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[chapter x]

Success Stories: How Marketing Managers Can Leverage the Psychology of Narratives

Jennifer Edson Escalas

In this chapter, I advocate that marketers use narratives as part of a brand's positioning strategy and in their advertising campaigns, because stories are able to persuade, create meaning, and demonstrate product usage experiences. More importantly, stories are able to involve, captivate, and entertain consumers, which is critical in today's marketplace, with ubiquitous advertising and the rise of social media. I begin with a discussion of narratives in general, focusing on the specific aspects of stories that make them useful to marketers. Next, I explore the role of narratives in branding and advertising. I propose that marketers can use narratives to construct a compelling brand biography to create emotional connections to brands and serve as a guide for an integrated marketing communication program. This is followed by a discussion of narrative advertising, which can generate emotion, is persuasive, and models the way products may be used. Finally, I discuss specific reasons why a narrative approach to marketing can reap benefits in social media-based marketing campaigns.

Narratives

Scholars in psychology who study narratives use the analogy of science and literature to propose two different modes of thought: the rigorous world of logical deduction, labeled paradigmatic thought, and the imprecise world of aesthetic intentions, labeled narrative thought ([Bruner, 1986](#)). Narrative thought creates stories that are coherent accounts of particular experiences,

temporally structured, and context sensitive ([Baumeister & Newman, 1994](#)). The narrative mode of thought does not necessitate that individuals form elaborate, complex novels in their minds. Rather, under conditions of narrative processing, people think about incoming information as if they were trying to create a story. In day to day living, individuals continuously attempt to impose narrative structure on occurrences in order to understand them. They do not experience life as a random series of unrelated events, but rather as a comprehensible, meaningful chronology.

The Structure of Narratives

What makes a story a story? An important aspect of narrative thought is its structure. This structure consists of two important elements: chronology and causality. First, narrative thought organizes events in terms of a temporal dimension; things occur over time. The human perception of time is configured as episodes, whereas time in reality is an undifferentiated, continuous flow. The general objective of narrative thought is to achieve closure by framing episodes with a beginning, middle, and end, and this is considered to be the fundamental way in which human events are understood ([Kerby, 1991](#); [Polkinghorne, 1991](#)). For example, think about a movie or novel that is presented in a series of complex flashbacks. The satisfaction of comprehension occurs when one is able to understand the underlying temporal order of events. This is the point where the story begins to “make sense” to the reader or audience member.

Second, narrative thought structures elements into an organized framework that establishes relationships between a story’s elements and allows for causal inferencing. Narrative story organization revolves around general knowledge about human goal-oriented action

sequences. Episode schemas are one way to characterize narrative structure ([Pennington & Hastie, 1986; 1992](#)), representing a standard sequence of events in both the real world and in stories. In an episode schema, an event, or series of events, initiates a psychological reaction and activates goals in a main character. The goals may be formulated in response to the initial event or may be preexisting goals that are activated by the initial event. The protagonist's psychological state and goals provide reasons for his/her subsequent actions. These actions, in turn, lead to an outcome or result. Accompanying physical states may be the main character's state at the time of the initiating events or the result of the initiating events and may also contribute to the activation of mental states or goals. Because these narrative elements are organized through time, causal inferences can be made. What happens in time one (for example, the protagonist feels jealous) causes what happens in time two (he kills his rival).

The Function of Narrative Thought

In order to make sense of what goes on in the world, people naturally think about things, people, and events in the form of narratives. By constructing stories, individuals organize their experiences, create order, explain unusual events, gain perspective, and make evaluations (Bruner, 1990). Narratives place events into framing contexts so that the parts can be understood in relation to the whole. For example, the meaning of an event is the result of its being a part of a plot ([Polkinghorne, 1991](#)). As a result of this emplotment, people can make meaningful evaluations ([Pennington & Hastie, 1992](#)), form judgments ([Gergen & Gergen, 1988](#)), and inform action (Olson, 1990). Understanding experienced events as part of a narrative also makes them memorable and sharable (Olson, 1990).

