

# "Let me tell you a story..." Why marketing fails without digital storytelling

By [Leigh Andrews](#)

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There's no denying the power of potent digital storytelling skills, but marketers aren't necessarily born equipped with those skills, nor do they know how to hone them. Enter the BrandLove potent digital storytelling experiential workshop, co-presented by Chantel Botha and Jon Savage. Here's a sneak peek of what I experienced.



A scene from the workshop, captured by [Johan Botha](#).

“ Once upon a time... ”

Whatever I say next, you're likely to see it as a story that you'll listen to and recall better than if I just marched right in with a sentence, whether it's fantastical or fact-based – that's because storytelling is how we humans communicate.

It triggers the visual centres of the brain and **makes a 'picture' for you to see, rather than another paragraph of words your eyes will gaze at and likely glaze over as a result.** That's why for brands, especially in the digital age of 2018 where information spam is the name of the game, it's one of the top ways to build an authentic relationship with your audience.

[Misc magazine](#) shares:

“ ...branding is storytelling, design tells a story, the applications of storytelling to business are endless. The fact that stories sell is evidenced by the success of TedX, Humans of New York, and Kickstarter. ”

And yet, for many marketers, it's difficult to know how to start. You know your brand's selling points inside and out, but do you know how to make your brand matter to consumers? *That's* the question.



Those 'idiots' are your brand ambassadors!

Mareli Smit 6 Jul 2016



And that's why we were attending the BrandLove potent digital storytelling workshop, held at BrandLove's unconventional offices in Boston – **no 'in-and-out-in-few-hours' quickie here, we were kept busy from 9am-on-the-dot to a little after 5pm, on a Friday, no less.** We put on our name tags, explained why we were attending and why we care about digital storytelling.

The sum of our responses were that every brand has ample messaging back and forth with its customers, but you need special storytelling skills to stand out from the sea of other brands out there, as the best brand storytelling is about creating an emotional connection and personifying your brand. Not as easy as slapping your brand logo on the latest sale item.



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Romi Adler 12 Mar 2018



So visuals and voices work – most ads are a testament to this. But consumers are not likely to remember the ad that simply punts the latest feature of the latest product. Instead, they remember an ad for the way it makes them feel, and for an ad to make you feel something, it needs to be relatable, telling a story that either solves a problem or adds to the consumer's life.

Presenter Jon Savage said it's easy to feel trapped by your brand, or that you don't actually have a story to tell. **But there's always a story.** Savage showed us the Squarespace 'Keanu Reeves story', where he travels to the desert to build his own website, [Archmotorcycles.com](http://Archmotorcycles.com).

Savage says this is the only funny episode from a series covering multiple tones with the same message of how to go about building your own website through Squarespace. It's effective because it's real and has buckets of personality. See for yourself:

There's authenticity at play here, as Reeves isn't merely a paid brand ambassador, here, he actually used Squarespace to build his site. So while the subject matter of 'building websites' may seem a little dry, Squarespace found a way to embrace who they are. Even better is that they're not afraid to poke fun at themselves, in saying they won't pretend to be something they're not. That's good storytelling.

As a digital content strategist, Savage knows first-hand that brands often lie to themselves. He candidly shared that his has been a career filled with failures and part of a crazy life story that includes travelling with a rock band and creating a movie that went to the Cannes Film Festival.

Savage says until just a few years ago, people thought his passion for digital was crazy. He's since made the leap from artist to expert and says the internet is the major catalyst here.

It has completely transformed the way we communicate. That's why Savage says traditional advertising agencies are struggling, as today's consumer is tech-savvy, wary of being 'advertised at' and has the option to ignore you. That's why Savage says:

“ Your reach in social media is meaningless, it just means you have forced your message in front of your audience – there's no guarantee they have seen it or absorbed it. ”

That's why Botha calls him 'a genuine disruptor of traditional thinking.'

## The real resonance of reach, follows and likes

Savage explains that **now, you have to invite consumers to talk to you. Gone are the days of saying, 'this is my message and I need you to hear it'**. Storytelling is how you do this effectively, and in making the all-important leap from reach to engagement, this the middle-ground.

The most recent HeavyChef event covered the topic of reach vs influence and real resonance in depth.



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Juanita Pienaar 23 Mar 2018



Savage says financial services have the hardest time with effective digital storytelling, as usually, their consumers reach out to them with a query that becomes a dialogue, not the other way around.

You also need to take a step outside and recognise how many brands post specials on social media daily. They have so many Facebook followers, yet only a few shared posts and usually only get comments on product or service fails.

It's fitting to read this while keeping in mind the current Enterprise crisis, where Savage says they're 'struggling to be authentic'.



