StoryBranding
Creating Stand-Out Brands Through the Power of Story
by Jim Signorelli

Selling Truth
Customers are loyal to a brand’s values, not its features.

QUICK OVERVIEW
Everyone is selling something—but not everyone is buying. Today’s consumers are skeptical of commercials and marketers. They can spot a spin or a pitch within the first two notes of a jingle. And with so much noise in the marketplace, companies are willing to go to great lengths to get noticed.

In StoryBranding, Jim Signorelli explains that the key to capturing prospects’ attention isn’t shouting louder; it’s sharing the “Big-T Truth”: the truth that connects you and your brand to your prospect. Telling a brand story that resonates with customers is the quickest—and perhaps, the only—way to develop true brand loyalty and long-term customer relationships.

The StoryBranding process is intended to help marketers understand their brand and their prospects “in ways that will foster lasting relationships, immune from any competitive claim or coupon.” While this book’s principles can be adapted to almost anyone who is offering a product or service, it will be most valuable to marketers and executives who are responsible for creating a brand’s messaging. In addition to the information in this summary, StoryBranding includes a number of useful tools and strategies to help marketers develop a story that resonates with prospects.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
When developing a story for a brand, Jim Signorelli explains that the first two steps in his six-step process are to collect the back story and to characterize the brand. You don’t begin by identifying the prospect and then building a story to fit them; you begin by knowing the brand. “Instead of beginning the planning process by focusing on customer needs, we start by looking at the brand from the inside out and discovering what the brand stands for,” writes Signorelli. With that formula in mind, consider how you could develop a story for the brand of you.

As an entrepreneur, business leader or small-business owner, your personal brand is even more important than whatever product you choose to sell. Aligning your core...
values with your message ensures that you are focused on giving your best to your customers. That doesn’t mean you can’t change your approach to customer service; it means that as you grow and change you must stay true to your values.

“StoryBranding is based on the premise that brands should strive for authenticity,” Signorelli explains. “The main ingredient of authenticity is knowing who the brand is in addition to what the brand does now, while becoming fully aware of how much change is possible.”

Story is a fuzzy word that is used in everyday speech to describe a number of different types of communication. There’s the story that is anything from a little white lie to an egregious fabrication. It could be the single-sentence dismissive, “What’s her story?” We have news stories, true stories, and make-believe stories. There are the unspoken stories told by photographers and rhyming stories told by poets.

StoryBranding is about drawing from the age-old logic of story structure to learn how we can better clothe brands with important truths. Like stories that resonate with something meaningful to us, successful brands also resonate with their audiences. This comes about as a result of shared truths. Brands like Harley-Davidson, Apple, Southwest Airlines, Disney, The Ritz Hotel, and many others have capitalized on this phenomenon. StoryBranding sets up the conditions for all brands to do the same.

WHAT IS A “GOOD” BRAND STORY?

The final goal of marketing is always action or the purchase itself. This goal is easy to love. It’s measurable; it keeps shareholders happy, employees gainfully employed, and chief marketing officers from having to dust off their résumés prematurely.

However, to think that this defines the ultimate goal of brand marketing can lead to a number of problems and missed opportunities. For instance, the prospect can be a source of repeat sales and/or referrals long after any action takes place. A brand’s best customers are often the brand’s best marketers.

As StoryBranders, we see the brand’s primary goal as forming a strong relationship with the prospect. Moreover, we ultimately want this relationship to be strong enough to garner repeat and/or referral business through word-of-mouth. It follows that, as we start to achieve this relationship, sales will naturally ensue. Additionally, the stronger the relationship and the more people the brand relates to, the better the short- and long-term sales outcome. In addition to this, the brand might start selling itself and require less advertising dollars.

THE STORYBRANDING PROCESS

The Six C’s of the StoryBranding process show the workflow from one planning element toward the final step, which is the creation of the StoryBrief. Completing this entire process will help you arrive at a brand communications plan that will serve as the blueprint for all brand communications, both externally and internally.

Step 1: Collect the Backstory
We start by digging up the backstory. In traditional marketing parlance, this is often referred to as the situation analysis. Every backstory is different but usually consists of any and all information relevant to the story about to be written. It identifies problems and opportunities that must be taken into consideration before the story unfolds.

Step 2: Characterize the Brand
Traditional planning methods start by focusing on the prospect. The StoryBranding process starts first with an investigation of the brand. Specifically, it starts with a thorough understanding of the brand’s value and belief system and how this is supported. Is what the brand stands for being evidenced? Is there proof that what the brand wants to stand for is real and not just lip service? Most important, will prospects resist or subscribe to certain associations that the brand would like to take on?

