of content drives engagement down and makes it difficult to be different, storytelling defines the marketer.

BY HAL CONICK
"You seem strategic," a manager told Rissa Reddan during a job interview, “but can you really execute an idea?"

Reddan, who worked as a marketing leader at PwC, listened to the question and realized she could answer with a story, something she had never done during a job interview.

“May I show you a picture?” she asked the manager.

“Sure,” he said.

Reddan reached into her bag and pulled out a photograph of herself. In the picture she is radiating an adrenalyzed smile, standing alongside a horse and a police officer. The trio stand just off a dirt road in Winter Park, Colorado, cars fanned out in a panicked formation behind them, another man in the background looking toward the ground.

“My husband and I were walking back from a music festival out in Winter Park, and this horse was running down Highway 40,” Reddan says she told the manager. “All the cars are stopped and everybody is looking at one another like, ‘What’s happening? What should we be doing?’ I’m standing there watching, and the horse comes around the corner. I step into the middle of the street and grab onto the bridle.” Reddan pauses her story, takes a breath and laughs. “I think that’s what it’s called; I don’t know anything about horses.”

The horse was bigger up close than Reddan imagined, but as she grabbed it, the horse slowed its gallop before faltering to a stop. “I was terrified,” she says. “I just felt like something needed to happen.”

As police officers and the horse’s owner arrived, Reddan’s husband snapped a photo of Reddan holding onto the horse as proof of the improbable moment. In the photo, her hand rests under the horse’s black mane, her body craned forward in a pose of astonishment. “Anybody could have stepped in to grab that horse,” Reddan says she told the manager. “But I was the one who did it. So I would say, yes, I am somebody who can take an idea and put it into practice or be the one to take some action.”

Weeks later, the manager offered Reddan a job. She worked as CMO of financial adviser Performance Trust Capital Partners for the next two and a half years.
Stories have long defined marketing. The story has been one of marketing’s best tools for building desire, interest and bonds with customers. Apple’s “1984” commercial is a classic example of the power of storytelling in marketing. The minute-long ad told the story of how Macintosh computers would free consumers from tyranny—something Apple Art Director Brent Thomas told The New York Times was “strictly a marketing position.” It was one hell of a marketing position: Apple aired the ad once during the 1984 Super Bowl and sold $3.5 million worth of computers the morning after and $155 million over the next 100 days, per David Lewis’ The Brain Sell: When Science Meets Shopping.

Just as stories have defined marketing, stories now define the careers of marketers, the people attempting to build desire and create bonds with consumers, managers and employers in a world awash with content.

The surfeit of content—tweets, videos, résumés, portfolios, blog posts, white papers, market research and inspirational speeches—has worn away the audience’s willingness to engage. A 2018 report by BuzzSumo finds that from 2015 to 2017, social sharing fell by 50%, even as the amount of content increased. However, a well-told story can stand outside the flood of content, engaging listeners and carrying a marketer’s message to the public. Think of the marketing stories that have stood time’s test: People still discuss Apple founder Steve Jobs’ keynote addresses, in which he mythologized newly created products—such as the now ubiquitous iPhone and iPad—as he introduced them. Nike’s Michael Jordan “Failure” commercial, a story told in 30 seconds and 44 words, is readily recited by anyone with hoop dreams: “I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over, and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”

Smart marketers have noticed the power of storytelling, but few marketers have become good storytellers, according to Storynomics: Story-Driven Marketing in the Post-Advertising World, a 2018 book written by Robert McKee, creative writing instructor of the “Story Seminar,” and Thomas Gerace, CEO of Skyword. “Story, like art and music, is a word you think you understand until you try to define it,” McKee and Gerace write.

Marketers and advertisers—even Super Bowl spenders—are often complacent with their limited definition of storytelling.
Most advertising campaigns lean on bragging and promising (McKee’s term for hard selling) coupled with a conflict-free, chronological narrative. Most corporate websites feature a carefully written history that reads as though the company were founded by improbably lucky businesspeople. Most speakers at marketing conferences tell stories of successful campaigns in data points rather than plot points. When the campaign bottoms out, the website gets no hits or the speaker puts the audience to sleep, McKee says, the storyteller blames the story.

