

Beneath



Storyful brands and how to build them



A guide for B2B marketers



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Section 01

The business of storytelling

Once upon a time, storytelling was something that happened around campfires, in books and at children’s bedsides. In boardrooms? Less so.

Commercial storytelling was largely confined to the origin stories on ‘About us’ pages – the kind that feature near-broke founders setting up shop in their parents’ garages. That stuff can still play a part in your brand storytelling, but it’s not what we’re really talking about here.

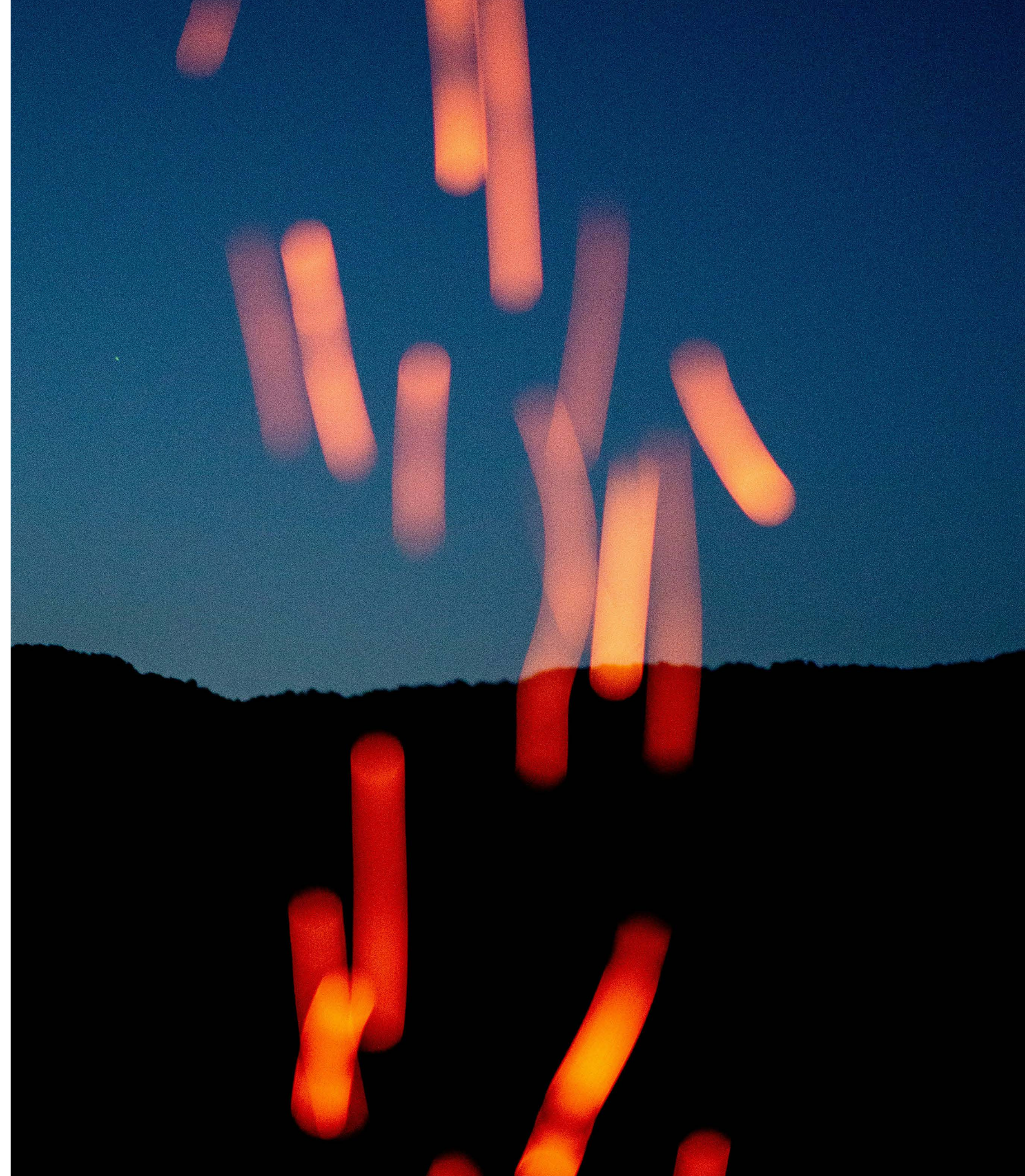
Skip to a few years ago, and storytelling got serious. It shed its reputation as marketing fluff and was finally recognised as a powerful business skill that confers a competitive advantage on the brands that know how to use it.