Many scholars now assert that people naturally tend to think about and interpret the world around them through narrative thought ([Bruner, 1986](#); 1990; [Kerby, 1991](#)). Narrative is the mode of thought that best captures the experiential aspect of human intention, action, and consequences; it involves reasons and goals (Reissman, 1993). The narrative process is so pervasive that people spontaneously create stories to explain the random movement of colored rectangles, attributing causality to the movement (Michotte, 1963, in [Hermans, 1996](#)). [Bruner \(1986\)](#) suggests a genetic proclivity for narrative. He proposes that the reason people have no early infancy memories is that they are unable to organize events in narrative form at that stage of development.

Thus, the human mind can be thought of as a creative story-builder. Forming stories is an ongoing process; people fit characters and episodes together in a narrative form to render the world and their lives meaningful. As story-builders, people do not record the world but rather create it, mixing in cultural and individual expectations, and combining sensory input and preexisting knowledge ([Chafe, 1990](#)). Narratives are also a social and cultural construction. They are influenced by the social setting in which a person exists ([Kerby, 1991](#)). The stories that people tell one another are determined, in part, both by shared language and the genre of storytelling inherited from traditions (Olson, 1990).

Story Quality

Beyond the basic structure of narrative, other theories have identified story characteristics that contribute to a narrative's quality. These characteristics answer the question, "what makes a *good* story?" Clearly, there are many theories about narrative quality. Here, I outline three

approaches to understanding what makes a compelling story. All three study story quality from the perspective that a good story is one that increases one's mental engagement in the story and evokes an emotional response.

First, Bruner (1986) proposes two dimensions to narrative: the landscape of action and the landscape of consciousness. The former is the causal sequence of events, while the latter is the degree to which the viewer is made aware of the protagonist's psychological state. The landscape of action consists of events that are visible to the casual observer: the initiating event, resulting action(s), and outcome(s). The landscape of consciousness allows the reader/viewer to "get inside the head" of the story's character(s). The audience learns what the character is thinking and feeling. There is an emphasis on attitudes, motivations, goals, and personal development. Whereas a landscape of action is necessary for any narrative, a landscape of consciousness has been shown to make a narrative more compelling. Readers make more inferences and exert a greater effort to construct an interpretation when a story has a well-developed landscape of consciousness (Feldman, Bruner, Renderer, & Spitzer, 1990). Thus a story with both a landscape of action and consciousness is a better story than one that contains only a landscape of action.

Another aspect of narrative that has been identified as a contributor to a story's quality is based on the idea of an evaluative slope. [Gergen and Gergen \(1988\)](#) theorize that the dramatic engagement of a narrative depends on the evaluative slope of the story, which represents the events in a story, evaluated over time (as it occurs in the narrative) for the degree to which they improve or worsen the state of the protagonist. Stories that have a steep incline or decline in their evaluative slope and those that alternate in sign (e.g., rising, falling, then rising again) evoke the most emotion. The classical tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, is an example of a narrative with rapidly

deteriorating events, from the perspective of the protagonist. Gergen and Gergen would contend that this steep downward evaluative slope creates drama and generates emotion.

Finally, a narrative imbalance has also been shown to improve a story's quality ([Lucariello, 1990](#); Feldman et al., 1990). This imbalance can take the form of a breach in canonical expectations about how people should behave or how stories should unfold (e.g., throwing water on birthday cake candles breaches one's cultural expectations about birthday party behavior). Narratives often pay attention to unusual events, with the goal of explaining such events in a way that conforms to accepted standards. A narrative imbalance can also be tension between story elements, such as actions that fail to achieve goals (e.g., the love of Romeo and Juliet fails to bring them and their feuding families together). These narrative imbalances lead to increased elaboration by readers as they attempt to explain the imbalance ([Lucariello, 1990](#); Feldman et al., 1990).

Narratives and Persuasion

Marketers are in the business of improving consumers' attitudes towards their products, that is, the persuasion business. Narrative processing has been shown to affect persuasion through a process called transportation, defined as "immersion into a text" (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 702; see also Gerrig, 1994). Most marketers are aware of persuasion theories based on analytical thought, where, "elaboration leads to attitude change via logical consideration and evaluation of arguments" (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 702). In these models, the amount of thought given to the persuasive stimulus affects which message components will be most effective at changing attitudes and how long such changes will persist.

