

Storytelling in management, marketing and advertising By Rolf Jensen, Chief Imagination Officer, Dream Company Inc.

This article is all about storytelling!

* The first part deals with storytelling as a business megatrend – a viable tool for the 21st century.

* The second part is about the actual art of storytelling; about how we utilize principles employed by the great storytellers within the fields of management, marketing and advertising. The article is a brief and concise presentation of some major points contained in a forthcoming book on the subject.

Up until four years ago I – along with many others – was convinced that the key to understanding the driving forces within the market place was to be found in the paradigm of the Information Society; i.e. within the new technology and its manifold uses. The reason being that most people work with the production, processing and dissemination of data. Production of goods and commodities, on the other hand, is largely automated – shop floors in the U.S. and in Europe are more or less depopulated.

Then, after a seminar held in Copenhagen, a client popped this question: “So what comes after the Information Society – what will its successor look like; what values will it cherish?” I had to reply that the question made me very uncertain, but I promised him to call back as soon as I came up with an answer!

The answer to this pithy question grew to become the theory about The Dream Society. At first I thought of it as a vision of the future; gradually, however, it dawned upon me that in the affluent part of our world this society was already part of the present. As consumers we straddle both the Information Society and the Dream Society; yet the latter represents our future. This, too, was the response I received from lectures as well as from readers of the book, which was published in 1999 and has since appeared in 7 languages.

The theory holds that, as consumers, we increasingly seek experience and adventure; we look for things that entice the heart rather than the brain. We buy stories along with the products. One example:

For my confirmation day, my parents gave me a wristwatch. It came with decent mechanical innards that you had to wind every 24 hours and it was not altogether accurate. That was in the 1950's – in the final phases of the Industrial Society. My next watch I bought in the 1980's. This was an electronic, quartz timepiece – it was impeccably accurate and cost less than its predecessor - a purchase made in the Information Society. Buying a watch

today you are no longer concerned with function – all watches are accurate – it is all about lifestyle, about a story. You buy a Rolex, an Omega, a Swatch. We are in The Dream Society where function is taken for granted and the decisive factor is the underlying story, lifestyle, experience, and adventure. Purveyors of coffee machines, athletic shoes, leisure wear and accessories, cars, motor bikes, kitchen appliances, furniture and bottled water today realize that without enticing emotions in the consumer there will be no sale.

This briefly summarizes the prevailing marketplace megatrend. I received many positive responses to these thoughts on the future. However, about a year ago a client of mine came with another important clincher: “Fine, I believe in your theory,” remarked this client, the vice president of a major U.S. corporation, “but where do I go from here? Just what is a good story? And how exactly am I to go about using it?”

Storytelling nowadays has become one of the buzzwords in the realm of management, marketing and advertising. And justifiably so. The challenge, however, remains to take the next step – transforming theory into practice.

So I set out to meet this challenge. First, I realized I would have to consult the people who write fiction, who write stories; the ones who know how to entice our hearts; the ones who can make us laugh or cry – even though we know it isn’t reality, but a story. Who hasn’t shed a tear over Grimm’s fairy tales as a child? Who hasn’t, as an adult, reached for the Kleenex over “Gone With the Wind” or “Titanic?” Who hasn’t reacted to “Das Boot” with sweaty palms?

Why are we captivated by a good story? Simply because we are not only rational beings; because we have feelings. We use stories in order to navigate the paths of our own lives. We observe how others act when placed in extreme circumstances and thus learn more about our own feelings and those of our fellow human beings. We also use these stories to find meaning in our own lives. This is why we are ready and able to be seduced by a good book, by a good movie – though we are quite aware that they are not reality. In “Titanic,” we know the young folks aren’t really in love, that they are acting. We also know the actors don’t die for real – it just looks that way. In the end, everything merely takes place on a silver screen. We want to be seduced simply because we feel a need for it; because stories constitute a way in which we learn more about life and death. They are our way of learning how to be human.

This is why the important question remains: Which stories are the best? What is the difference between a good and a bad story? And – not least – where do I go in search for the answer?

Two categories of stories seemed obvious sources to turn to in the search for an answer:

* The myths, legends, lore and fairy tales that have survived for centuries, for millennia even. When the Nordic myths have been able to survive for a thousand years and the Greek legends for two millennia it must be the hallmark of perennial validity.

* Who are the most successful storytellers of the 21st century? My answer would be the Hollywood filmmakers. This is true both in terms of box office popularity and global presence. "Star Wars", "Titanic", "Casablanca" and Walt Disney's adventure epics. These movies have a worldwide audience. Hollywood still remains the world's number one story factory, reaching most eyeballs.