How many founders does it take to push a car to a meeting?

All of them, apparently. At its user conference, a tech company we know told a story about how, in their first few years in business, the three founders used to travel cross-country to sales meetings in a rusty old car one of them owned. One day it broke down, smoke billowing. So the young founders got out, and they pushed it the rest of the way... and they made the meeting on time.

It’s a nice story, and it maybe tells us something about the founders’ grit. But it’s nowhere near as powerful as the storytelling they’re doing at the brand level – creating a new category of tech with confidence and, importantly, credibility. That’s the kind of storytelling a storyful brand does. The other stuff is a nice extra.

Read a little more about this storyful tech brand [here](#).



The business case for building a storyful brand



It's easy to see why brand storytelling was so neglected for so long. In companies with complex B2B offerings especially, it's easy to shun the emotion and drama of storytelling and default to the cold, hard facts – the tech and specs.

This may feel like the safe approach, but in the long-term business of brand marketing, it's the opposite. Even the best product in the world won't sell itself. If you can't capture and hold your audience's attention, you'll never earn the right to tell them about those great features and USPs.

The science backs it up: studies show that buyers make subconscious decisions based on emotion then justify with logic – yes, even in B2B. And yes, even buyers with engineering degrees and million-dollar budgets. Hook them with a story and you can smuggle product information in as part of the plot.

It's worth remembering that stories aren't just for customers, either. B2B brands use storytelling for all kinds of audiences, in all kinds of ways. Pitching to investors, marketing to partner organisations, selling to prospects, onboarding users, hiring and engaging employees, building brand awareness, thought leadership... The list goes on.

We say all this to dispel any lingering doubts about the business value of storytelling. Phew. Now let's get started.

Want that promotion? Learn to tell a good story

A McKinsey survey of 18,000 professionals in 15 countries found that storytelling is a 'foundational' skill for anyone who wants to succeed in their career – in a world where the robots may be coming for (some of) our jobs. ChatGPT did not write this guide, honest.

Storytelling is a highly effective delivery mechanism for product information and sales messaging. Next time someone tries to tell you storytelling is marketing fluff, correct them.

Section 02

What are storyful brands?

All brands have a story to tell. In fact some brands have lots of stories worth telling, but we'll talk about the “one story vs many” question later.

For now we can say that every company – certainly any company that aspires to become a successful brand – has a story in it. There's a reason it exists. There's a distinct value it brings to the world. Specifically, to a certain kind of customer with a certain need. And this value is best explained through story.

But there's more to being a storyful brand than telling a great story. Storyful brands see storytelling as far more than just good marketing. To them it's a strategic superpower that can be turned into a competitive advantage.

Storyful brands get both the strategy and the execution of storytelling right. They develop an exceptional brand narrative, based on a well-researched and differentiating brand positioning. Then they bring this story to life creatively and consistently, so that every visual and verbal expression of their brand aligns with the story and reinforces it in the minds of their audience.

This strategic approach to storytelling is critical in B2B tech markets, where products and services tend to be complex, and it can take months or even years for a large committee of buyers to make a decision. Slick-but-superficial stories don't cut it. You need compelling, coherent, convincing stories that set a course for growth, stand up to buyer scrutiny and bring everyone along with you.

“Your story should be mission-driven. It's for the market but it's also crucial for motivating your own teams internally. Why do you do what you do every day? It comes down to helping people solve a problem.”