However, narrative processing is different from analytical processing. When a person thinks in the form of a story, he or she may be “transported” by the narrative. Transportation leads to persuasion through reduced negative cognitive responding (that is, less counterarguing), realism of experience, and strong affective responses ([Green & Brock, 2000](#)). When a person thinks in the form of a story, he or she may be “transported” by the narrative, which enhances persuasion without increasing critical evaluation of the message ([Escalas, 2007](#)). Narrative transportation affects brand evaluation and persuasion through several mechanisms. First, strong feelings associated with the story may be transferred to the attitude object ([Escalas, 2007](#)). Second, the scenes presented in the text (or visually in the case of a movie or advertisement) evoke imagery that links the experience of entering the narrative world to the meaning of the story, building beliefs about the characters and objects presented in the story ([Escalas, 2004b](#); [Green & Brock, 2002](#)). Furthermore, transportation makes a narrative experience feel more real, and because real experiences can strongly influence attitudes ([Fazio & Zanna, 1981](#); [Green & Brock, 2000](#)), narrative processing can also have a strong influence on attitudes.

Capitalizing on Narrative Research

With this background on how people naturally think in terms of stories to make sense of the world around them, I now move on to the practical implications of this information for marketers. It makes sense for marketers to speak to consumers in the language they understand, the language they use to interpret incoming information and communicate with others.

Consumers use stories to understand their personal experiences, with people and the world around them, which includes products and brands. Furthermore, we now know a bit about what

makes a story captivating and persuasive, so we should be able to apply this knowledge towards creating compelling marketing campaigns.

Brand Biographies

Consumers value products and brands for different reasons. One reason may be for a product's instrumental features or attributes, which provide tangible benefits (e.g., cars provide transportation and salt adds flavor to food). A second major reason is that, in some cases, consumers form an emotional connection with products or brands so that these products come to signify more than just the sum of their features. As an example of special meaning, many people become particularly attached to their first car. The car provides freedom and independence; it is part of a rite of passage into adulthood. Important memories become associated with the car, for example, going to the prom or high school graduation. In many cases, the brand of car acquires special meanings for the consumer and he or she exhibits brand loyalty, continuing to buy that brand well into the future.

Brand equity research often refers to the value of a brand being derived from its associations, symbols, or meanings (Keller, 1993; Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1988). Strong brands are those that form an emotional connection with consumers, going beyond functional product features and benefits. These brands symbolize characteristics that consumers believe are important to them personally. How are emotional connections formed? How does symbolic meaning become associated with a brand? One mechanism is through the construction of narratives or stories. Research has shown that brand stories can present brand images that consumers integrate with their personal brand experiences, building a special, emotional

connection between the self and the brand ([Escalas, 2004b](#)). When consumers have a self-brand connection, then the company behind the brand can gain an enduring competitive advantage. Although competitors may easily copy a positively regarded product attribute or feature, a self-brand connection creates a bond that may be difficult to break.

The brand biography is an unfolding story that chronicles the brand's origins, experiences, and evolution over time (Paharia et al., forthcoming). These stories are constructed by managers to create a brand's personality, symbolism, and meaning. For example, Nike is a strong brand whose marketing communications revolve around a well-crafted brand biography. While some attention may occasionally be paid to features and benefits, the bigger picture in Nike ads revolves around a story of hard work, sweat, and perseverance; the result of the story is that Nike enables people to achieve their very best. Thus, Nike's story is about enabling consumers to achieve their personal quest for excellence. This story resonates with Nike's target consumers, who are athletic, fitness conscious individuals. Using Nike sports gear, the consumer can build his/her own personal story of accomplishment. Nike is now more than a bundle of high tech sports features. It is connected to the consumer's ideal self; the brand represents hard work that leads to personal accomplishment. Even consumers who are not athletic or fitness conscious can use this meaning from Nike's brand biography to communicate an idealized image of themselves to others. Thus, Nike's brand biography has a clear plot where the brand plays a role in actions that lead to favorable outcomes, it reflects the history and culture of the brand, it models how consumers can use the brand, and it even allows the consumer to become part of the narrative. Nike's brand story is the centerpiece of its entire marketing communication strategy.

In addition to the brand story creating meaning through narrative context, a well-crafted brand biography can help the brand be perceived of as authentic, despite the increasingly

skeptical consumer of our modern age. Brand heritage has been identified as one driver of brand authenticity. Heritage is a function of a brand having a relevant and engaging brand story. Authenticity is about practicing what one preaches; being totally clear about who one is and what one does best. When a brand's rhetoric gets out of sync with customers' actual experiences, the brand's integrity and future persuasiveness suffers. Thus, the brand story must be believable and compelling enough to convince consumers to suspend disbelief about the brand's fundamentally commercial nature in order to be considered authentic ([Grayson and Martinec, 2004](#)).