In all their multifarious complexity, the myths about the Greek gods encompass a near totality of the human emotional spectrum. They give us gods for war, for love, for wisdom; for good and for evil. They also provide a beautiful portrayal of our world's creation. In the beginning there was chaos, so the myth tells us. Chaos meaning that all elements were present, yet totally lacking in order. Out of this chaos, heaven and earth, woman and man, the sea and the animals were created. Then, the battle between evil and good forces ensued. In the end, the world order was made. This narrative was written down as early as 600 years BC – 2,600 years ago. For our present day, the strongest message lies in the idea of chaos as something potentially fertile; in the realization that this condition holds the greatest promise of new and better things.

One of the foremost modern day connoisseurs of myth and legend is Joseph Campbell. He devoted a lifetime to the study of every aspect of myths worldwide – from Siberian shamans and West African folklore to Greek, Roman and Nordic mythology. His insight was truly global. He delved into the common, fundamental structure of all these myths – finding traits common to them all. Or rather, one trait that reappears in all the myths that have survived to our present day.

Many books have been written on Hollywood and on movies; most deal with the studios and with the actors, the big stars. A great many books, however, also deal with how the consummate script is written. Prime among these is Robert McKee's "Story". It is a substantial and exhaustive work recognized as authoritative for anyone wanting to write fiction.

One summer night in June as I was reading "Story" I gradually came to the realization that Hollywood and the great myths rely on the same fundamental structure. In other words: Here was the perpetual principle underpinning any good story. When the same principles span nearly 3,000 years they would seem to be immutable. Such moments are few and far between in the life of any researcher. I felt I was closing in on the DNA of the story. It was to be a sleepless night.

The next challenge was to transfer these basic principles of storytelling to the sphere of business. The world of fiction possesses a logic of its own; so does the world of business. They would seem like two separate, intellectual continents. My task was to bridge the divide between the two hemispheres. I had embarked on a journey to explore the vast land of fiction – now I had to return to business life and relate what I had seen.

Here it was of considerable use to have found the principles – the underpinning structure – to which a good story is tethered, since this enabled me to rough out a map behind storytelling. In business, rules and principles are seen as a prerequisite for understanding and acceptance. Referring to intuition and creativity will not by itself lead to persuasion.

Outlining this set of principles has a dual purpose:

- * To create a framework within which to narrate the unique story behind each enterprise; adding an emotional dimension to the corporation. For example, telling the tale of an enterprise as if it were an Odyssey.
- * To inspire marketing and advertising to utilize the principles behind any good story in order to create interest and boost sales. To bring emotions into a materialistic universe using the stock-in-trade of fiction.

Offhand, the first question turned out to be the easiest. Exactly as is the case in the great myths, corporations also go through their good periods, their periods of stability and profitability. Everybody is content with the way things are heading; everything is progressing the way it should, management and employees alike are satisfied. On the other hand, there are also times of crises, deficits, downsizing and management upheavals – just as in myths and movies you will have inevitable crises and conflicts where life is far from sunny. There will be alternate intervals of light and darkness.

The other question – concerning marketing and advertising – is trickier. Today, most will agree that, on the average, brands will fare better in the marketplace than non-brands. To this, add the fact that we still tend to bring along the rigid, materialistic logic of the Industrial and the Information Society along into advertising. We tend to highlight the function and quality of products despite the simple truth that nearly all products nowadays work perfectly well – of which the customer is well aware. And the customer knows that the competitor's product will work OK, too.

Hold on one second! Aren't management and marketing art forms that defy rules? And, indeed, isn't good art an art form? Can this really be learnt – and can a system be set up describing it? You would be hard pressed to teach yourself how to become a new Picasso or a new Steven Spielberg; nor could

you easily turn into a self-taught, next Jack Welch or a new Bill Gates. These individuals possess unique skills that defy facile definition; their qualifications cannot simply be passed on to their successors. And unfortunately, their abilities are not easily cemented within a rigid organizational framework. You must appreciate them while they are around, but they are fundamentally irreplaceable. The only way to create permanent value within a corporation is to solidify deeply rooted knowledge and principles of that organization so that these methods may be carried on and developed – because they have proved their worth.

Thus, the lasting utility value of any corporation lies in a set of principle guidelines for management and advertising which will demonstrably create better results than could otherwise be expected. Better tools suited for business in the 21st century.

This is where the analysis of the structure of myths and the underpinnings used by Hollywood screenwriters may provide us with a significant, almost revolutionary message.

