

Creating Stories that Inform, Enlighten and Inspire

The Eight Hallmarks of a Great Corporate Narrative

By Bernie Thiel, Partner, Corporate Narratives Group

A study by InboundWriter garnered a lot of attention among content marketers—and for good reason. Announced at the 2013 Content Marketing World conference and picked up in a short piece by Forbes, the study—as the *Forbes* article’s headline succinctly puts it—found most content marketing doesn’t work. More specifically, according to the *Forbes* piece, the research discovered “only 10 percent to 20 percent of a company’s website drives 90 percent of its web traffic, and only half a percent of a website’s content drives more than 50 percent of its traffic.”

**MARKETING
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Even worse, says the study, content marketers really don’t know why a certain piece of content fails and others are big hits.

While many factors contribute to how well content is received in the marketplace—not the least of which is the effectiveness of a company’s promotion and distribution around that content—the most basic determinant of a piece of content’s success is its quality. If a company’s content is inferior—as judged by customers and prospects—it will fall flat.

So what makes for superior content? First and foremost, the best content tells a compelling story. Throughout history, stories or narratives have been used to inspire, inform, and entertain. A well-developed story, communicated effectively, has the power to reach and move people in ways few other modes of expression can. That’s true even in a business

setting. Stories that communicate the relevance of a company and its offerings to customers' own lives—whether personal or in a business setting—are more credible than typical marketing materials, are more effective in capturing customers' attention, and are a key element of a stronger, more interesting customer experience. Great stories translate into stronger customer attraction and retention and, ultimately, greater revenue for the company.

But not all stories are good or compelling. Some can be dull or uninspiring, insipid or unclear, or just plain bad—and, as a result, have no bigger impact than the other dross that's clogging our computers, mobile devices, television sets and magazines. Thus, a company that recognizes it needs to incorporate storytelling into its content marketing efforts—a great first step—must make narrative quality its highest priority.

Of course, quality can be subjective. But there are certain standards by which companies can evaluate their stories. Our experience tells us there are eight such fundamental standards, which we call the hallmarks of a great corporate narrative (see figure).



Relevant:

Addresses a need, concern or interest of the target audience

Stories that aren't meaningful to people will have no impact. That seems obvious, but it's critical to reinforce because it's easy to overlook. Companies need to make sure they know what's important to their

customers—whether by conducting traditional customer research, using analytics, or monitoring the chatter on social media—and build their stories around what customers are thinking. Often that can mean creating different versions of the same story, each tailored to a particular need, concern or area of interest.

Subaru's *Drive* magazine is a great example of narrative-based

content that hits customer interests squarely on the head. Subaru owners, as a group, tend to be outdoorsy, active types and typically purchase all-wheel-drive Subarus for their ability to haul gear and excel on road trips involving rough terrain. They also are likely to be interested in environmental issues and conservation. Thus, in addition to articles on Subaru models, *Drive*

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contains such pieces as “[Fun in the Mud: Competitive Mud Runs](#)” and “[Ice Climbing: Fear, Exhilaration and Accomplishment](#),” as well as case studies on environmentally focused non-profits that Subaru supports. The Subaru website also enables visitors to sort current and archived *Drive* articles by their interests—including biking, camping, running, outdoor sports, environment, and snow sports.



Credible:

Avoids outlandish claims and backs up assertions with proof

It’s no secret that people love to be entertained, and are willing to suspend disbelief to a dizzying extent in the pursuit of entertainment. However, that’s typically not the case when it comes to a company’s marketing. People asked to consider the purchase of a product or service, however subtly, want to know that they’re not dealing with smoke and mirrors. While they may be willing to accept the fact that a 65-year-old Sylvester Stallone can escape from 50 adversaries armed with automatic weapons and manage to jump into a taxiing plane before it takes off, they generally don’t like to take a leap of faith in their dealings with product or service providers.

In the B2B arena, for instance, consulting firms have been telling stories for years as part of their thought leadership marketing efforts. White papers, research reports, and journals from such giants as McKinsey, Bain and Boston Consulting Group set the standard

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for how to use strong narratives to engage current and prospective customers. Yet it’s easy for a firm to get caught up in writing a white paper on its approach to solving a particular business problem and forget the proof points. To tell a credible story, firms need to provide data and, better yet, examples from their client projects, that show the positive impact their approach and insights have had on their clients’ business—much like [this one from Accenture](#) does. Without data and examples, consulting white papers end up being little more than opinion pieces rather than the credibility-enhancing tools they could (and should) be.