“But what they don’t realize is that they didn’t tell a story, they told a narrative,” he says. “If they had told a true story, they would have seen the effect of it. It’s inevitable. There’s no avoiding it. But it requires a huge transition in thinking.”

Case in point: Research from Jennifer Aaker, a marketing professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business, found that 63% of people will recall a story, but only 5% will recall a single statistic. Put this stat in context (if you haven’t already forgotten it) by thinking back to your favorite stories: Were any of them read from a PowerPoint slide?

“Today’s CMOs must be change agents,” Gerace says. Marketers spend hundreds of billions of dollars on ad distribution, but many are losing faith in advertising’s ability to grab the attention of ever-distracted consumers. Stories, he says, will grab the attention lost by ads. “Today’s successful marketers will be folks that shift from ad-centric to story-centric marketing.”

This huge change in thinking—from bragging to storytelling—is summed up by McKee and Gerace in three words: Conflict changes life.

Conflict on the side of a dirt road in Colorado may not have changed Reddan’s life, but it certainly gave her a good story to tell. Before she learned how to tell a story, she would have answered a question like “Can you really execute an idea?” with a platitude like “I’m a go-getter.” Now, Reddan keeps the runaway-horse photo tucked into her folio, looking for her next chance to retell the tale. Reddan pulled out the photo during a recent truncated job interview with PayNet—an interviewer told Reddan he had a flight to catch—and immediately told her story. Later in the interview process the same man told Reddan he was telling the company great things about her. “I think you’d be a terrific add to the team,” Reddan says he told her. That company also offered Reddan a job as senior vice president; she started in April.

“When I have reached for a story versus saying ‘Let me tell you about the 57 facts on my résumé,’ the story has resonated more,” Reddan says. Reddan’s anecdote is bolstered by research from New York University psychology professor Jerome Brume, who found that facts wrapped in stories are 22 times more memorable than facts alone. Marketers who clothe facts in story will benefit, McKee says, as the story format allows marketers to contextualize the facts. “If you don’t tell them the story that you want them to hear, they will ‘storify’ it their own way, which may not be persuasive for you,” McKee says.

Why Stories Matter and How They Work

Scott Whitehair didn’t plan to make a business of storytelling—it was 2013, and Whitehair loved stories so much that he ran events where his friends and neighbors could spin yarns in front of an intimate crowd—but one day, Whitehair’s phone rang.

“We found you through your website,” a nonprofit executive said to Whitehair.

“You did?” Whitehair replied, slightly confused. He had been telling stories publicly and coaching others in Chicago’s tight-knit storytelling community, but he wasn’t sure how a business could find him—his website was a tangled mess.

“Yes, the exec said. “Do you coach sales teams?”

“Of course, yes,” Whitehair said, even though he had never coached a sales team.

Whitehair still shakes his head in disbelief when retelling the story of his first call from a business. “I worked with people who want to tell stories to their family and socially and on stage,” Whitehair says, “But [after that call], it clicked for me that this stuff is useful anywhere people communicate.” Whitehair researched the business he’d be coaching, scribbled down everything he knew about storytelling and coached his first group of employees on the art of the story.

Five years later, Whitehair is a full-time storytelling coach, a fantasy job for an English major and storytelling hobbyist. He has coached at corporations (Johnson & Johnson, BlueCross BlueShield and PwC), nonprofits (Chicago Cares, Rady Children’s Hospital - San Diego, Boston Children’s Hospital) and universities (Northwestern University, DePaul University, University of Chicago Booth School of Business). Whitehair
spends a lot of time working with businesses, but he doesn’t spend any time wondering why a business would want employees to learn storytelling. “It bypasses the skeptical mind,” Whitehair says. “If I tried to tell you about all my values, how I was raised ... it would take 10 or 15 minutes. Or, I could tell you a story about finding a wallet full of cash in front of my apartment and how I took all day to track this guy down. He had a very common name, but I found him through Facebook and gave his wallet back. At the end of that story, you know about my values.”