The message is derived from a world view, a basic outlook – our life, the life of our corporation, the life of our community takes place within two spheres:

* The Sphere of Light; our secure, everyday life. "Another Day At The Office." This is where stability is found; where there is only a foreseeable amount of change. No major decisions need to be taken and you know what will happen next week – and next month as well. The sun is shining and what-me-worry. Business will be more or less booming with no new product lines to be launched. Employee satisfaction is prime. To be sure, there are ritual demands for increases in pay and more safety stewards, but the bottom line shows a well-run corporation with no imminent threat of downsizing.

* The Sphere of Darkness; the world of struggle and challenges. This is where chaos, latent menace, strife and battle thrive. On a personal level, this may take the form of dismissal or divorce – the negative side. Yet challenges may also be positive: a new job, a start-up initiative, innovative research leading to a new product. For the company, this means red ink flowing, a looming merger, acquisition or restructuring. Here, too, there may be positive aspects: in the implementation of new technology or an important plan leading towards globalization.

While some human beings as well as corporations only inhabit one of these spheres most will move back and forth between them. There are the good, secure times and there is the time of struggle. There is light and there is darkness.

The myths tell us that precisely this continual interplay of two forces constitutes the core curriculum of life. A full life consists of peace of mind as well as challenges – many times during our life we will leave behind our secure, everyday existence and plunge into a sea of challenges knowing it involves a risk of failure. The excitement in meeting a challenge constitutes a part of life every bit as important as our leisurely, workaday existence.

We may also learn from the myths that this is a universal worldview independent of cultural background or education.

Most of us will be able to recognize these two spheres from our own life and from that of the corporation. The good news here is that the Sphere of Challenges is no exception to the rule; it does not constitute a fleeting part of our existence, but is a major part of it.

The continual interplay can be described as a circle – the circle of life.

It starts out in the comfortable and secure circle of everyday life. What instigates the movement around the circle is "the Call to Adventure," or "the Inciting Incident." This is the moment where you decide to take on a challenge – or the moment where a challenge introduces itself from the outside. It may present itself in the shape of a merger, an innovative product, a new market or a new organizational structure.

Some corporations excel at accepting new challenges, at trailblazing steps that motivate all employees to surpass every difficulty and achieve brilliant results. Other companies fail to sound "the Call to Adventure;" they let sleeping dogs lie until the problems become insurmountable or they simply find means of denial in the face of new opportunities. Presumably, this is the most frequent reason why companies wither away. They fail to understand, or simply do not wish to enter into the struggle, fail to see new possibilities because they cling to ancient traditions and values.

After "The Call" you must pass "The Dragon Gate." Here, you are met with a dragon demanding that whoever has taken on the challenge must answer a question. It will ask whether or not you fully realize the nature of the voyage on which you have embarked. It also asks what goal you seek and whether or not you are willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to reach that specific goal.

After "The Dragon Gate" you must enter the battle in response to the challenge. The question to be resolved at this stage is who your opponent is. It might be a competitor, but it may also be lack of an ability to change on the part of your own company. Imagine a fight between two armies and ask which weaponry is used. Where is the battle fought and how many troops are at your enemy's disposal. Also, how long can the battle (or battles) be expected to last? In short - when will a winner prevail?

The battle will have an outcome – a final result. When the fight ends – hopefully in victory – you will have to decide what the victory means for the company, for its employees and other interested parties. Even if the outcome falls short of victory – for example, if an attempt at a new market breakthrough is unsuccessful – you must still figure out your gains. Often, some useful experience will have been gained for future exploitation. Ultimately, the battle should not merely be put down as victory or defeat, but be measured against a scenario where no action at all was taken.

After an interval in the secure, everyday mode the company will, yet again, be ready for another "Call to Adventure." As mentioned previously the life of a healthy corporation rests in the continual interplay between security and challenge. Between light and darkness.

According to the Harvard Business Review, the successful U.S. corporation 3M has chosen divisions in which the traditional planning process has been replaced by a story narrated by the employees themselves – according to guidelines like the ones outlined above. The results were palpable. Employees became more motivated, along with an increased understanding of what the challenges were and an increased effort to reach specified targets. The dry bullet-points and the austere presentation of objective spreadsheets could not compete with a dramatic story written by the employees themselves.

The use of the underpinnings of fiction in marketing and advertising should adhere to the same principles that lie behind any good story in order to catch our interest. In particular, there must inevitably be a conflict. Where would "Star Wars" be without Darth Vader? In creating this epic, George Lucas was also inspired by the underlying structure of the great myths. How captivating would "Titanic" have been with no conflict, no iceberg, no protests and opposition from the enamored girl's parents? The answer is clear: no one would have seen the movie; our interest is only piqued where there is conflict. There must be suspense about the outcome. The cliffhanger is the name of the game; suspense until the final moment.