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Madelain Roscher 3 Apr 2018



## A call to courage with crisis communications

Brands can come back from a crisis, though. Botha shared the Cannes Lions-winning OB tampons 'apology song' case study as an example of this. Due to distribution problems, the product disappeared from shelves for a while. Female consumers were angry so the brand sent out a customised email apology song to all 65,010 of them:

It's effective as the consumer is placed right in the story. And while it's heavily based on stereotypes, metaphors are woven into something that's truly funny – and as it's personalised, you're likely to share the 'awesome brand experience' with your friends online.

Typically in corporates, we try to solve customers' problems internally. We need to meet with legal and compliance teams, which takes days if not weeks, but by then, even the perfect explanation to a crisis has snowballed into a different monster altogether.



Waffleboo © – [123RF.com](http://123RF.com)

That's where Savage and Botha says we need a call to courage. **Brands are typically great at telling stories when things go right, how about telling stories when things go wrong, too?** The personalisation route worked for OB in 2012 with a fairly limited customer base but may be too data-heavy in 2018, and frankly could come across as freaky and stalker-ish.

So brands need to find a way to communicate that they're fixing the problem rather than just saying "Oh, we're sorry."

They need to be funny and fast, and while a print ad can be effective, digital is often the best way to do so.



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Leigh Andrews 27 Feb 2018



The reason? Well, the internet enables powerful new metrics so you can consistently test and change your message, and get instant feedback if consumers don't like it. That's one thing about digital storytelling – you're always learning and adapting.

## Know your brand, know your brand tribe

Having a good understanding of your brand personality is a good starting point, but you need to know your customers, too. A three-month campaign is often dictated by the media but there's no sense in sticking to that timeframe with digital – you can modify your brand essence with each campaign as you get feedback, amplifying it across the people joining your brand tribe.

That's why Savage says all your digital storytelling work should be audience-focused, but to be effective, the brand needs to know who it is, or else it is always on the defence. Also remember that digital needs to be led with insight, even the simple things – especially the simple things. We have all the data at our disposal about what our customers like, so we need to use that.

It's also important to separate the brand's needs from the customer's needs – the brand needs are intrinsic to its survival, the customer needs are what you need to focus on to make those sales. Savage points out:

*“ The boardrooms you sit in and the decisions you make often have nothing to do with your customers. ”*

A good starting point is thus to start with listening and respond to what your customers are saying, and realise that you can't force your brand positioning into that. Having a clearly defined brand essence makes your own path easier as a marketer so that you're no longer just responding to your customers' good and bad experiences.

In an example of what he calls "Fantastic storytelling from a brand that stands for ideas and innovation through technology," Savage demonstrated two ads in which the GE brand tells you who they are, not what they are, that they want to be innovators, and their ads speak of that.

The style is hyper-puristic and they needed to truly understand their brand essence, as well as why they do what they do to get this right.

This ties into Savage's next point, that the story you tell needs to address who your brand is, and vice versa.

Also, remember that you won't necessarily complete the process overnight. Red Bull got it right by realising that brands weren't catering to the extreme sports market – they found out what extreme sporters needed and focused on that. As a result, they started to build trust with their audience.

This can be a painful process, so brands need to see themselves as future leaders. **There's lots of fear around how power has shifted to the consumer**, but it's an opportunity to hone in on your customers, as your competitors are likely feeling the same way.

Savage says to see courage as a strategic tool to build trust.

Brands feel reservation and list many reasons not to go this route, but all you need to do is **give yourself a 'permission slips'** – we did so in the workshop session, where I settled on 'I give myself permission to... write what I want to read'. It may seem silly but you'd be amazed how empowering it is to do so, and the way your thought processes change once you tell yourself you have permission to create something different, not stick with the rules, and to think without judgement. Give yourself permission to be brave! Your brand will thank you for it.

## **Hard fact: Your brand won't be relevant to everyone**

Because of big data and analytics, even audience segmentation is being phased out for some, and **the more you try and cater to everyone, the less of that broad audience you win**. You need to find your specific brand tribe. You need to talk to those who want to listen to you, and adapt in order to survive.

Keep in mind the top three reasons why customers love a brand:

1. It's **how the brand makes you feel** (the emotional connection);
2. It's about **the problem your brand solves**; and
3. It's about **how customers remember their experience** with the brand

This last point tie into Daniel Kahneman's peak-end rule and is a design principle many marketers miss.

“ Your communication can't all be about selling, and no matter how hard you try, not every customer experience will be fantastic. ”

But if your brand banks a lot of love, your customers' loyalty won't falter, even if (when) you do something wrong. It comes down to **purpose**. Take the banking industry, for example. Banks exist as an interface between customers and their money. The ultimate industry disruptor, Uber, is much-loved as it cuts out the middleman – Savage says to take note, as this means banking is primed to be the next industry to really innovate disruptively.