Rutger Frissen, VP of Sales & Strategic Partnerships, SO Connect



Your story is your strategy.

Ben Horowitz

So make sure it's not \$h!t.

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Section 03

What (and who) this guide is for

All companies have the potential to become storyful brands. Most of the ingredients already exist within them, lying dormant, waiting to be activated or combined in the right ways.

Maybe your brand narrative is good but not quite as great as it needs to be. Maybe you've grown but your story hasn't evolved with you. Maybe you have too many different stories flying around and you need to enforce some structure and strategy. If any of this sounds familiar then, reader, you're in the right place.

In this guide, you'll learn about the power of business storytelling and how to become a truly storyful brand. You'll also hear perspectives from B2B leaders honing their own craft of brand storytelling every day – not just in marketing, but in leadership, product, innovation, sales, design and more.

Read on to discover more about brand stories, how to find and craft the right ones, and how to turn them into your competitive advantage.

“Growth is the ultimate goal but brand is what gets you there. To achieve growth (in the form of demand creation, results and marketing performance) you need a memorable, standout story that helps differentiate you from the competition.”

Taylor Pettis, Director, Growth Marketing and Systems, Intel 471



Section 04

Positioning vs story vs strategy vs huh?

It gets confusing, doesn't it, all this jargon?
The problem is, if we can't clearly define our terms,
we don't stand a chance of getting this storyful
stuff right. So here are some quick definitions.

Vision

We don't dwell on it in this guide (because you've hopefully already got a pretty good idea what it is) but your vision is the ultimate destination you're headed towards, and can be framed as an end goal for your company ("To be the biggest and best ABC") or for everyone else ("A world in which XYZ").

Strategy

Probably the most misused and abused term of them all, strategy is simply your plan to get from point A to point B. If the ultimate goal is your company vision, the strategy is your roadmap. But remember that a strategy may dictate a journey of many parts, and each part may require an evolution of your positioning. Plus, strategies themselves evolve, or take us only as far as they can with the knowledge we have today.

Positioning

This is really a list of facts that explain how your company or product provides the best solution for a specific problem or opportunity faced by a specific audience today (i.e. in the strategic present, not in a far-flung vision of the future). It provides the framing and the narrative elements for your brand narrative right now. Kind of like a creative brief that's detailed and prescriptive, in a really good way. So what's in this list of facts? It varies, but at Beneath we try to uncover six important truths. You'll find these in the section titled "Key questions to answer in your brand positioning."

Brand narrative

This is the narrative you create using the elements defined in your positioning. Think of it as the best possible presentation of your positioning, logically and creatively. If you wore a strategist’s hat during the positioning phase, swap it for your copywriter’s hat when you draft the story and associated messaging. Read more about what makes a great brand narrative a little later.

Messaging

Messaging – a collection of creative miscellany – ultimately refers to all the chunks of copy you write (using your thinking from the stages above) to communicate with different audiences, with different points of focus. Sometimes you’ll create quite complex messaging frameworks for multiple personas and industries. Or elevator pitches and value propositions that communicate key benefits and differentiators. If you have a company tagline or a campaign slogan, that’s messaging. Technically your brand narrative is a form of messaging too.

Mission, purpose, values...

Mission statements are a bit like vision statements, but they’re about how a company delivers on its objectives today, in pursuit of the long-term vision. Purpose and values are usually derived from this stuff, and tend to get a bit fluffy and hifalutin. They’re kind of like a brand’s tone of voice: they work when they’re a part of (and emerge from) the strategic thinking we outline above. Not when they’re plucked out of a magic brand Sorting Hat, or invoked like horoscopes.



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A rule of thumb

Positionings come and go. Stories change. But here's a rule of thumb: your vision should change less than your strategy (if at all), which should change less than your positioning, which is brought to life in your brand narrative (and all the messaging and storytelling content that it informs) at each stage of your company's journey.