We need to realize that modern marketing is becoming increasingly emotional. Thus it is equally important to describe the emotional needs we have as human beings. In satisfying these needs, we gain identity. We affirm that we are indeed alive:

Our Emotional Needs:

Love

The need to receive and give love is part of how we define ourselves as human beings – Homo sapiens. Love of another person, of our children, of our

parents. At the same time, we have a fundamental need to learn about and symbolize love through books, music, movies and products

Control

We need to feel in control, that we are in charge of our surroundings; or, at least, that we are aware of the interrelated facets of our lives. A prerequisite for control is knowing how other people react and that we can influence them. Also, there must be some control over our physical surroundings and knowledge of what governs them. We read books in order to understand the world around us; we read books and watch movies in order to gain insight bringing control. We buy products to gain control

Recognition

All human beings need recognition so they do not stand alone; to feel part of a peer group, part of a community. This community may be based on shared values or attitudes. A place where you can be validated as belonging to a group

Tradition

Celebrating family reunions and other festive occasions gives us the opportunity as a group or family to enjoy the same process in togetherness (the traditions of Christmas) and feel we are not alone, that we are part of a greater whole. We thus know a continuity stretching beyond the fleeting moment

Freedom

The immense success of the Marlboro Man as an advertising icon reflects our need of freedom; our need to set our own agenda, to be self-reliant, secure in having found our own place in life. Each one is a group to himself

Care Give and take.

By providing or receiving care we are affirmed in our sense of being – that we are indeed alive. Giving and taking are equally important. When others show their appreciation we understand that our lives have meaning, that we are put on this planet for a purpose

The Big Answers

There are certain needs and requirements we are often prepared to die for – questions prompting the big answers. They regard the Big Stories about the Nation, nationalism and patriotism, about defending ideology or religion. Maybe also about defending nature and wildlife on our planet against destruction. We might also be dealing with big principles about justice, about

human rights. Throughout history, millions of people have sacrificed their lives defending these values

Change and conflict

Especially when we are young we need to be explorers, venturing into virgin territory to find enriching experiences that change us – to feel that we are growing and expanding as human beings. We seek out new horizons in order to discover ourselves

These eight fundamental needs constitute the cornerstones of marketing in the 21st century – a brief outline of what we seek in other human beings and in the products and services we demand.

So one must choose between – or combine - these emotions. Determine whether the product is centered on love and family bliss (say, the romantic kitchen) or associated with control (like a cell phone). There are many possibilities and the actual connection between product and emotion may be slight or non-existent – the real link is achieved through advertising – as in the example of the Marlboro Man.

The conflict in the story is introduced by creating an opponent who is relevant and credible. At the same time, the roles should be cast. Who is the hero? (Usually, it will be the customer.) Who are the helpers? (As a rule, it will be the store or the salesperson.) Who is the fairy godmother, assuring that the customer wins in the battle against the opponent? (Most often, this will be the maker of the product.)

As a further inspiration towards strengthening the emotional needs and clarifying the conflict you may discuss the qualities of the hero, using the archetypes of fiction. There are many ways of classifying these; one recognized list enumerates twelve:

The creator; the person in love; the court jester; everyman; the magician; the rebel; the ruler; the hero; the wise man; the investigator; the innocent one; and the caregiver.

Then the plot is fleshed out and the road to the goal is outlined. The advertisement entices the emotional needs; a conflict has been built in; a goal has been set out – “The Holy Grail” beckoning at the end of the story. This is how the rules of fiction may be applied to advertising. Sometimes, the entire story is not told. The famous slogan for the U.S. beer Miller simply states: “It’s Miller time.” Any potential customer will understand the point: a gratifying glass of Miller upon a day’s work completed. Although this story is not told straight out, the thought is conjured up. The same is true of the Chivas Regal

ad stating, "You know you have arrived"; the point being, you have worked hard on your career, now you deserve this fine scotch.

For many years now, the illusion regarding management as purely rational and advertising as strictly objective has been on the wane. We know now that our emotional needs do not only belong in our private lives and in fiction – they have their place in business and in the marketplace as well. This article seeks to follow this megatrend to its natural conclusion – to storytelling.

Books referred to in the text:

Campbell, Joseph: "The Hero with a Thousand Faces". Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 1949.

McKee, Robert: "Story". Regan Books. Harber Collins, New York. 1997

Mark, Margaret & Pearson, Carol S.: "The Hero and the Outlaw". McGraw-Hill, New York. 2001

Harvard Business Review May-june 1998: Strategic Stories: How 3M is Rewriting Business Planning. By Gordon Shaw, Robert Brown and Philip Bromiley.