Step 3: Characterize the Prospect
Once the brand is fully explored, we then look to the prospect for insight. Specifically, we look to see what functional
and emotional needs are being left unfulfilled. Then we set out to
discover the extent to which any of these needs presents an
opportunity for the brand in question. In story parlance, this is
referred to as the dramatic issue. It consists of the problem that
propels the main character’s journey. That issue might be about
finding redemption, love, or a life purpose. While constructing
the brand story, we are similarly looking for something that
would propel the prospect’s movement toward a fulfilled
relationship with the brand. More often than not, fulfillment
results from a belief that is shared with the brand and one that
the prospect feels is important to his or her identity.

**Step 4: Connect the Characters**

At this stage, we start to play matchmaker. Now that we
understand our two characters, the brand and the prospect, we
look for the fit between them. Short term, we are interested in
knowing how the brand satisfies a functional need through its
product features and benefits. Additionally, however, we need
to know that there is something that can spark a long-term
relationship, one that is founded on shared values and beliefs.

**Step 5: Confront the Obstacles**

A brand’s story deals with some obstacle to achieve a
relationship with its prospect. This sets up the elements of
the plot. As such, and coming into this step, we have wrestled
with all of the elements except for the obstacles or those
things that stand in the way of forming a strong affiliation
between the brand and the prospect. In this step, we prioritize
the obstacles that the brand must deal with now and as it
moves toward its goal.

**Step 6: Complete the StoryBrief**

At this stage, we review the preceding steps for logical
consistency and summarize them in the StoryBrief. Unlike
the traditional creative brief, the StoryBrief outlines the entire
brand story. It identifies the inner and outer layers of our two
characters: the brand and the prospect.

Once this process is completed, we should see a logical
consistency between all of the newly defined brand story
elements. Furthermore, we will have outlined and unfolded
both the plot and the theme of the brand story.

**CHARACTERIZING THE BRAND**

Given that the goal of StoryBranding is to create a strong
and enduring relationship with the prospect, I want to focus
attention on the brand and the prospect the way an author might
attend to the makeup of his or her characters.

Writers, at least the best among them, do not start by
conducting focus groups to help them decide between genres
or story themes. Certainly, we ultimately need to understand
the who, the where, and the what about prospects that will
attract them to the brand. But considerations can get in the
way, up front. Stephen King was once asked to comment on a
story he had read. “No,” he moaned. “It’s not a very good story.
Its author was too busy listening to other voices as closely as he
should have to the one coming from inside.”

Instead of beginning the planning process by focusing on
customer needs, we start by looking at the brand first, from
the inside out in order to discover what the brand stands for.
Established brands, by definition, have meanings that are well
entrenched both inside and outside their organizations. We start
by understanding brand meaning internally.

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To start the process, we cast the brand in the role of hero
whose purpose is to save the day for the prospect. Heroes have
strengths and flaws. One of our initial tasks is to appraise this
brand hero in human terms: what he is, what he isn’t, and,
based on what we find out, what he could realistically become.

The most successful brands are typically those who have
known and followed their “grain” from the start. As Harry
Truman once said, “Follow the grain in your own wood.”

**Art or Science?**

Most planning processes start out as science before the artists
get a say. StoryBranding starts out as art before the scientists
have their say. Traditional approaches that first take a look at
what consumers want and need can lead a brand astray. The
logic of the marketing concept suggests, “Just find out what
they want, build according to their specs, and they will come.” StoryBranding is based on the premise that brands should strive for authenticity. The main ingredient of authenticity is knowing who the brand is in addition to what the brand does now while becoming fully aware of how much change is realistically possible.

Sometimes pegged as radical, in reality StoryBranding springs from a more conservative foundation. It is based on the premise that overhauling a brand’s identity should not be taken lightly. Rather than throwing out the old identity, we embrace it, accept it, and figure out how to evolve it.

THE UNIQUE VALUE PROPOSITION

The unique value proposition, or UVP, is the unique belief that we want both employees and prospects to associate with the brand, beyond its functional purpose. It is a brief statement, often only one sentence, that guides and directs the creation of all of the brand’s marketing communications. In other words, it is damn important.

Simply put, the UVP explains the big “why” behind the brand, beyond its profit motive. A UVP might be stated as, “We believe in value of invention that is responsive, not just for invention’s sake,” or “It’s important to do things the hard way so that no stone is left unturned.”

As is sometimes the case, the UVP is not to be confused with its older and more familiar cousin, the USP, or unique selling proposition. As acronyms, UVP and USP may differ by just one letter, but in meaning, they are miles apart.

Unlike the USP, a brand’s UVP has nothing to do with describing what a brand does or how well it does it relative to competition. It extols a belief, not a benefit. As such, it explains why the brand does what it does beyond the profit motive. It describes the cause that gives the brand a reason for being.