Get it right by realising that storytelling is an audience journey, so start with the message you want to tell, then determine how you want to tell it.

Next is to remember that your own personal emotion needs to be embedded in all the messaging.

“ Your brand is effectively one person talking to an audience of one person, and you need to allow your audience to talk back to you. This shows the brand is human. ”

Don't remove yourself from the process. Savage and Botha said to remember to include your personal challenges from brand experiences in your messaging, as they're pain points others can engage with. Aim to solve the problem. On the secret to scalability, Savage says it's as simple as making sure your communication is authentic. There's so much data out there, yet so little insights...

## Let the brand tell a story

One of the top take-home messages of the day was that **anecdotes are incredibly powerful as communication tools**, as they let you drill down to the essence of what you're trying to communicate, and do so in a memorable way.

The best part is that this works extremely well with social media. For example, rather than stating the exact ever-climbing audience views, you could say: “More than 16,000 years have been spent watching *Gangnam Style* on YouTube.” Impressive!

It's also important to note the difference between linear narrative and emotional narrative – for any form of storytelling, you need to craft the story. People will then assign meaning to that. So put yourself in the audience's shoes and start with the thing that's most interesting to you. That could be the end (provided you don't give away the conclusion). Think to yourself, “What's the most interesting anecdote I would tell my buddy about our brand?”

You're trying to solve the problem of the fight for attention and engagement. Done right, your brand's storytelling is no longer just about communicating to them, instead, you're inviting them to also communicate with you.

Savage says:

“ The enemy of engagement is how soon you put on your corporate hat. ”

Brands shoot themselves in the foot by always trying to write a hit song. But songwriting is not magic. It is hard work crafting, understanding emotion, putting that into the craft. ‘Edit, edit, edit’ is then the key to everything working.

## How do your fans and audience recognise you, beyond the branding?

Savage shared a reminder that the basic ‘hero's journey’ is still the basis of Storytelling 101. Research shows that stories

have been told same way for thousands of years, so any piece of storytelling ever told adheres to the cycle of **the hero's journey**: There is a person displaced from their natural state – they could go on holiday or get fired from work. They then begin an adventure, where they face an obstacle to overcome. When concluded, they go back to where they started and have somehow changed.



## The hero's journey: leading organisational change

Marlene de Lange 15 Jul 2014



Savage says we are wired to our core to respond to that process, because when people engage with stories they engage with their own personal journey and empathise with it. So your brand needs to be a champion for your personal audience, not for everyone.

So **it's not about your audience size, it's about being ideologically aligned with the brand tribe you've built**. But it's also about changing perception behaviour.

### Storytelling end goal: Change consumers' behaviour

Savage also pointed out the difference between marketing and changing behaviour. Threats don't work in advertising, just look at smoking and car accident ads. They're gruesome, yet people continue to smoke, drink and drive. It's also been shown through research that incentives don't work for brand loyalty, they only give a short-term boost. So messaging where you spend with the slogan is not as important as following up with what you believe.

For true behaviour change, you need to put yourself in your consumers' shoes – **provide the stepping stones so they will come in your direction**. Storytelling is the cornerstone of marketing today, as you are inspiring the audience to make a change.

It's not enough to say 'we are the cheapest,' as everyone is the cheapest for a week. Instead, your brand communications should entail the surprise effect and focus on the quality of the consumer, with a focus on the marketing long tail over the specific campaign, so **marketers need to understand the overall strategy before working on short-term campaigns**.

*“ You also need consistent content creation. It doesn't need a big budget or even to be your own story, it can be just as effective for your brand to show it's listening by curating what others are saying. Leverage the passion in the communities you have. ”*

Story told, you need to respond to analytics and realise that bravery and courage are not inherent in advertising, also realise that there's so much reward in failing in digital, then coming back stronger. You also need to work on disrupting your own brand before someone else gets there.

Savage shared an example where instead of asking for donations online, the brand he was working with randomly thanked people for their donations. This upped engagement, raised curiosity and got consumers keen to make their own donations – that's a clever form of individualisation and personalisation on social media its best.

**TL;DR:** Get to know your audience, what they like and what they don't like online. Get to grips with the psyche of your audience. The premise needs to be rooted in insight. Savage shared a video of Rich Mulholland explaining how to drill down to premise from pain point in an elevator pitch.

Then it was 'Lights, camera, action,', as we improved on our earlier efforts and presented what we'd learned through the workshop on video. Yes, it was scary, but also an amazing way for the message to really hit home.

We left with reams of notes to look back on, and that 'I did it' nugget in our bellies. That's what I call an extremely potent way to get to grips with where your brand's messaging may well be failing, despite all the budget and production values, and shift the story.

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## ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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