

Authentic Brands Live Their Story! Does Yours?

A powerful story, when executed well—builds trust, connection, and loyalty with your audience.

Does your brand have a story? You know—a **story** that's **captivating** and **inspiring**; has real meaning and comes from the heart of what you're all about as a brand. It's a story your employees believe in and they stand behind it through their behaviors and actions. It reveals itself in your systems and processes and your customers are convinced by the story because **you live it**.



Countless times I run across brands that are really good at touting a story; what they believe they're about and what they think they stand for, only to find that the story is backed by dysfunctional processes, empty promises and a culture of discontented employees undermining it at every turn. This incongruence is dangerous as it tarnishes the brand at every customer touch-point. It creates mistrust and I vow never to do business with that brand again.

Authentic brands **live** and **breathe** their story. It's reflected in their core essence—what they stand for and how they show up. You trust their story because you experience it through the living of their *values* and brand *personality*. *The story is embedded in their standards of performance* and the consistency in the *delivery of the promise* they make and keep to their employees and to you—their customer.

It doesn't matter what **industry** you are in, **product** or **service you provide**. If your story is true to who you are as a brand, your employees will get behind it, and live it. If your story is convincing and consistent, your customers will love and trust your brand, and continue to buy from you. If the story is **false** or rather just a marketing gimmick, because the brand doesn't really 'own' it, then your employees won't live it and customers will always see through the fallacy of it.

Consider the following scenarios of two competitor brands I have experienced:

- **BRAND A** is a company where its founders express a simple story that doing business with them should be *fun, easy and enjoyable*. They emphasize *integrity, and a friendly and exceptional service experience along with 100% guaranteed satisfaction or your money back*.
- **THE EXPERIENCE:**
 - The initial purchase experience was reasonably fast and efficient, but when I went to return my item (a pair of shoes); I was sorely disappointed with the customer service representative and their supervisor's behavior, and their return policy.



- I was one-day past the 15-day return policy (*of which I wasn't aware of because it was in the tiniest print—hardly visible to the naked eye, however, the 100% guaranteed satisfaction or your money back was in huge, bold print, on the packaging receipt. Seemed a bit misleading to me.*)
- I haggled for 45 minutes over the phone and during that time was put on hold for several extended periods. I thought, *“How difficult is it to live up to YOUR 100% satisfaction guarantee and refund MY money?”*
- I must mention that the supervisor was insincere in his droning tone during most of the call—not really friendly, nor fun, easy and enjoyable—the story I was led to believe.
- But I just kept at it. I think I finally wore the supervisor down to which he agreed to let me return the item, but for exchange only.
- Needless to say this brand did not live up to its story and I'll never venture back. And, yes, I've told several of my friends!

● **BRAND B** is a company whose story is about open and honest relationships, a family spirit, and humility. They emphasize that it's important for their customers to feel special, a part of a community experience as they strive to deliver the best customer service possible – it's their WOW philosophy.

● **THE EXPERIENCE:**

- My initial purchase experience was great! I received my order the next day, not to mention I ordered the shoes on a Sunday. I didn't expect overnight. I also didn't expect free shipping.
- When I tried the shoes on, I found they had a flaw in the toe of the right shoe that made it impossible for a comfortable fit. And of course, I thought, *“This should be an interesting return experience.”*
- When I phoned, the customer service representative apologized profusely (very humble in his tone), and instructed me to give the shoes to goodwill.
- The rep explained they didn't have another of the same shoe of my size in stock, so he offered me \$15 off my next purchase. I received an email in my inbox within minutes with a confirmation of the offer and instructions on how to use it.
- He asked if he could place me on a wait list so I could be notified by email when the item would be back in stock. Of course, I said yes!
- He then offered VIP status. I said, *“Absolutely!”* He mentioned several things, but one thing I remembered was free overnight shipping both ways. Talk about feeling special, not to mention by this time I was truly WOWED!



- This brand truly lived up to their story in every way! I continue to venture back and have never been less than wowed.

So how do you compose a compelling story that you can live up to it like Brand B? How do you know if your brand's story is believable to your employees? How do you know if it resonates with your customers?

- *You'll know it when it engages them and consistently guides their behaviors and actions in ways that make them continue to want to be a part of and insist on your brand.*



And how do you **guide** their behaviors? Your brand must deliver to your employees and customers an experience that builds trust in what you stand for and creates an emotional bond that is continually reinforced. ***Your brand's story and how you live it must affect the way they feel, the way they think, and the way they act...consistently!***

Here are a few ideas to kick-start your organization in living and breathing your brand's story:

Define Your Story (What Does Your Brand Stand For?)