Sharing values through storytelling succeeds, Whitehair says, because people want to work with people, not ideas. This ability to relate to others can be critical to a career, according to research from Lauren Rivera, associate professor of management and organizations at Northwestern’s Kellogg School of Management. Rivera conducted two years of interviews with hiring professionals at 120 large companies and found that the most common way interviewees were judged for a job was by their similarity to the interviewer.

One professional told Rivera that potential employees must be able to pass the “stranded in the airport test,” which asks, “Would I want to be stuck in an airport in a snowstorm with them? And if I’m on a business trip for two days and I have to have dinner with them, is this the kind of person I enjoy hanging with?” Rivera called another common interview test “looking glass merit;” interviewers defined merit by their personal sense of worth and goodness, using themselves as the standard bearers, judging interviewees thusly. “Because these firms leave a lot of discretion to evaluators—‘I want you to pick somebody that’s driven!’—but they don’t tell you what drive looks like, people end up defining it in their own image,” Rivera told Kellogg Insight.

Interviewees can’t know the merits or personality of a person they’ve never met, but they can use stories to relate to interviewers as human beings instead of potential employees. Esther Choy—the woman who coached Reddan on storytelling, president and chief story facilitator at the Leadership Story Lab and author of *Let the Story Do the Work: The Art of Storytelling for Business Success*—says most people banter with and talk past one another, but very few people communicate well. When they learn how to tell stories, they’re learning how to captivate and communicate, all while sharing memorable truths about themselves. The standard reaction from new storytellers, Choy says, is, “Wow, people finally understand what I’m saying.”
A good story is like riding a rollercoaster, says Carl Marci, chief neuroscientist at Nielsen Holdings PLC. A good story has moments of tension and release built throughout the beginning, middle and end, just as a good rollercoaster clacks upward before dropping down, speeding along and clacking back up again for the next drop—every good story has the tension of the climb and the emotional release of the drop. The brain reacts to a poorly told story or a set of data points as if it were an uninspired firework display: “You get a little pop of attention early, but then engagement falls off,” Marci says.

Getting the listener’s brain to pay attention is tough, he says, whether working on a campaign or speaking at a conference. Distractions are everywhere: A social media marketer must compete with 330 million Twitter users, just as a conference speaker must compete with the glow of smartphone screens. “We’re pretty taxed when it comes to attention,” he says. And attention is just step one of engagement.

Step two, Marci says, is conflict. This is an ingredient that changes a story from good to great by going beyond tension and release to give the listener themes, stories and relatable characters. When listeners can relate to a character, they feel empathy. Put that empathetic character into a surprising, thematic dilemma—wanting peace while at war, longing for love while experiencing hatred, wishing for freedom while held in captivity—and you’ve gone a long way toward activating the emotional and memory circuitry in the listener’s brain, which Marci says is essential for the third and most difficult step: creating an emotional response that forms new memories.

This step—the payoff—is why you’ll remember every detail of your favorite childhood story but forget every detail of the PowerPoint presentation you heard yesterday. It’s likely a big reason why Reddan received a glowing recommendation from the manager she spoke with for 15 minutes. “We can’t act on something in the future unless it stays with us,” Marci says. “The key is that big emotional payoff at the end.”

The emotional payoff chemically bonds us to a brand, a character or an interviewee. As a great story develops, the brain releases oxytocin, a hormone responsible for empathy and narrative transportation, according to research from Paul Zak, director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University. When the brain synthesizes oxytocin, Zak writes “people
are more trustworthy, generous, charitable and compassionate.” Oxytocin is why great stories often leave us feeling exhilarated, ready to change our own lives, but it’s also why narratives without conflict are instantly forgotten.

“How many times have you left a movie saying, ‘I want to do something differently in my life?’” Whitehair says. “I’ve been there. But if you’d gone into the theater and they just flashed bullet points at you, would you leave and say, ‘I should do the thing the bullet points said?’”

