

Creative
Supply

Brand Storytelling Handbook

The ultimate guide to building
your unique brand story.



Getting the story started

Brand overload

For better or for worse, we are living in an ultra-branded world. Every day, we are exposed to over 4,000 brands. From our morning toothpaste to our late night whisky, they are an integral part of our existence. New and established brands alike want to tell us their story to get a share of our attention and, ultimately, of our wallets too.

To achieve this, they produce an enormous amount of content: millions of Instagram posts, podcasts and billboards flood our senses day in and day out. A study by media giant Havas has shown that 60% of the content created by the world's 1,500 leading brands is "just clutter" that has little impact on consumers' lives or brands' business results. And yet, some brands still stand out to us. Of course, you have the usual suspects - expert storytellers like Apple or L'Oréal. But you also see smaller brands succeeding, like Freeletics or Boston Dynamics.

And that's not mentioning the beloved local or regional brands we encounter in our daily personal and professional lives. Understanding why these brands are meaningful to us can help uncover some of the secrets of great storytelling.

Strategic asset

In all our years helping companies with their branding, we have seen successful brands use storytelling as a strategic asset, and not just as a communication tool. A story can weave together an organisation's positioning, its personality, mission, and how it communicates with the world.

Brands with great stories don't just advertise their products, they offer us a window into their unique worldview. Mastering storytelling can give you and your organisation a real competitive edge, no matter its size or activity.

Tested method

This handbook is the result of Creative Supply's research into the art and science of storytelling, informed by feedback from dozens of consulting projects and workshops we have led. In it, you will learn what makes a great story and how to build one with the help of our own Brand Story Canvas.

The Canvas is a proprietary framework designed to help you analyse, refine and build your own brand story. Lastly, you will discover four case studies featuring brands that excel at storytelling. We hope you'll enjoy this handbook as much as we have enjoyed writing it, so grab a comfy chair and - without further ado - let's get this story started.



Youri Sawerschel
Chief Creative Officer

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Youri".

About the author



Youri Sawerschel
Chief Creative Officer

Youri Sawerschel is the Founder and Chief Creative Officer of Creative Supply, a creative consultancy present in Zurich and Paris. Solicited for his creative thinking skills, Youri has been involved with projects focused on creating, launching and managing brands in Europe, China and the Middle East. He has worked with brands as diverse as Kempinski Hotels, UBS, EPFL and Mondelez. Youri is also the author of dozens of articles on the topics of brand strategy, storytelling and entrepreneurship and is a lecturer at ESSEC Business School in Paris, at the Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne and at HEC Paris.

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From Storytelling to Storymaking

Storytelling is more than a marketing buzzword. Beyond the hype that surrounds the term, great storytelling is perhaps the most important tool a brand can use to interact with its audience. In this part, we dive into the origins of storytelling, to better understand how we can use it proficiently and meaningfully today.

Once upon a time

Human history is a collection of stories.

These tales illustrate how far we've come as a species, and showcase the incredible power of human imagination.

At the same time, their common traits and tropes help bring us together across time and space.

From oral traditions to bedtime stories, the world has been shaped by generations of storytellers.

From cave dwellings to Instagram stories

Storytelling is a buzzword. From digital marketers to company executives and career coaches, everybody stresses the importance of storytelling.

But despite all the marketing humdrum, storytelling is hardly a new concept. Storytelling is ingrained in our DNA. Humans have been telling stories for as long as we can remember. Evidence of some of the first stories can still be found today, painted on the walls of prehistoric cave dwellings. They depicted events and ceremonies, detailed the local fauna or flora and were even used to warn others of danger.

From that point on, stories have never stopped evolving: from cave dwellings to cuneiform tablets and papyri, together with oral traditions bridging our earliest past to our digital present.

Stories have been a constant in all of human history, and as we evolved, so did they. They became richer, more complex, able to elicit emotions and spark debate and introspection. But the main mechanics of storytelling, the ability to weave together context, characters and a plot, have stayed the same. What was used then is still relevant today.





Cave paintings predate writing by thousands of years, but though the sheer force of their symbolism, the stories they tell can still be understood today.

“On a more profound level, stories are arguably the backbone of our society.”

The backbone of our society?

On a more profound level, stories are arguably the backbone of our society. Concepts like laws, money, country borders and diplomas are borne out of stories that we all ascribe to as truths. In his book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari demonstrates this through the lens of our judicial systems. He says:

“Judicial systems are rooted in common legal myths. Two lawyers who have never met can nevertheless combine efforts to defend a complete stranger because they both believe in the existence of laws, justice, human rights – and the money paid out in fees. Yet none of these things exists outside the stories that people invent and tell one another.”