Compelling:

Captures and holds the audience’s attention

Nobody likes a boring story. If a story can’t grab the intended audience and hold their attention, it’s either not worth telling or it’s not being told in the right way. What makes a story compelling is generally a combination of factors—subject matter, words, imagery, sound and

others—all working together to create an experience in the minds of readers, viewers or listeners. When it works, it’s magic.

Think about the copy that accompanies products in a typical catalog—whether B2C or B2B. “Compelling” would probably not be the word that first comes to mind. Now consider the J. Peterman catalog, produced by the clothing retailer made famous by its ongoing references on the “Seinfeld” show. The descriptions in this catalog don’t just convey the product’s features; rather, they paint a vivid picture in readers’ minds of who might wear the item, how, and in what interesting or elegant circumstances. They are, perhaps, one of the best examples of aspirational marketing—“You, too, can be an erudite world traveler visiting exotic locales and charming everyone around you—if you buy this jacket.” Each one also is [100 words of pure poetry](#).



Persuasive:

Influences and moves people to action

Great stories don’t simply keep people interested. They also excel in motivating people to do something—and for companies, that typically means ultimately buying something from them. After all, a company is in business to make money. Similar to the previous hallmark, persuasiveness is not the result of any one factor. But imagery and words generally play a dominant role in making a connection—emotional, intellectual, or both—with customers and moving them to action. In

other words, employing professional and talented photographers, videographers, and writers is key to maximizing a story's persuasion quotient.

For persuasive content, it's tough to beat *Four Seasons* magazine. Published and distributed by Four Seasons Hotel & Resorts, *Four Seasons* rivals the best travel and lifestyle magazines anywhere in the world. It uses stunning pictures and lively prose to highlight interesting destinations, inspiring wanderlust among readers (who, presumably, will be similarly inspired to book a room while on their travels with the company that gave them the wonderful magazine). The "Concierge Recommends" section of the magazine is an especially effective idea, as it capitalizes on the local knowledge and experience of Four Seasons concierges around the world to provide inside tips on things to do and places to see while in their city. And the "Destinations" section includes mini travel guides for each of the areas in which a Four Seasons is located (helpfully accompanied, on the Four Seasons website, by a tool that lets visitors search for available Four Seasons rooms in that location).



Timely:

Deals with something of current importance to the audience

There are many timeless stories in literature and film, those with enduring appeal that people can read or watch again and again. However, when it comes to storytelling in a marketing context, the best narratives are those that align with a person's

need within the buying cycle. Understanding when customers or prospects are considering a purchase, the context in which they are determining whether and what to buy, and the information they need to help them make the purchase decision, is key to creating a story that attracts an audience's attention at the appropriate time and positively influences their actions.

For example, tax-return specialist H&R Block produces a blog that discusses a wide range of topics related to personal finance, typically posting articles to coincide with the

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deadlines, decisions or activities people are facing at particular times of the year—such as "Does the IRS Need to Know About Your Garage Sale?" This piece was issued in early June at the beginning of the summer garage sale season to ease the minds of people who are presumably worried about the tax implications of money they make by selling those old sweaters, books and outdated electronics equipment. Similarly, many consulting firms and technology companies seek to raise their profile among retailers with their yearly reports on the upcoming holiday shopping season, which are

designed to showcase these firms' insights on leading practices that can make retailers more profitable.



Understandable:

Is well communicated and flows logically

A story may have a great underlying message with real potential to inspire and engage prospects and customers. But it will never live up to its promise if the target audience has trouble deciphering what a company is truly trying to get across. Nothing neutralizes a story more than a muddled structure, lack of logic, or unclear writing that leaves an audience confused and frustrated. Regardless of medium, a story needs to unfold logically, making it easy for the audience to "connect the dots" and follow the narrative. And if it's presented in a written format, a story performs best when crafted by experienced wordsmiths who understand the topic and the audience.

This is especially true for B2B companies that often deal in highly complex business, management or technology topics. The onus is on these firms to sort through all the possible messages they could communicate, identify the most critical ones, and present them clearly and understandably. Cisco, which manufactures and sells a vast portfolio of high-tech networking gear, could easily cause customers' eyes to gloss over by talking about the nuts and bolts of its routers and switches. That's why, instead, the company has opted to launch a new monthly digital magazine called *Focus*, which covers key technology

and business trends through stories, interviews and case studies on Cisco products in action. Because they are clear and free of jargon, these stories make it easy for readers to understand how tools such as Cisco products can improve the business and professional lives of people everywhere.