If this all sounds difficult, that’s because it is, McKee says. But that’s good news. All marketers can improve the way they tell stories. The human brain may want to take the easy way by bragging and promising, McKee says, but that doesn’t take listeners on a twisting, looping rollercoaster ride. It leaves them watching the hiss, fizzle and whimper of an underwhelming firework display.

**The Pattern of Well-told Stories**

When Allen Gannett was a child, he spent hours finding the pattern of the artificial intelligence in computer games, working until the games were effortlessly beatable and exceedingly boring. “I’ve always been a tinkerer,” he says, pausing his story to ask a waitress to bring a straw for his iced coffee (“Gotta protect those teeth,” says Gannett, who has tinkered his way out of extrinsic stains).

As a teenager, Gannett badly wanted to appear on a game show. He methodically applied to dozens of auditions and was quickly called for an audition on “Wheel of Fortune,” a show he had never watched. Gannett binged on episodes, trying to figure out what contestants had in common. “I realized that there’s a certain way they enunciate that works really well on TV and they’re all really silly, but they’re actually not good at solving puzzles,” Gannett says. “I practiced, I drank a lot of espresso, killed the audition and got on ‘Wheel of Fortune.’”

Gannett lost, but he kept searching for patterns and applying to game shows, appearing on “Movers & Changers,” an MTV take on “Shark Tank” that has since been deleted entirely from MTV’s website. Gannett didn’t win “Movers & Changers” either, but at 19 years old, he formed a hypothesis: There’s a pattern to everything, including stories.

Now, Gannett is 27 and runs TrackMaven, a marketing analytics firm with clients such as GE, Honda and Saks Fifth Avenue. He’s also written a book, *The Creative Curve: How the Intersection of the Familiar and the Unknown Leads to Breakout Success*.

The title of Gannett’s book offers a peek into what he believes to be the pattern of the story and all creative endeavors: The familiar and the unknown intersect and become something new. Stories have narrative arcs and character archetypes that have existed for centuries, but life is always offering new twists, situations and technologies that can be combined with the classic arcs and archetypes. The existing patterns of stories allow people who may not consider themselves creative—businesspeople, numbers people, methodical tinkerers—to be storytellers, too, so long as they’re willing to try something new.

Gannett leans forward; he’s a super-liberal, he says, but he employs a practice from Steve Bannon, former chairman of Breitbart News and former White House chief strategist for President Donald Trump, that perfectly underlines the importance of story patterns. When Bannon ran Breitbart, a far-right news and opinion website, he said he used narrative arcs for each news story. “Paul Ryan is the globalist, and Donald Trump is the savior, Hillary Clinton is going to prison,” Gannett says. “They follow these arcs and they’re telling lots of stories. Content is coming out on these longer narrative arcs people can follow along and come back to.” Breitbart went from attracting 3% of news readers in 2014 to 9% of news readers in 2016, according to FiveThirtyEight. “They bring you back in,” Gannett says. “Otherwise, why should we come back to your website, your channel or your brand if it’s just one random piece of content?”

Despite the rapidity of modern media, Gannett says people still want content they can follow episodically—think of the popularity of serialized podcasts such as “S-Town,” which was downloaded 10 million times in four days. Gannett wants to give people something both familiar and unfamiliar as they follow him online. If TrackMaven releases something familiar like a white paper, a few people may read it, but if Gannett does something unfamiliar, like a silly video on LinkedIn that tells the white paper as a story, he believes the information will resonate with the audience. “It brings people into my story and my company’s story,” Gannett says. “There are consistent characters in my story, there are tropes, there are inside jokes. People get latched into that.”
A story has eight stages, according to McKee and Gerace’s Storynomics:

1. **Find the target audience.** Who should the story emotionally affect? GE targeted potential employees with its “What’s the Matter With Owen” campaign, which followed a young software developer who explains to confused friends and family that he has been hired by GE to write code that matters to the real world. The campaign increased job applications by 800%, per the company.

2. **The protagonist needs a core value,** a prime principle.