Advertising Narratives

Many advertisements tell stories. Most often, an ad is a self-contained narrative. For example, the “Priceless” campaign by MasterCard has all the narrative elements in an episode schema. In a recent instantiation of this campaign, the initiating event shows some people in front of a scenic overlook, which inspires them to take pictures. The main character, a blond man, pulls out his camera to take a picture. The narrator describes the camera, including its price. The secondary characters, an African-American couple, pulls out their camera, which the narrator describes as being exactly the same as the first camera, but was bought online for thirty percent less. This causes concern in the protagonist, who breaks the “fourth wall” between the actors and the audience, and begins talking to the narrator. The action begins when the protagonist is so distracted by the narrator’s information that he falls off the cliff the group is photographing. The narrator describes each ensuing action by how much the remedies will cost (ibuprophen, x-ray, and chiropractor). The other couple takes their pictures (accomplishing the goal, which the protagonist is unable to complete, due to the complicating actions of falling off the cliff). In the

end, the protagonist is uninjured, but the actual outcome is that MasterCard marketplace is a cheaper way to shop, which is “priceless.”

In addition to ads that are complete stories in and of themselves, ad campaigns can have varying degrees of storytelling. For example, some ad campaigns tell the same basic story over and over again with different characters and in different settings. In addition to the MasterCard campaign mentioned above, Aleve uses this structure in its ads for its pain killer. In each ad, the protagonist is a hard working individual who suffers from arthritis. He/she used to need many doses of other pain relief medicine to make it through the day, but with Aleve he/she is able to take just two pills in the morning and work pain free for the entire day. The characters may be cowboy hat manufacturers, electricians, or seamstresses, but the narrator is always a caring loved-one.

Other ad campaigns tell ongoing stories in serial form. These are the melodramas of advertising. Again, there are varying degrees of this structure. The quintessential continuing story campaign was that of Taster’s Choice in the 1980s. These ads were nearly soap operas, with each successive ad building on the story-line presented in the last ad (or episode). The ads all ended on a suspenseful note: for example, what will happen to the couple who fell in love over Taster’s Choice coffee when the woman’s ex-husband appears on the scene? The success of the Taster’s Choice campaign has led to other continuing story campaigns, including Hallmark cards (a young woman tries to teach her boyfriend the importance of looking at the back of cards) and Nissan’s Seven Days in a Sentra campaign (comedian Marc Horowitz spent a week living out of his Sentra automobile).

While these examples of storied advertisements show some variety, they all contain the basic narrative elements of chronology and causality. The definition of a narrative ad is simply

an ad that tells a story. The extent to which an ad tells a story, however, is a matter of degree (Mick, 1987). Some ads may not have all the elements required to be a story. Others may focus on what happens but not why. Others may not allow viewers into the hearts and minds of the characters. Thus, the narrative structure of advertising runs along a continuum, with completely non-narrative ads on one end, and well-developed, complete, and moving stories on the other end.

Narrative ads have been studied by some consumer researchers looking at drama in advertising, which I would argue is synonymous with the definition of narrative ads presented in this chapter. Deighton, Romer and McQueen (1989) find that drama advertising affects persuasion by evoking feelings and by verisimilitude, which they operationalize as drawing the viewer into the ad and the ad being perceived with authenticity. Dramatic ads work by generating affect, personally involving the viewer in the ad, and appearing to be realistic or believable stories. Stern (1994) theorizes that classical dramas are persuasive because they provide consumers with a coherent cause-effect progression. In response, consumers are able to make causal attributions about the product/person/situation interaction. Additionally, she claims that classical dramas work through empathy. Consumers are actively drawn into classical dramas and therefore experience affective reactions. This is consistent with Green and Brock's (2000) transportation theory of persuasion described above.

Story Quality in Advertisements

Although many advertisements tell stories, some ads tell “better” stories than others. The MasterCard ad described above is likely be judged as a better story than many story ads that

demonstrate simple product usage scenarios. For example, a typical pain relief product ad shows a character in pain (the initial event, or the result of some other initial event). To solve this problem, the character uses the pain relief product (goal and action). The outcome is a happy, pain-free protagonist. Even though this ad is in the form of a story, it is not very compelling.

