

# Science of storytelling: why and how to use it in your marketing

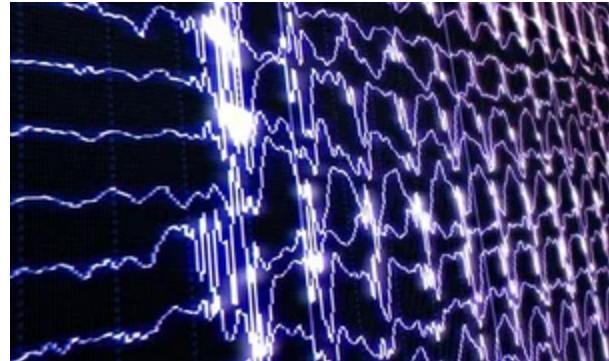
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“They lived.”

Telling a story in two words is a bold move, but Subaru does it in a compelling [30-second commercial](#). At first glance, hunks and scraps of metal that once resembled a vehicle make it seem as though whoever was in the car at the time of impact could not have survived. But with Subaru, they did.



Powerful stuff. Yet it's not the product that holds the power here – it is the power of storytelling at its best.

This short commercial is just one example of influential storytelling in marketing. As marketers, we know storytelling works and we should be incorporating it in our efforts. But do you know why it works? Do you know how to use storytelling to its fullest extent? Let's look at the science.

[Psychology Today](#) highlights the influential role of emotion in consumer behaviour in four points and makes a compelling case for storytelling:

- Functional MRI neuro-imagery shows that, when evaluating brands, consumers primarily use emotions (personal feelings and experiences) rather than information (brand attributes, features and facts).
- Advertising research reveals emotional response to an ad has far greater influence on a consumer's reported intent to buy a product than does the ad's content—by a factor of 3-to-1 for television commercials and 2-to-1 for print ads.
- Research conducted by the Advertising Research Foundation concluded that the emotion of “likeability” is the measure most predictive of whether an advertisement will increase a brand's sales.
- Studies show positive emotions toward a brand have far greater influence on consumer loyalty than trust and other judgments, which are based on a brand's attributes.

Prior to this work, [researchers in Spain](#) found that being told a story drastically changes the way our brains work. When people hear neutral words like “chair” or “key,” language-processing parts of the brain called Broca's and Wernicke's areas are activated exclusively. However, when people are

being told a story, the language processing areas of the brain are activated along with other sensory areas being used to experience the story. In this case, it was the primary olfactory cortex that lit up when hearing words associated with odour, such as “perfume” and “coffee”.

In the same vein, Véronique Boulenger, a cognitive scientist at the Laboratory of Language Dynamics in France, concluded that sentences containing action caused activity in the motor cortex, which coordinates the body’s movements, after participants were scanned as they read sentences like “Pablo kicked the ball”.

Through these studies and [others](#), it can be concluded that the human brain does not distinguish between reading or hearing a story and experiencing it in real life. In both cases, the same neurological regions are activated.

## What does this mean for marketing?

In a [less formal study](#) than those above, Jennifer Aaker, a marketing professor at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business, had each of her students give a 1-minute pitch.

Only one in 10 students used a story within his or her pitch while the others stuck to more traditional pitch elements, such as facts and figures. The professor then asked the class to write down everything they remembered about each pitch: 5 percent of students cited a statistic, but a whopping 63 percent remembered the story.

“Research shows our brains are not hard-wired to understand logic or retain facts for very long. Our brains are wired to understand and retain stories,” Aaker says. “A story is a journey that moves the listener, and when the listener goes on that journey they feel different and the result is persuasion and sometimes action.”

That action is exactly what marketers work so hard to achieve. If you struggle to write narrative content, these six tips will help you incorporate sophisticated storytelling into your digital marketing efforts:

1. **Develop a [true understanding of your target audience](#)**. This goes deeper than a one-page “buyer persona”. You must speak to your customers and ask why they bought from you. What drove them to start searching for a solution? How did they find your brand? What questions did they ask your sales team? Once you understand their answers, you will be able to create material that truly speaks to your audience.
2. Through your conversations, **identify emotional drivers** your buyers experience. This emotional analysis will help determine what your customers truly care about and how to tap into that passion.
3. **Prioritise authenticity** as much as possible. Highlight stories from employees, customers and other industry folk. Don’t shy away from using details like names, settings and positive outcomes. The more relatable your story is, the more your audience will respond.
4. Whether you are using Facebook, a blog, Twitter, direct mail or even a billboard, **use the strengths of your channel** to tell your story appropriately. From two words to 140 characters,

create a story that's shareable across your channel of choice.

5. **Give your stories credibility.** “No one says facts and figures should be completely eliminated from your storytelling,” Aaker says. “When data and story are used together, audiences are moved both emotionally and intellectually.”

6. **Encourage user-generated content** to share different perspectives of your overarching story. Try hosting a contest, managing a hashtag or interviewing industry leaders to create third-party content with storytelling flair.

If, as marketers, we continue to use neutral words and phrases that lack narrative, the minds of our buyers will continue to simply process and forget them. Stories stimulate the mind; it is now in our job descriptions to [send consumers on journeys](#) that lead them to solutions that solve their problems and, hopefully, boost our bottom lines.

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