3. **An inciting incident occurs.** An unforeseen event must upset the protagonist’s balance. What happens when their core value is tested? Think Tom Hanks being marooned on an island in “Cast Away,” or turning from a child to an adult in “Big,” or needing to find Private Ryan in “Saving Private Ryan.”

4. **The protagonist longs for an object of desire to restore balance.** What does the character want? Kurt Vonnegut once wrote that you must “Make your hopes will push her toward the object of desire. This may be clumsy, like Tommy killing Billy Batts in “Goodfellas,” or it may be inspiring, like Rocky beating up a side of beef in “Rocky.”

5. **The protagonist makes a tactical choice she hopes will push her toward the object of desire.** This may be clumsy, like Tommy killing Billy Batts in “Goodfellas,” or it may be inspiring, like Rocky beating up a side of beef in “Rocky.”

6. **The tactical choice fails.** A gap opens between what the protagonist thought would happen and reality. (Damn, you mean you shouldn’t rage-kill a made mobster?)

7. **The protagonist makes a crisis choice.** Does she use insight gleaned from the first choice to make a more informed, more difficult tactical choice? “Goodfellas” protagonist Henry Hill knows his time in the mob is over. Does he risk death or go into a witness protection program?

8. **Closure, the payoff.** The character’s insightful choice brings the story to an end. Cinderella marries the prince. The audience leaves hepped up on oxytocin.

Marketers who are unaccustomed to telling stories may look at these stages—a character who fails?—and get nervous. McKee and Gerace say marketers have “negaphobia,” a fear of showing their conflicts and failures, but McKee says that marketers need to get over negaphobia and start thinking in conflict. Remember: their definition of story is “conflict changes life;” no conflict, no story. “Marketers must be willing to recognize the negative side of life and dramatize it,” McKee says. “Things go wrong. There are negatives all along the way; they’re essential in story. If [marketers] can’t [realize] that, they’ll never tell stories. It starts with a recognition of that positive-negative dynamic, the conflict of life that’s underneath the surface.”

In marketing, failure and conflict should look different than Hollywood’s dramatic deaths and life-shattering events. Nationwide CMO Matt Jauchius produced a story-based Super Bowl ad in 2015 that featured narration from a little boy who dies in the span of the 40-second spot. The ad was designed to save lives by warning of the danger of child accidents, Jauchius told AdAge, but it left consumers feeling sad and cold—a multimillion-dollar insurance payout can’t make up for the loss of a child. Within months, Jauchius left the company.

Instead of using severe conflict, marketers can use conflict and failure as obstacles in the way of success. One of Choy’s clients won business after a moment of vulnerability. They asked a potential client, “Do you struggle with this?” After a nod from the listener, Choy’s client followed with, “Well, we do too.” Reddan melded conflict into a video testimonial campaign by asking clients “What was your hesitation in working with us?” followed by “What got you over that hurdle?” The result was an unvarnished look at the biggest hurdle any company faces: winning over a client. “You weren’t getting a polished talking head,” Reddan says. “You were getting a real client account of what they value.”

Gannett understands why conflict makes marketers nervous. “It’s really risky,” he says. “Some stories don’t work even if you plan really well.” However, Gannett says marketers who continue to use outdated content strategies will stunt their professional growth and hurt their companies. Marketers who send a higher volume of the same content through e-mail and social media will get the same response rate and burn out their followers in the process, all without developing a knack for storytelling. Marketers who long for a job at a prestigious company or to be the CMO of the next big startup while only speaking in facts, boasts and promises will fail the “stranded in the airport test” and get used to hearing the phrase “just not the right fit.”

“It’s easy to be right down the middle and not take risks,” Gannett says. “There are a lot of people who have loss aversion and a lot of corporate environments that don’t reward failure.” By focusing on stories, marketers are accepting failure of the old
“Any story that shows a mistake you’ve made also shows that you’re still standing there. You have overcome it. The act of telling that story is a strength. It’s you saying, ‘I’ve learned from it, and I’ve moved past it.’”