

THE ART OF STORYTELLING

Using the Principles of Brand Journalism to
Engage Customers and Employees

What's Your Story?



INTRODUCTION

Public Relations (PR) has traditionally managed the release and spread of newsworthy information for an organization. The basic tools of PR include press releases and staged events, such as press conferences. These tools were used to pitch stories to the media. Marketing, which once relied on sales brochures, collateral materials, and website copy to sell products and service, now uses “content marketing” to tell a story with the distinct purpose of generating leads. A third option has emerged which uses storytelling to capture an audience’s attention and showcase an organization’s values, but not in a sales-driven way.

James Ylisela, co-founder of Ragan Consulting Group, coined the term “brand journalism” to refer to this growing practice. Using his many years as an award-winning investigative reporter, he tailored traditional news gathering tactics to the corporate communications environment. Here, Mr. Ylisela shares tips for applying brand journalism to engage customers and employees alike.



The Role of Brand Journalism

“Every organization has a story to tell. People relate to stories. With brand journalism, marketers still have to market, that doesn’t go away, but the discipline changes when you add brand journalism to the mix,” says Mr. Ylisela. The practice can support both external and internal communications, as well as boost employee engagement dramatically.

“For years, internal comms had a license to bore people to death; you can’t get away with that in external communications,” Ylisela explains. “All that has changed, as employers think more about recruiting and retaining talent. Where executives used to pay lip service to benefits, culture, morale, and engagement, that is no longer the case. You just can’t be boring any more.”

Consequently, storytelling inside the organization is as important now as it is on the outside. Enter brand journalism.

What Constitutes Good Storytelling?

People recognize the value of storytelling. It engages the brain and the heart in ways that facts and information do not, Mr. Ylisela stresses. At the heart of every story is emotion. Unfortunately, most internal communicators are simply delivering task-oriented information. Organizations also present themselves as emotionless.

Yet stories that get remembered are those that contain emotion.

Conveying emotion, within the context of business, means demonstrating passion about purpose, showing the persistence to solve problems, and having compassion towards employees and customers. This is how organizations connect with people. During crises, it is particularly critical.

In more formal and technical terms, a good story contains a narrative arc, often in the structure of the “hero’s journey.” The hero strikes out on an adventure (accomplish a task or solve a challenge), faces obstacle, and overcomes them to achieve resolution or success. Emotion is everywhere throughout the narrative arc.

In business, the hero’s journey might involve a team trying to develop and launch a new product or to change the nature of business operations. Mr. Ylisela advises telling those stories from the point-of-view of employees closest to the work being done, not from the executives’ perspective.



We're Already Doing That!

Often, Mr. Ylisela finds, organizations believe they are telling stories effectively. Once he guides them through an audit of their internal and external communications efforts, however, they discover holes in their processes and weaknesses in their content.

An audit, he says, establishes a baseline for what is being communicated, how well it is working, and whether the audience is responding. After making programmatic changes, those same elements can be measured and evaluated again to track progress.



“Many clients don’t want to do the audit, they just want to get started,” Mr. Ylisela says. “We often try to get them to slow down, to spend time thinking about the strategy and framework for their communications. Organizations will cling to a crappy communications channel, just because they don’t want to change. Even if they know it’s crappy, it’s still their crappy. We want to document and quantify whether a channel is working.”

Armed with audit data, Mr. Ylisela encourages his clients to be willing to let go of tactics that aren’t working. Typically, companies will add to their list of actions and strategies without subtracting any. With the audit complete and a communications strategy as a guide, communications professionals can ask themselves: What can we let go of? If the team needs more time to support innovative strategies like brand journalism, perhaps there are tasks that can be eliminated to create space for these new pursuits.

How Do We Find Stories?

Good brand journalism requires generating stories from across the organization consistently—not unlike how a traditional newsroom operates, humming with leads for stories across a city. Based on his many years in journalism, Mr. Ylisela adapted that editorial process to the corporate communications setting.

First, he recommends creating an integrated team with representatives from different departments and functional areas, including marketing, PR, social media, and human resources. He also finds it useful to create brand journalism-specific roles and responsibilities.

“We configure a brand journalism org chart layered on top of the regular org chart,” Mr. Ylisela explains. “It mirrors a newsroom, where someone is the publisher, and the editor. In a newsroom, there’s a reporter to cover sports, politics, health, and city hall. In an organization, we use the same concept. We bring people together to identify news of the day across all aspects of the organization.”

The news team, or select members from it, participate in recurrent meetings held monthly, weekly, and daily.

Monthly meetings of the broad team are led by the marketing representative and enable long-term planning. Looking two to four months down the road, they answer questions such as: What initiatives, events or activities are on the horizon? What campaigns can we create?

During the weekly meetings, a subset of the team comes together to generate and select ideas, and to brainstorm the most creative way to tell each story. They may decide to pursue a video story, create an infographic, or conduct a Q&A interview. Once they determine an approach for each idea, they can assign a reporter to the story, based on skills and expertise. Each week, the team also reviews progress from previous assignments.

Daily meetings enable two to three people from the team, led by PR or a social media representative, to review planned posts for that day. It may require only 15 to 30 minutes to assess which stories are ready to be released. The team might ask: What are we saying about ourselves today? Is there a special event? Did anything noteworthy arise? And, what’s happening tomorrow?



The News Team in Action...

What might the end results look like after a news team hits the street? Imagine it's Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Company ABC is a major sponsor for a local 5K race to benefit the cause. The PR team helps to coordinate and promote the event. The brand journalism team members write a story about the race that includes interviews with experts in the fight against breast cancer. The internal communications team creates video profiles to highlight the involvement of specific employees volunteering at the race, as well as profiles of employees who are breast cancer survivors. The CEO speaks at an industry event, references the race in her opening remarks, and ties its importance to the company's core values and mission.

Just as this example shows, by understanding and applying the principles of brand journalism, an organization's news team can identify many ways to join forces to present a more unified, compelling, and consistent message to all audiences.



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