

Brand new storytelling

By [Nick Warren](#), issued by [Mann Made](#)

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As a young playwright in London I learned the commercial impact of poor storytelling when a theatre producing one of my more experimental pieces cancelled the run due to audience absenteeism.



The same rules apply to corporate communications - if people wouldn't pay for a seat, they won't buy what you're telling them. They may sit there and appear to be present if the event is mandatory, but their hearts and minds will be stubbornly absent.

There are a few aspects of this commercial fact that may be of interest to brand marketers.

One of my first exposures to South African consumers was a satirical comedy review that I wrote and directed in the early '90's. After one of the shows, a brand manager offered me a commission to 'write a play about Melrose Cheese.'

Being unfamiliar with the concept of corporate theatre I laughed it off at the time, and only took it seriously when I got the first fifty percent of the fee in my bank account.

What I subsequently learned about the engaging power of corporate and industrial storytelling has stayed with me - in the right conditions, a processed cheese can have the emotional range, comic potential and dramatic power of near Shakespearean proportions.

So how do you begin to recognise the story potential of your brand?

Brand as Character

Every brand has all of the ingredients of a good story. Brand characteristics define how a brand will behave in certain situations. When the brand is clearly defined and authentic, a marketer and their audience intuitively know what to expect from that brand, and any deviation or 'uncharacteristic' behaviour is notable and even suspect.

Brand Muscles as Story Pillars

In terms of SWOT you can define the strengths and weaknesses and opportunities and threats faced by your brand in the ever-evolving backdrop of the competitor environment.

Brand as Protagonist

Competitors are antagonists out to destroy your brand and steal its supporters. Put your brand up against its most dangerous and powerful competitor and you can instantly sense the bristling beginnings of a thumping great yarn about to unfold.

Brand as Action

A brand has goals and objectives and most of them even boast lofty visions and near impossible missions that need to be accomplished. How far is your brand in achieving these goals and what real obstacles is it facing that it has to overcome?

These brand assets are all the staple ingredients of any good story. Add a fresh angle, genuine insight, and a compelling narrative and you have the essentials for the kind of engagement that your audience would happily pay for in a cinema or theatre.

So how do you assess the potential success of a piece of corporate storytelling?

1. Make sure that the people telling the tale of your brand have been successful in the world of commercial storytelling. People that have only ever made corporate creative tend to lack creative rigour, reproduce familiar formulas, and produce a competent mediocrity that fails to fully engage audiences.
2. Make sure that they have an intimate appreciation of your brand and its unique characteristics. Broad understanding and shallow assumptions result in clichéd storylines and caricature.
3. Make sure that they understand and respect the audience that they are addressing. As a marketer you may not be the target audience that your brand story needs to engage. Don't underestimate their ability to appreciate and understand good storytelling.
4. Make sure that the story is true. Most corporate storytelling is remorselessly two-dimensional, singularly positive, falsely upbeat, un-dramatic, facile and trite. This is why so much corporate storytelling fails to engage or convince an audience.
5. Make sure your audience is satisfied but not stuffed. What you leave out is as important as what you put in. No brand story is a movie or a novel that can be enjoyed in one sitting; every brand story is a series of scenes or chapters that are constantly rewritten by context.
6. Don't substitute cliché for comedy. Comedy is born out of conflict, it lives in the gap between expectation and experience, and it thrives in the collusion between an authentic brand and an engaged audience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Creative Director at Mann Made Media, Nick Warren is an internationally published and awarded author and playwright whose latest production, 'Sunday Morning' appeared on the Main Festival at Grahamstown, followed by a run at the Kalk Bay Theatre and will be appearing at Theatre on the Square in Johannesburg later this year.

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