Why is one advertising narrative better than another? The answer is, for the same reason that one story is more compelling than another. Providing the consumer with a landscape of consciousness is one way that an advertising narrative can be more interesting and entertaining. When people are able to relate to a character's thoughts and feelings and observe personal development, they are more likely to be drawn into the ad story. Furthermore, ads that evoke emotion can move or touch consumers in a personal way. Gergen and Gergen's (1988) research on dramatic engagement suggests that an advertising narrative in which the protagonist's situation rapidly improves or worsens or alternates between the two should be especially good at generating feelings responses in consumers.

Another aspect of ad story quality is the extent to which the ad is novel. Story ads with a narrative imbalance should be more interesting and provocative than those that conform too rigidly to expectations. Additionally, ads that follow repetitive story-lines may become abstractions to consumers. Rather than focusing on the particular events, the story may be perceived as mechanistic. Narrative research has shown that scripts score low on measures of story quality ([Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981](#)). Therefore, overdependence on the use of story "formulas" may eliminate the benefits of advertising narratives. However, if a story ad is too novel, or if it departs from expectations too much, then the advertiser may sacrifice ease of understanding ([Mandler, 1984](#)). People have expectations about how stories will unfold, and too

large a breach in those expectations can lead to incomprehensibility, particularly in a 30-60 second ad.

Story quality has a direct impact on the extent to which narrative transportation occurs, with higher quality stories leading to more transportation and therefore more persuasion (Green, Garst, and Brock, 2004). Consumer research finds that complex advertising narratives lead to higher levels of transportation and greater persuasion due to the consumer's deployment of more cognitive and imaginative resources (Nielsen & Escalas, 2010). Studies found that consumers are willing to invest more resources to understand a difficult-to-read story, which in real-life settings may be highly complex. This idea is consistent with psychological research on story quality, which treats high-quality stories as those that evoke more processing effort. The underlying assumption is that a complex, thought-provoking story is considered a good story. Again, the caveat with advertising is that the ad must be comprehensible in a thirty to sixty second time frame.

Priming Narrative Thought Using Advertising

There are a variety of methods by which an ad can invoke narrative thought. Ads may be presented to consumers in the form of a story, which is likely to prime narrative processing of the ad. For example, a recent Fed Ex commercial shows an employee explaining to his boss that he has solved the company's shipping problem using carrier pigeons. He shows the boss the extremely large pigeons developed for heavy packages, however, the birds drop their packages on cars below them, wreaking havoc on the city. The ad concludes with the boss telling the employee to use Fed Ex to solve the problem. The fact that the ad is in the form of a story may

prime the ad viewer to think in narrative form, processing the ad's events in keeping with the episode schema presented above, by piecing the elements together over time and focusing on causality. Or the individual may be drawn into the story, imagining him/herself as the employee or perhaps even as the boss, and experiencing the story events through that character's perspective. Or, the consumer may relate the externally presented story to a personal story and begin to think in a self-generated, narrative way about the shipping problems at their workplace or even just general shipping problems (e.g., with online shopping or sending of gifts). In the first case, the ad is processed narratively, but the story is external to the ad viewer. The interaction is quite distant. In the second case, the viewer is drawn into the story, becoming personally caught up in the events. Self-referencing occurs as the viewer imagines him/herself to be one of the characters. In this third case, the external narrative provides what can be considered a narrative shell or script; it provides an initial narrative direction or starting point for self-generated thought.

Another way in which advertising can elicit narrative thought is by directly encouraging self-generated narratives, for example stimulating autobiographical memories or mental simulation of product use. Both autobiographical memories and mental simulations are usually in the form of stories ([Polkinghorne, 1991](#); [Fiske, 1993](#)). Here, rather than presenting a complete story, the ad may present songs or images designed to evoke memories of the past ([Sujan, Bettman, & Baumgartner, 1993](#)), or the ad may be filmed from the first person perspective, encouraging imaginings about the future ([Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1996](#); [Escalas, 2004a](#)). Ads also present direct exhortations to think about the past (e.g., "Remember the times of your life," for Kodak film) or to imagine the future (e.g., "Imagine yourself in a Mercury"). Thus, ads may

prime mental simulation and autobiographical memory retrieval indirectly with images, music, and so forth, or directly with specific instructions or cues for the consumer to follow.