At the heart of your brand's story is a special message that comes from the core of what your business was founded on and what you aspire to be. Ask the following questions:

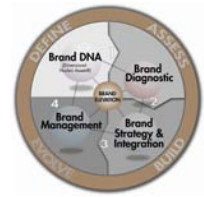
1. What does your brand **believe** in?
2. What core values guide your behaviors?
3. What standards of performance do you adhere to?
4. What **sets you apart** from your competitors?
5. What's your personality as a brand?
6. Does your brand have a **strong point of view**? If so, what is it?
7. What makes your brand different or special?
8. What **emotions** do you want your brand to evoke in others?
9. What's the overall '**lingering feeling**' for those who experience your brand?

Craft and Communicate Your Special Story

Distill the elements of what your brand stands for into a unique **value proposition** by weaving the answers to the above questions into a **powerful story**.

- Keep the story as simple as possible, yet compelling for your employees and customers to be intrigued and want to be a part of what you stand for.

Elevate



- Make sure it is authentic to your brand.

HOW you communicate is just as important as **WHAT** you communicate.

- Think about how to convey your story and the **vocabulary** and **tone** (congruent with your brand's personality) used to express what you say you are.
- Develop a **list of words** that represent your brand and incorporate those terms in all of your communications.

One story model to consider is to build a storyline around a typical customer (e.g., 'Jane') experiencing your brand through a guided visualization. Be sure to include multi-sensory descriptions that compel and engage the customer throughout the brand experience. This type of story-writing model is a great exercise for not only the leadership, but for the employees to attempt. This will provide you with a great sense of what your employees think about how they live your story and may be an interesting exercise to use in conveying the message.

Make sure your story is communicated clearly and directly. Get creative in how the message is expressed in all your print and online communications, and your daily written and oral interactions with your employees and customers. Consistently spread the word about your story so it reinforces your brand's value proposition.

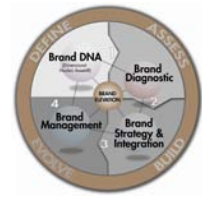
Live Your Story through Every Facet of Your Business—the Power is in the Execution

Make sure you **hire people** who can relate and **share** the **principles** behind your brand's story. Ingrain it in the minds of your employees so everyone believes it and lives it.

- Integrate the essence of your story into your employee on-boarding processes, training and development programs and how you reward and recognize your employees.
- It's your employees that make the story come alive so make sure they understand their role in playing out your story.
- Observe your employees in action. Observe how your customers respond.

MAKE IT REAL. Infuse the essence of your story through **all aspects of the customer experience** from initial contact to sales or service transaction, support and follow-up.

- Establish policies, systems and processes that support what you stand for, and reinforce the story at every touch point.
- Continually assess and evaluate to ensure you are living your story to the fullest. Continue to ask your customers and employees for feedback. Make adjustments to ensure you live up to your story.



- Ensure a sense of urgency to correct immediately when you ‘slip up’. This will only foster goodwill among your employees and customers in how you strive to live your story.

If clearly articulated and lived consistently, the story behind your brand can be truly inspiring—propelling the success of your business. It can unite your organization behind a common purpose—*your special story*, engaging your employees to live and breathe it, while captivating your customers so they keep coming back to experience it.



About the Author -- Carol is committed to organizations who want to achieve transformational and sustainable brand success through **strategic, internal branding** practices. As co-developer of *The Brand DNA Journey*SM methodology, she has helped numerous clients create consistent, relevant and distinctive experiences that inspire, motivate and engage employees to deliver memorable customer experiences.

For 30 years, Carol has cultivated extensive global experience and proven success in leading businesses through significant challenges. Her experience spans a variety of industries including hospitality/hotels and other service related, cable, media, government contractors, government—local, state and municipal, high technology, professional services, financial services—banking and insurance and healthcare.

Carol has a passion for branding, where she believes everyone in an organization is responsible for understanding and delivering “on-brand” experiences. Having held several executive management and strategic HR roles, including Vice President of Human Resources—Asia Pacific for the largest hotel company in the world – Six Continents Hotels (currently Inter-Continental Hotels Group), she has learned that the most successful and sustainable brand organizations harness the energies of their people to bring their brands to life through the power of this most critical asset.

As a captivating international speaker and consultant, she has presented at major conferences and events in London, Singapore, Bali and the U.S. She regularly trains and presents webinars on brand culture and employee engagement, brand definition, brand strategy and management for businesses and is author of numerous articles.

Carol is co-author of *Brand DNA: Uncover Your Organization’s Genetic Code for Competitive Advantage* coming in May 2010. Find out more at www.BrandDNABook.com. Accepting pre-orders.

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