In story terms, the USP is most like the story’s plot. The UVP is most like the story’s theme. The plot of a story might be about the good guy struggling but finally prevailing to put the bad guy behind bars. In this case, the theme might be that persistence wins or that evil can’t hide from virtue. The theme of any story is subject to the audience’s interpretation, but it always imparts what its audience would consider a worthwhile maxim. The author’s objective is to share what he or she sees as a truth, but, unlike the plot, it isn’t told in the story; it’s told through the story. The same can be said about UVPs. Unlike USPs that are told by the seller, UVPs are told through the selling.

The UVP does not depend on the seller’s assertions. It depends on the seller’s motivation.

One strike against every brand’s perceived motivation is selfish pursuit. Sellers of brands may try to convince you that they truly care about you, but we all know that how much they care is often a function of how much you are willing to pay for that care. Unlike the USP, however, the purpose of the UVP is not to directly and outwardly try to convince you of anything more than the fact that the brand stands for the same important values and beliefs that you stand for.

The most successful brands are typically those who have known and followed their “grain” from the start.

These beliefs are a brand’s Big-T Truth. And Big-T Truths are not talked about, they are demonstrated. They are not bragged about, they are shown.

TRUTH IN STORIES

Stories don’t create our beliefs. Rather, their themes are like magnets that find and attach themselves to beliefs that already exist. Additionally, the best stories amplify the importance of existing beliefs by charging them with emotion. Telling someone that war sucks conveys information. Showing someone how war destroys the hopes and dreams of innocent people conveys the same information with power.

Additionally, stories provide an easily digested context for truth. Because stories do not outwardly profess or directly tell us how to think and feel, we welcome their points of view.

I have mentioned the concept of Big-T vs. small-t truth. Small-t truth is objective, is either provable fact or arguable opinion. It appeals to the rational side of our brains. It typically comes at us from others who want us to know what they want us to know. Small-t truths are explicitly stated and directly communicated. In stories, they might consist of details used to describe a character or an event. They are the facts that a story is built upon.
In advertising, small-t truths are explicitly stated. Small-t truths are found in statements like “The number one selling gizmo in the United States,” or “MegaBright makes your teeth whiter.” Besides being provable or refutable facts, small-t truths in advertising often express opinions, too: “You’ll feel secure knowing you’re protected by Acme Alarms,” or “You’ll save big during our holiday sale.”

On the other hand, Big-T Truths appeal to the non-rational side of our brains, where they are often colored by and linked to some emotion. Rather than coming at us, Big-T Truths come from within us. They contain our interpretations of what we’re being told. We may learn small-t truths from description, but we know Big-T Truths from our personal perceptions and beliefs.

Big-T Truths are sometimes difficult to articulate and often have to be inferred from the way we feel. “I feel scared” suggests an underlying Big-T Truth that is triggered through identification with the source of the fear. It can be triggered by beliefs, rational or irrational, such as “airplanes are unsafe” or “the stock market is a bad place to invest money.” This is one of the reasons why psychologists typically try to engage their patients in talking about their feelings. Feelings are the windows to Big-T Truths.

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Too often, we see advertisers talking more to themselves than to their audiences. They may believe that their brand makes people smile or makes them feel secure, smart, or fashionable, all the time ignoring the most important feeling people desire: the feeling of being understood. The most powerful advertising is advertising that generates a “that’s me or my problem they’re talking about” response. This, I believe, tops the list of important lessons that can be drawn from the art of storytelling.
ACTION STEPS
Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you've learned to your business. Here are a few questions and activities to get you started.

1. Identify your personal brand. What are your values? What do you stand for?
2. Are your current activities/marketing messages in alignment with your brand values?
3. Are you trying to be all things to all people? In what areas are you stretching to do something that is outside your expertise or ability? Is that benefiting or harming your customers?
4. Characterize your ideal prospect. Identify their demographics as well as their values and beliefs.
5. Ask yourself: Are my values and my message in alignment with those of my prospects?
6. Identify your Unique Value Proposition: the belief that you want people to identify with your brand.
7. Consider how you tell your story. Are you focused on Big-T truths (feelings and emotions) or on small-t truths (facts and features)? How could you rewrite your brand story to be more effective?

About the Author
Jim Signorelli has always had a passion for advertising. His favorite activity in grade school was “show and tell.” As a paperboy, he would add subscribers by copy testing leaflets, where he found that the tagline “If you buy from me, I promise not to throw your paper in the bushes,” outsold “You need the news, I need the money. Let’s strike a deal.”

After receiving both a B.A. and an M.A. in advertising from Michigan State University, Jim worked in advertising in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and Baltimore. He amassed experience on a wide variety of major accounts, such as Citibank, Kraft Foods, Burger King, General Electric, Toshiba, Arby’s and many others. In 1999 he started his own agency in Chicago, ESW Partners. Jim and his wife Joan live in Evanston, Ill.

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