



Business Strategies

What's Your Story?

If your company's story doesn't resonate with people at a level that goes way beyond what's tangible, you're missing the mark.

By Michael Hammond

We all have a story. We are all unique. However, we some times don't do a good job telling our own story. I'm here to tell you that this failing can cost you money, and I'm not alone in coming to this conclusion.

In an article called "Find the Heart of Your Brand Storytelling with These 6 Questions," published by the Content Marketing Institute, the author asserts, "Unfortunately, a lot of companies don't think of themselves as a brand, let alone consider whether they have a story to tell. But the

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problem is not that they don't have a story — they just don't understand how to find it, or how they should be sharing it."

What is a brand story you might ask? The Content Marketing Institute defines a brand story as being made up of all that you are and all that you do. From the company's history, mission, inspiration, goals, audience, and *raison d'être*, it's why you exist. Your story is the people, places, and ideas that your company thrives on. It's the foundation that keeps a brand going and growing.

So, how do you effectively tell a good brand story? The Content Marketing Institute says brand stories can be told in many different forms, with an evolving story line and cast of characters, but content creators must be vigilant about continuity and consistency, avoiding any holes. Your brand's

story has to resonate with people at a level that goes way beyond what's tangible — the functionality, features, and benefits of your products or services — to create a deep, emotional connection with your audience. You have to create something that they want to be a part of and show that you really "get" who they are and what they need.

Here are a few basic questions to answer to help you pull your story out of its box:

1. What's your reason for being?

To tell your story, you have to know your reason for being in business and be able to articulate it clearly. What is your purpose? What is important to you? What makes your product different from the competition?

Business leaders must understand the essence of their own company's mission and get real with themselves as to how durable and realistic that mission is. Businesses also must have clear corporate positioning that identifies who they are at their core and is based on a deep understanding of why they are in business and who they are in business for. The strategy, mission and vision are part of the true essence of a brand story, and are essential to aligning that story with truth and reality. If you are building upon a weak foundation, there will always be cracks in your story.

2. What's your history?

From shampoo to chocolate to logistics companies, people want to know the history of your products or services and how they came to be. Has anyone else owned your company? How did it come to be? Was there a creative or historical event behind the origin of your business? If you're stuck for inspiration, consider that the luxury notebook company Moleskine created a fictional history around its notebooks, describing them as "The legendary notebook used by artists and thinkers over the past two centuries: among them Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, and Bruce Chatwin."

Think your business isn't that exciting? Paper

Brands that don't have their **core value propositions in place**, will never be able to share their story.

converting likely doesn't sound thrilling either. In fact, the folks at Oren International once had a dry, boring website focused on numbers, weights and measurements and type of paper they convert. It certainly didn't tell the story of a fun, creative group with an amazing paper facility that services major clients — including restaurants, pharmaceutical companies and advertising agencies — worldwide.

However, Oren had gems of information to bring out its personality and enhance its custom services through more fitting words and visuals. Oren's new content explains how it partners with companies to bring their visions to life and conveys its passion for the possibilities of paper. It has a voice and perspective and effectively communicates what Oren can do for clients, from developing innovative alternatives for product parts to make them more green and economical, to collaborating with project engineers to execute ideas.

Within the first three months of its new site launch, Oren International saw a 69 percent conversion rate for its eBook, which targeted restaurants, and an 86 percent conversion rate on an eBook about the environment. Both of these pieces show Oren's expertise and commitment to quality through interesting storytelling.

3. Who are your main characters?

Every brand story has main characters that helped it take shape. Was your business inspired by a book? Did your founders have a chance meeting with someone on a subway? Was there an aha moment while jogging? To find the heart of your story, start by identifying all of the people (real or fictional) who make your business thrive, and use them as your cast of characters.

4. What's your corporate mission?

This is your business' ultimate reason for being. Why are you in business? What call are you responding to? What problems are you trying to solve? Method Products founders Eric Ryan and Adam

Lowry set out to turn the consumer goods industry on its head by creating products that “inspire a happy and healthy home revolution” with ingredients that “come from plants, not chemical plants” and will be “role models in bottles.” Method's annual revenue now exceeds \$100 million.

5. How have you failed?

Failure often breeds success. Showing people how you failed along the way and transparently embracing those pitfalls demonstrates the humanity of your business and will help them feel more connected to you on a personal level. Even Henry Ford failed in his early businesses and lost his fortune five times before founding the Ford Motor Company.

6. Where are your gaps?

As you dive into the Q&A, pay attention to topics or subjects that you see people being hesitant to share. It's common practice to try and fill every month and year of your working life when creating a resume. You aren't “supposed” to have any gaps in your professional life. From our experience, those gaps are usually where the most interesting stories take place.

For example, a slow year may have forced your company to invent a new product or service. A re-branding campaign may have resulted from bringing on a new partner or letting someone go. The times where everything seemed status quo or even boring may have been when your next big idea was actually brewing underneath the surface. The gaps often hold the key to why you have a story in the first place. Whether you are a new or old brand, taking some time to remember why you started or how an idea came to you can be the essence of your story.

In the end, you have to know who you are before you can explain it to someone else. Brands that don't have their core value propositions in place, or have internal discrepancies about what they are even trying to say, will never be able to share their story with the world in an honest and engaging way. ❖