What Advertising Narratives Can Do for Ad Responses

Based on the assertion that advertising narratives prime narrative thought, there are a variety of ways in which ads that tell stories can affect consumers. First, narrative advertisements can influence viewers' cognitive responses. They may be able to capture a viewer's attention and draw him/her into an ad, leading to transportation. Narrative transportation can be the result of an interesting and relevant plot, a familiar setting, or characters with whom the viewer can relate (Escalas, Moore, & Britton, 2004). Similarly, advertising narratives can enhance character identification. Research has shown that the quality of a story in general leads to increased elaboration by the readers or listeners (Feldman et al., 1990). Ad viewers will engage in the cognitive activities necessary to comprehend the story, such as establishing relationships among the narrative elements and developing causal inferences. This increased elaboration is likely to result in better recall about the ad and the brand.

Narrative thought also leads to emotional responses. In advertising research, four types of feelings have been identified as capturing the majority of affective responses to ads: upbeat feelings, warm feelings, uneasy feelings, and disinterested feelings (Goodstein, Edell, & Moore, 1990). On the one hand, upbeat feelings, warm feelings, and uneasy feelings have been shown to be positively related to narrative structure: a compelling story can be favorably received when it has a happy ending, evokes compassion for characters, or even makes one uneasy due to a downward sloping evaluative slope (Escalas, Moore, & Britton, 2004). These emotions are

linked to positive brand evaluations. On the other hand, narrative thought has been shown to be negatively related to disinterested feelings, which lead to negative brand evaluations. As narrative structure improves, story quality improves, and hence subjects may be more interested in the ad, rather than distancing themselves and becoming skeptical ([Escalas et al., 2004](#)).

Through transportation, advertising narratives and narrative responses in consumers should have an impact on attitudes towards the ad itself and the brand being advertised. Story ads are often judged to be good ads (with correspondingly high attitudes towards the ad) because stories are an interesting and entertaining form of communication. Furthermore, narrative thought may provide a more enjoyable form of processing. These factors may favorably influence consumers' assessments of story ads. Favorable attitudes towards an ad have been shown to influence attitudes towards the advertised brand positively (see [Brown & Stayman, 1992](#)). As discussed above, narrative transportation leads to persuasion, that is, favorable brand attitudes. First, transportation leads to positive emotions that may be transferred to the brand. Second, transported individuals do not engage in criticism of the ad and brand. Third, consumers may understand and appreciate the way that the brand is to be used based on an advertising narrative, building favorable beliefs about the brand. These are especially powerful if the ad evokes vivid imagery and realistic experiences.

Finally, given that people naturally create meaning based on stories, it is logical to assume that advertising narratives will help to create brand meaning for consumers. Narrative research has shown that people are very good at establishing the relationship between story elements and extrapolating meaning ([Carr, 1986](#); [Polkinghorne, 1991](#)). Thus, a story ad that provides a brand with a series of linkages to certain types of characters, settings, and usage scenarios creates meaning for that brand. If one of the connections built through the advertising

narrative is to the consumer him/herself, then the brand's meaning may be especially compelling. Because people often think of themselves in the form of narratives, narrative thought may create a link between the brand and the self, which contributes to a brand's meaning and value. In this case, consumers come to value the psychological and symbolic brand benefits because these benefits help them construct and cultivate their self-identity and express their self-concepts, publicly or privately. In the process of using brands to construct and communicate self-identities, brand associations may become linked to the consumer's mental representation of self, forming a self-brand connection, which builds brand equity.

What Advertising Narratives Can Do for Product Experiences

The stories provided in narrative ads may do more than influence ad viewers' cognitive, affective, and attitudinal responses. The content of a narrative ad may set up a narrative shell or script that the viewer can use in subsequent purchase situations. Many beer ads show stories of young men who end up having a good time drinking beer, even after overcoming some problem, such as losing a sporting event or having an argument with a wife or girlfriend. These ads show the men feeling better and having a lot of fun while drinking beer together. In real life, men may come to believe that they will have a better time if they drink beer. Beer campaigns may have, over time, increased the primary demand for beer in general as consumers have seen story after story highlighting the positive results of drinking beer in social settings. When these consumers think about drinking beer, their own narrative enactment may be favorably inclined. Thus an ad can influence viewers' construction of narratives in the future. This ability to affect consumer narratives may allow marketers to make their brands more valuable.