Informative:

Educates the target audience on something they value

People love to learn new things. Just look at the explosion in the number of DIY and cooking cable television shows as one example. The most effective corporate narratives are those that educate and inform, that provide insights on something people value. Such stories capture people's attention and are memorable, and they convey an air of authority or credibility that benefits the companies telling them. Often, stories seeking to educate rely on research to get their points across. It may be primary research conducted by the company, or secondary research that uncovers data relevant to the narrative at hand. But in either case, the goal is to tell the audience something they didn't know (but should) and, in the process, position the company as a place they can turn for help addressing a particular personal, professional or business challenge.

Consulting firms are great examples of companies that use the power of stories to educate and inform. Many of these firms produce research reports that convey important information on business

or management issues their executive buyers and their companies are struggling to address. For instance, "Unlocking Industrial Opportunities," a report published by Accenture and presented at the European Business Summit 2013, used an Accenture research study as the basis of a narrative that outlines ways European governments and business can work together to reinvigorate economic growth across the Eurozone. Similarly, PwC conducts an annual survey on internal audit practices at global companies, which serves as a foundation for the firm's report that outlines their recommendations for how companies can improve the performance and contribution of their internal audit function.



Authentic:

Is sincere, honest and genuine

According to Wikipedia, authenticity refers to "the truthfulness of origins, attributions, commitments, sincerity, devotion, and intentions." When applied to corporate storytelling, that means "don't be fake." People, whether business buyers or consumers, hate to be fooled. They avoid companies they perceive to be insincere or untruthful. As Jim Gilmore and Joe Pine noted in the introduction to their book Authenticity, "the more contrived the world seems, the more we all demand what's real." Thus, companies must strive to ensure that their stories are true—and, more important, are true to the essence of the company—to have a positive impact on their audience.

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One of the best examples of authentic storytelling is the client case study. By featuring their products or services being used by customers—in a non-salesy way—companies illustrate the essence of their offerings and how those offerings help improve customers' lives. And it's tough to fake the story when customers must tacitly approve the use of their names and experiences. Lincoln Electric, a provider of welding equipment and solutions in suburban Cleveland, has taken the customer case study to new heights with its www.madepossiblewith.com website.

The site showcases stories on the critical role welding—and welding equipment and materials from Lincoln—have played in a variety of applications. That includes the building of the Sears Tower (now known as the Willis Tower) in Chicago, the assembly of the Grand Canyon Skywalk, and the installation of safety barriers on all four turns of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Reading these compelling stories, one has no doubt that Lincoln Electric

and what its products make possible are the real deal.

With people's primal disposition to stories, companies that can tell good ones are better positioned to get their messages heard and engage audiences.

In today's digital economy, customers are constantly bombarded with marketing, and it's getting harder for anyone to even know what to read, listen to or watch, let alone actually absorb what's being communicated.

It's no wonder that so much content is ineffective. With people's primal disposition toward learning through stories, companies that can tell good ones are better positioned to get their messages heard and to engage more fully with target audiences.

A passage in an [article in *Fast Company*](#) really encapsulates the case for powerful storytelling in business today:

"The challenge is clear by now: Intrusive, interruptive, self-centered marketing no longer works the way it once did, and its effectiveness will only continue to diminish in the social age. The question is what will replace the legacy model. There's a one-word answer: stories."

The bottom line is that if you want your content to make an impact—i.e., attract customers' and prospects' attention and spur them to action—it must tell a great story. Anything else is just additional noise and clutter

that discourages people from wanting to learn more about your company and its offerings. Companies that place a high priority on the quality of the stories they tell will not be the ones desperately trying to figure out which pieces of content are working. They'll already know. 📌



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Corporate Narratives helps companies boost the effectiveness of their marketing activities by creating and communicating compelling stories about their business. As accomplished researchers, writers and communicators, we identify and draw out the most interesting stories a company can tell about its brands and offerings; present these stories in an informative and interesting way that resonates with customers; and effectively disseminate these stories to cut through marketplace clutter. The result is marketing content that engages rather than "sells to" customers which, in turn, boosts customer attraction and retention and, ultimately, overall sales.

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