But here's the rub: every element has to work as part of a coherent whole. If there's a disconnect, everything falls apart. If it all works in harmony, you have the strategic foundations in place to build a storyful brand.

"One character that's still missing from most brand stories is the product. Your customers want to know about the product, even if marketers get squeamish about it."

Jess Crandon, MMEA Content Marketing,
Senior Analyst, Salesforce

"As storytellers, we're here to do three things really. We're seeking truth, building trust and performing a service. And performance is as much about winning hearts and minds as it is about making bank."

Jeremy Connell-Waite,
Communications Designer, IBM

Section 05

Brand positioning informs
brand narrative

Some people call it their north star, their strategic narrative (shout-out to the great Andy Raskin) or, simply, their strategy. At Beneath we call it a brand narrative. Whatever you call it, your brand narrative sets the stage for everything you do as a brand.

The elements of a brand narrative are defined and refined during a brand positioning project, and brought together in a compelling story: one story to rule them all.

As always, there are various methodologies you can use to define your positioning, the most effective of which is usually to ask a hundred questions and follow the most interesting routes through the conversation. But that's not very useful advice, so here are six questions that distil at least a few dozen of the biggies down to a purer form. Use them and see where they take you!

De-positioning the competition

Slack calls itself “your digital HQ” and talks about “building the digital-first ecosystem for work” – but that messaging isn’t exactly clear or intuitive for the casual reader.

So one of Slack’s most impactful messages, in our humble opinion, was when it ran some ads with this simple comparison:

“What if your email was organised by project? Then it wouldn’t be email at all.”

Suddenly Slack wasn’t just cooler than Microsoft Teams – it was more effective than email. That’s a beautiful example of a brand that can reframe its competitive set, and control the context in which buyers think about it.



Key questions to answer in your brand positioning

Why must your story be told now?

Capture a moment of significant change or a challenging state of affairs in your customers' world. This demand trigger is the relevant backdrop to your story.

What market category do you want to be in?

In other words, what type or product or service are you offering? Note the use of "want to" here: on some (quite rare) occasions it might make sense to create a category. Or you might simply need to reframe the context in which people think about your offering.

What defines your ideal customer?

Identify who needs to hear this story, and who doesn't.

What do you help them achieve?

What is it that makes you the hero? Showcase the value, benefit or outcome that you ultimately give them. It also helps to show the peril of the status quo, to add danger and urgency. This can help you establish the villain of the piece.

What are your competitive alternatives?

What are your potential customers using instead? Bear in mind that these might be recognised competitors or some kind of homegrown solution...or nothing. This is what you need to de-position.

What makes you better than the alternatives?

What value or USP do you offer that none of these alternatives can, and that the people out there sorely need? This is the magic you bring to the party.

What value or USP do you offer that none of these alternatives can, and that the people out there sorely need? This is the magic you bring to the party.

Section 06

Story-led design

The words you use are only part of the story, of course. On the flip side of the brand coin is the visual identity and design work that works alongside copy to communicate a brand’s identity and personality.

Both disciplines should be story-led. But in many ways design is the more efficient information-delivery mechanism. It provokes an instantaneous, subconscious response on an emotional level. It sets the scene for your messaging – before it’s even read.

Freedom in constraints

The fun thing about story-led design is the freedom it affords you, not in spite of the constraints you place upon it but thanks to those constraints. With a well-defined story as your strategic backbone, you can flex your design to the various contexts, formats and channels it will encounter – confident that you know what does and does not align with your story-led visual brand.

It’s tempting to describe copy and design as the creative expression of a logical positioning, though this would be drawing an extremely over-simplified (and false) distinction between logic and creativity.

What we can say with certainty is that storyful brands have the strongest strategic foundations, so they get to have the most freedom – and the most fun.

“Designers love constraints. They’ll say they don’t, but deep down they know constraints will help in the long run. And a brand story is an amazing creative constraint, in effect. Like a tight brief, it shuts off distracting tangents and invites you to focus your idea, delivery and execution on telling that story – which in turn leads to a more considered and strategic brand.”