Narrative ads can also serve as “generic plots” that actually frame or influence subsequent consumption experiences with the brand. The externally provided narratives serve as a template enabling consumers to evaluate and make sense of their later experiences with the brand. For example, as a result of MasterCard’s “priceless” campaign, one instantiation of which was described above, consumers have seen many stories about spending money to achieve “priceless” benefits. As a result, the consumer may begin to spend more money on credit, with the goal of achieving the “priceless” benefits depicted in the ads’ stories. This is more than mere recall of an advertising narrative in a purchase setting; what I propose here is an effect on actual usage evaluations. A generic plot may affect the way that consumers cognitively interpret their experiences. For example, consumers in the MasterCard ads are all very happy. This is not interpreted as a random event if the story in the ad indicates that this happiness was caused by the “priceless” benefits associated with purchases enabled by MasterCard. But more than that, the next time the consumer buys something with his or her MasterCard, he or she may actually feel more happiness and satisfaction while making the purchase. Thus, consumers may come to construct their personal consumption experiences using the generic plots presented in narrative ads.

Many consumer behavior researchers have alluded to the power of stories in guiding and constructing subsequent consumption experiences. For example, Puto and Wells (1984) assert that transformational ads can “transform” product usage experiences, and [Deighton \(1984\)](#) argues that advertising suggests a hypothesis for consumers regarding what their consumption experiences will be like. When consumers later encounter ambiguous evidence (the consumption experience), confirmatory biases ([Slovic, Fischhoff, & Lichtenstein, 1977](#)) may lead them to evaluate those experiences in keeping with the hypotheses created in the advertising. Since many

consumption experiences are subjective and ambiguous, consumers may construct stories to interpret such experiences using narratives suggested in advertising.

I do not mean to imply that only narrative ads are able to transform or guide consumption experiences. Other advertising structures may accomplish the same thing via different processes. However, story ads may be particularly well suited for “teaching” consumers what they should expect to experience (which then becomes what they actually perceive they experience through narrative interpretation). [Scott \(1994\)](#) asserts that narratives are more palatable than exhortation for changing beliefs. Narratives provide parables or exemplary stories that embody cultural expectations and values. Thus, advertising narratives can show consumers how to use the brand, how they will feel when they use the brand, and how they should evaluate their brand experience.

Narratives and Social Media

If one thinks about the history of advertising, early on, advertisers simply had to communicate directly with consumers about their new and innovative products, highlighting the features and benefits that differentiated them from the competition. As advertising became ubiquitous in our society and products achieved high quality parity, the goals of advertising shifted towards the objectives of breaking through the clutter and building emotional connections to consumers, in order to be heard and achieve differentiation. Now, we are at another crossroads, where social media has entered the advertising panorama. Distrustful consumers, after years of advertising exposure, are skeptical of marketers. Facilitated by technological advancements, they can now turn to other consumers for product information and recommendations. Word of mouth

communication, which is very difficult for marketers to control, is now coming to the forefront. The psychology of narratives can help marketing managers contribute to, guide, and encourage consumer dialogues about their brands.

When companies engage in social media marketing, a primary objective is to engage consumers in a conversation about their products, services, and brands. These consumers in turn spread positive word of mouth communication about the company to others. Thus, companies often hope to create brand “evangelists” or “missionaries” who actively advocate for the company. Consumer research can shed light on some best practices for how to create engagement with consumers in order to foster brand advocacy. Two areas in particular are relevant to this discussion: first, creating compelling brand stories to engage consumers, and second, building self-brand connections to enhance evangelism.

First, the communication that the company sends out into the social media network must be interesting, engaging and memorable. Otherwise, consumers will not notice the brand, let alone promote the brand to others. Stories are a natural way to have impact because they have the structure, context, and detail necessary to be relevant and memorable. Narrative research demonstrates that a good story involves the listener/reader, increasing the amount of thought about the characters, events, and even brands, in that story. A good narrative provides the characters and situations necessary to evoke positive feelings, which in turn, spill over onto the brand being promoted. What makes a compelling story? Stories consist of a plot, with actors engaged in actions, to achieve their goals, where they often have to overcome obstacles. In order to be compelling, a plot typically includes something unusual or unexpected. A good plot also provides insight into the protagonist’s psychological state, his/her thoughts and feelings. Thus it

is important for companies to build a compelling brand biography, which guides social media interaction, and also to tell a compelling story whenever they communicate with consumers.

One of the big issues facing marketers moving from traditional campaigns to those that include social media venues is the question of content. Simply posting a 30 or 60 second ad on the Internet, even if that ad tells a compelling story, is not enough. Social media creates an ongoing conversation with consumers. Content must evolve and change as part of the continuous dialogue. So rather than condensing a story down to a very short commercial, marketers can now develop longer, more complex narrative arcs. These longer stories can be presented through social media in serialized form, harkening back to the Taster's Choice commercials of the 1980s. In a serialized narrative, small pieces of the story are presented to consumers over time, with each episode ending at a point that creates interest, often leaving off with a narrative imbalance or mini-cliff-hanger. Thus, compelling content can extend over time, giving consumers a reason to stay in conversation with the brand. A key advantage of this approach is the longer term, brand building aspect of the company-consumer dialogue. This is in direct contrast to the discounts, coupons, and free goods and services approach to maintaining consumer engagement, which leads to a reduction in brand value, rather than building brand equity.

Second, brand evangelists need to be emotionally involved with the brand. The brand has to matter to them, so that they are motivated to "spread the word." We know people use products and brands in part to create and represent desired self-images and to present these images to others or to themselves. That is, consumers value the brand because it helps them construct and cultivate their self-identity and express their self-concepts, to themselves and to others. Brands can be used as tools for social integration or to connect people to their past. Brands act as symbols of personal accomplishment, provide self-esteem, allow one to differentiate oneself and

express individuality, and help people through life transitions. In the process of using brands to construct and communicate self-identities, brand associations may become linked to the consumer's mental representation of self, forming a self-brand connection, a unique relationship with the brand. These powerful connections between the brand and the consumer's self-identity lead to impassioned brand advocacy. These are the brands that matter to consumers; these are the brands they want to talk about.

A good example of one such social media oriented campaign is Pedigree dog food and the Pedigree Foundation to promote shelter dog adoption. The campaign is organized around the story of adopting shelter dogs, an issue that is very important to an active subset of Pedigree's target market. The website and commercials tell an adoption story, which states that, "Every dog that finds itself in a shelter has a story. Our goal is to make sure those stories have a happy ending." This story provides compelling content for the website and the commercials built around this issue. Coupled with cute pictures of dogs and moving music, the Pedigree narrative evokes strong emotions in anyone who cares about animals, even slightly. The brand has started a fund to help shelter dogs, which added to the story, builds authenticity. When consumers become a fan of Pedigree on Facebook, a bowl of dog food is donated to a shelter. Those consumers who are especially passionate about dogs can get additional information on shelter programs and events by following Pedigree on Twitter. Thus, the brand's meaning is not based on nutritional dog food features, rather, it comes from the identity built through the shelter dog adoption storyline. This meaning engages consumers, helping to create missionaries who spread the word through social media about the adoption program and the Pedigree brand.

Conclusion

In general, narrative structure helps individuals organize and understand situations, others, and themselves. People think in terms of stories, imposing a temporal and relational structure on events. This chapter extends narrative research to the realm of brand building, advertising, and social media. I propose that brand biographies can be an effective tool in positioning a brand in the mind of the target audience, creating emotional connections with consumers, and building brand equity. A coherent and compelling brand narrative should be used to guide one's marketing communications campaign. Advertising narratives evoke narrative processing in consumers which positively affects their cognitive, affective, attitudinal, and behavioral responses to the ad and the brand. Given that narratives are the natural way that consumers think and communicate about brands, brand and advertising narratives can engage consumers so that they communicate about brands in their social networks. In the emerging world of social media, where consumers influence each other's brand evaluations as much or more than companies are able to, having authentic, involving brand and advertising stories can be an effective way to engage consumers so that they are motivated to communicate favorably about brands to other consumers. As a result of understanding and applying the psychology of narratives, marketers should be in a better position to differentiate their brands in today's marketplace.

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