Matt Roundell, Design Director, Beneath

The changing face of your business, story and brand

Just as your story will change over time as your business evolves (and the world around you and your customers changes), so too must your visual brand. Usually this will be an iterative process. Don’t go changing your logo every couple of years just for the sake of it. But do make the time to conduct a formal review to make sure your visual brand is fit for purpose in supporting the latest and greatest version of your brand story.

How Beneath evolved its visual identity

Forgive us for talking about ourselves, but it's a handy example. When Beneath started out as an agency determined to create "B2B marketing with depth" our visual identity mirrored our then-positioning with ideas of depth: layers, darkness, downward spirals.

Fast forward a couple of years, we realised our customers valued us for our storytelling and creativity at least as much as for our rigorous approach to B2B marketing. So we refreshed our positioning and brand narrative. We held on to depth as a core element (the deep ideas we uncover to inform strategic storytelling), but we also introduced the notion of storyful brands to represent the kind of brands we love to create and work with.

Our visual identity shook off some of its gloomier shades and took on a more uplifting, colourful, lively character that helps us blend the rigour, logic, emotion and creativity that define our work.

Section 07

A five-step process for
building storyful brands

First, a caveat about processes like the one we're about to lay out. Repeatable processes (or frameworks, methodologies, templates – whatever they're sold to you as) are often useful, but they're never enough. And they can often be downright damaging. If anyone tries to tell you their particular cookie-cutter is the one and only solution for you, don't let them anywhere near your, um, dough.

That said, you have to start somewhere. So here's a process you can follow as far as it works for you, and tailor as appropriate to your needs.



01 Story Mining

Any strategic marketer worth their salt knows that the first step in any project is diagnosis. When you're building a storyful brand, we call this foundational step Story Mining. So sharpen your metaphorical pickaxe, or your real pencil – whatever works – and start digging into your research.



In practice, this step involves lots of desk research, reading up on company history, competitor analysis, and studying the market or markets being served. Input calls and interviews with the people in the know (definitely not just the brand or marketing team) are essential.

Speak to the company founders if they're still around, and the current leadership. If you're working on the highest level brand story, i.e. the brand narrative, then why would you delegate ownership and approval of the project to anyone below the highest level of company leadership?

Speak to people in product, sales, marketing. Speak to customers if you can. And partner organisations. Anyone with potentially useful insight. Not sure what to ask? Start with the questions we shared in chapter five.

Don't cut corners in the Story Mining phase. Be forensic, capture everything, and if you're lucky you'll hit on a deep idea or make a connection that sparks something in you. You may not fully grasp the sense of it yet, but these are the instinctive moments when great brand stories are born.

One story or many?

In this guide we talk about brands with lots of stories to tell, but we also talk about your story (singular). So do you need one story or many? The answer, of course, is: it depends.

The most strategic and valuable story is the brand narrative – the narrative that communicates your brand positioning in a way that engages your prospects. For tips on how to kick-start your brand positioning process, we've given you some questions and thought-starters.

Then, once you have the brand narrative figured out, you have the foundation in place to riff on your core story for thought leadership or for specific products, audiences, channels, and so on. The key is having that overarching narrative to align with. Add colour and nuance to suit the context, but never contradict the brand narrative.

02 Story Crafting

We're mixing our metaphors a bit here, but if step one is where you go mining for deep ideas and insights, step two is where you extract and refine the ore until you end up with the really valuable end products: your brand positioning, brand narrative and a strategy for creating further storytelling content.



It's at this crafting stage that you also develop your visual identity in tandem with your brand positioning and story. People argue about whether copy or design comes first – but only in tactical conversations. The important point for our purposes is that your story comes first. The copy and design come next, giving your story its best expression.

So now is when you craft the story and any supporting messaging you need. It's also when your tone of voice emerges. Note the deliberate referral to emergence there. Tone of voice isn't something you can simply cobble together, last minute. If you're playing brand personality bingo towards the end of a branding process, then allow us to be "expert but human" and "friendly yet informative" with you now: you're wasting your time. You can read more about how voice and personality actually materialise in the "Five Cs" section up next.

"My favourite opinion writer is Tom Friedman. The most engaged writer The New York Times has ever had. And on his business card, does it say: Tom Friedman, NY Times, 3 Pulitzer Prizes? No. it says: Tom Friedman. Heating and lighting. He says that's all we do in communications: try to stoke up an emotion so you might act, or illuminate something by simplifying complexity. Energy and clarity. Heating and lighting! I love that."

Jeremy Connell-Waite, Communications Designer, IBM

The five Cs of a great B2B story

When you’ve worked on as many B2B stories as we have (and studied more on the side, because everyone needs hobbies), you start to recognise and appreciate the traits that make up the successful ones. Whether it’s a brand narrative or a more tactical piece of storytelling content you’re tackling, here are five traits worth emulating – we even managed to make them alliterate.

Clarity

Your story is a logical argument presented creatively. Before anyone can buy into it, they have to understand it. So a number of things have to be crystal clear (thanks to your hard work in the brand positioning phase): the intended audience, the premises of the argument, and the logic that carries us irresistibly to the solution: these people need what you’re selling.

Conflict

B2B stories are a bit like short stories in that they’re essentially about change. But they have more in common with Hollywood blockbusters, where conflict drives the action and maintains suspense. So identify your protagonist’s deepest desires, raise the stakes, and stick a villain in their path.

Celebration

Once you’ve piled on the doom and gloom, it’s time to offer salvation. Your customers have faced an existential threat, but (spoiler alert), a hero has emerged to save them (that’s you). It’s a cause for celebration! Company-branded bubbly all round. Spread the good news.

Credibility

As the narrator of your brand story, you’re hardly reliable on your own. You need to back up your claims with credible proof. Pitching for investment? Tell them all about your founders’ amazing qualifications, your beta product and your super-long waiting list. Selling to prospects? Show them how you’ve already won and wowed companies like them.

Character

By the time you’ve worked on all of the above, your story should already be brimming with character. The best brands (and their stories) have vivid personalities, but this isn’t something you hastily slap on slide 48 of your brand deck. The same applies to tone of voice. Character isn’t just how you tell ‘em – it’s what you say. If you have a story worth telling, and you have fun while you do it, its style will emerge with its substance.

03 Storytelling

After the Story Mining and Story Crafting steps comes Storytelling – where we graduate from diagnosis and strategy to execution (rounding out the marketing textbook triad). In other words, it's time to act.



The Storytelling step is exactly what it sounds like. It's when you take the story you've developed and you bring it to life in all the places your audience(s) will see and hear it. On your website, of course. In sales decks. In thought leadership and lead-gen campaigns. And all the usual suspects in terms of sales and marketing content.

But remember it's not just about customers. You may want to tailor your story for investors in a pitch deck, for product and product marketing teams, and for employees and prospective employees in recruitment, onboarding and employer branding content, and so on.

“Product storytelling is all about motivation. If I can't explain the motivation for the chosen software architecture, I'll lose the engineers. If I can't convince the customer that their short-term pain point is the wrong motivation, and they need to focus instead on the bigger picture, I'll lose them too. If I align them on the right motivations, I can win their trust and build relationships (and great products).”

Stuart Dobbie, Head of Product and Architecture, Callsign

“Great storytelling is universal – it evokes emotions, it challenges our perceptions, it moves us to action. B2B marketing should be no different. The best storytellers are so engaging that you become part of their world and the dividing line between storyteller and audience blurs. This is where the magic happens in B2B marketing – where storytelling is your pathway to shared success.”

Tammy Ammon, Sr. Director Thought Leadership & Market Research, Acxiom

04

Story Scaling

When you harness the power of story, there's no limit to where it can add value. Brand positioning and brand narrative nailed? Check. First content marketing campaigns up and running? Check.



That's a good start. And it gives you a strong foundation on which to scale your efforts – adding new campaigns and formats into the mix, and tailoring your stories to your most strategically important audiences.

With your brand narrative as your north star, you can develop thought leadership programs for your leadership teams and be quick to respond to timely industry events or announcements – without straying from your strategy.

You can expand your messaging so you know exactly what to say to the next customer segment on your target list, or tweak your story for new markets you're trying to break into.

You can also begin to weave your story into the fabric of your company – beyond the immediate sales and marketing applications. Think partner marketing, co-branded marketing opportunities and events.

You laid the groundwork for this kind of flexibility in the Storytelling step. Now it's time to scale on up.



A storyful brand writes about its tax strategy

Stripe are often lauded by marketers as a poster child of B2B tech, and for good reason. They make “financial infrastructure for the internet” – so far so simple. Their mission statement is “to increase the GDP of the internet” – nicely put. But as CEO Patrick Collison pointed out in a tweet:

*“Increase the GDP of the internet’ is our mission statement but also, importantly, our *strategy*. Zero sum games are bad. We want Stripe to enable new businesses, new customers, new transactions, and new economic activity.”*

That’s a brand that knows the power of a single story, told on repeat, by everyone in the organisation. And if, like us, you happened to read deep down into the legal pages on their site (because, again, everyone needs hobbies...), you’d see that same thought again, nested in some lines about Stripe’s tax strategy (our italics):

“Stripe helps new companies get started and grow their revenues, and established businesses accelerate into new markets and launch new business models. Over the long term, Stripe aims to increase the GDP of the internet. The tax strategy below applies to Stripe Payments UK, Ltd. It has been published in accordance with paragraph 22(2) of Schedule 19 to the Finance Act 2016...”

We love how this shows Stripe’s respect for storytelling in strategy and in execution. That’s a storyful brand in our book.

05

Story Evolving

Stories aren't static. Strategies and brand positionings change – even a company's vision can change, as we mentioned when we tried to do some jargon-busting earlier.

The point is, everything must evolve: your brand identity, your brand narrative, and all the stories you tell under that umbrella, both verbal and visual, in your sales and marketing content.

So plan for change. Listen, learn and optimise your ideas and stories to make sure they're always performing, while staying true to your growing brand. If you missed the section on story-led design, there's some advice in there on how to evolve your visual identity.

“When you're a big brand, it's hard to capture everything in one story. You can't tell it all, so you need to be able to trust people to adapt the story in different contexts and regions, without straying from the essence of it. One of my major lessons in the past few years has been to get our customers to tell our story for us – they usually tell it better!”

Jess Crandon, MMEA Content Marketing,
Senior Analyst, Salesforce



Section 08

It starts with the right mindset

We've outlined a process that any company can follow to become a storyful brand. But we missed a step – one that comes before the five we explained, and is probably the most important step of them all.

It's a mindset change. It's about knowing that stories aren't just for marketers and creatives to play with. Stories define companies, and they connect them with all the different audiences they need to win over.

Stories can be tactical in a piece of content, or strategic in the form of a brand narrative and visual identity, informed by a deeply researched brand positioning. The trick is to embrace the storytelling process fully, knowing that it only works when you commit to the hard work of strategy and the fun of creative execution in total harmony.

Being a storyful brand has nothing to do with having more stories than the next company. It's about recognising the power of story, finding your own, and turning it into your competitive advantage.

"Everyone has to believe in the brand story, and care about it – not just the marketing department. When you've been on both sides of the agency-inhouse marketing divide, you develop the ability to tell when a brand is just doing performative storytelling and when they actually give a shit. Find the real enthusiasm!"

Jess Crandon, MMEA Content Marketing,
Senior Analyst, Salesforce



Ready to build a storyful
brand? We'd love to
talk it over with you.



LinkedIn

Instagram

Thank you.
Any questions?

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