Looking at it from this angle, stories become much more than simple narratives designed to entertain or inform people. They become frameworks through which one understands the world and lives one’s life. And what if you could do the same for your organisation or your company? Build a story that is so compelling that your audience

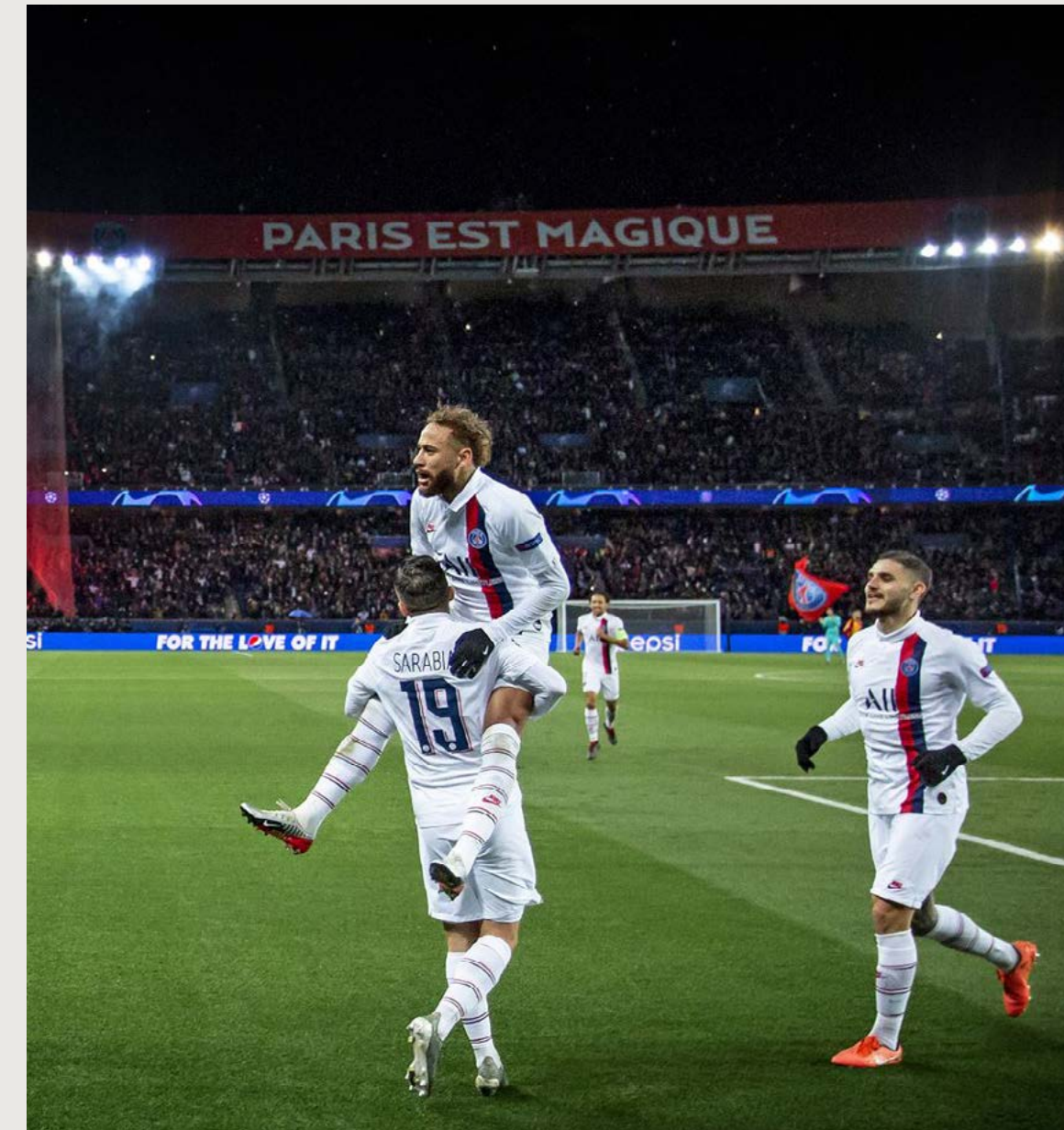
does not perceive it as a marketing effort but as a truth to live by? That’s what brand storytelling is about.

Whether it's retelling past exploits or commenting on the latest game, fans of French football team Paris Saint-Germain always have a story (or three) to tell.

Storymaking

When people believe in a brand story, they no longer see themselves as customers. They see themselves as actors or characters with an active part to play in the story. This is why organisations have to make sure their “love story” with their brands never ends.

From hospital hallways to city streets, Crocs have become an unlikely style icon.



Buying is believing

To build a strong following, brands must tell stories that are worth believing in. Supporters of football teams like Chelsea FC, Paris Saint-Germain or Bayern Munich are not just fans of the sport. They believe in their team's unique story, full of myths, heroes and rivals.

This, more than the team's performance, is what drives them to spend hundreds or thousands of euros annually on game tickets and merchandise. To outsiders, the willingness to invest so much time and money in a football team can seem frivolous.

But that is only because they don't believe in the “story of football teams.” They might, however, believe in other stories - Apple fans still go up against Microsoft or Android users because they believe in the story of so-called “Apple supremacy”, and because that story paints them in a positive light.

Owners of Rimowa luggage will acknowledge each other at airports because many still believe in the story of a “sophisticated traveller class,” while Crocs wearers are proud to defend the brand's “comfort over style” mantra in any setting.

The Hero's journey

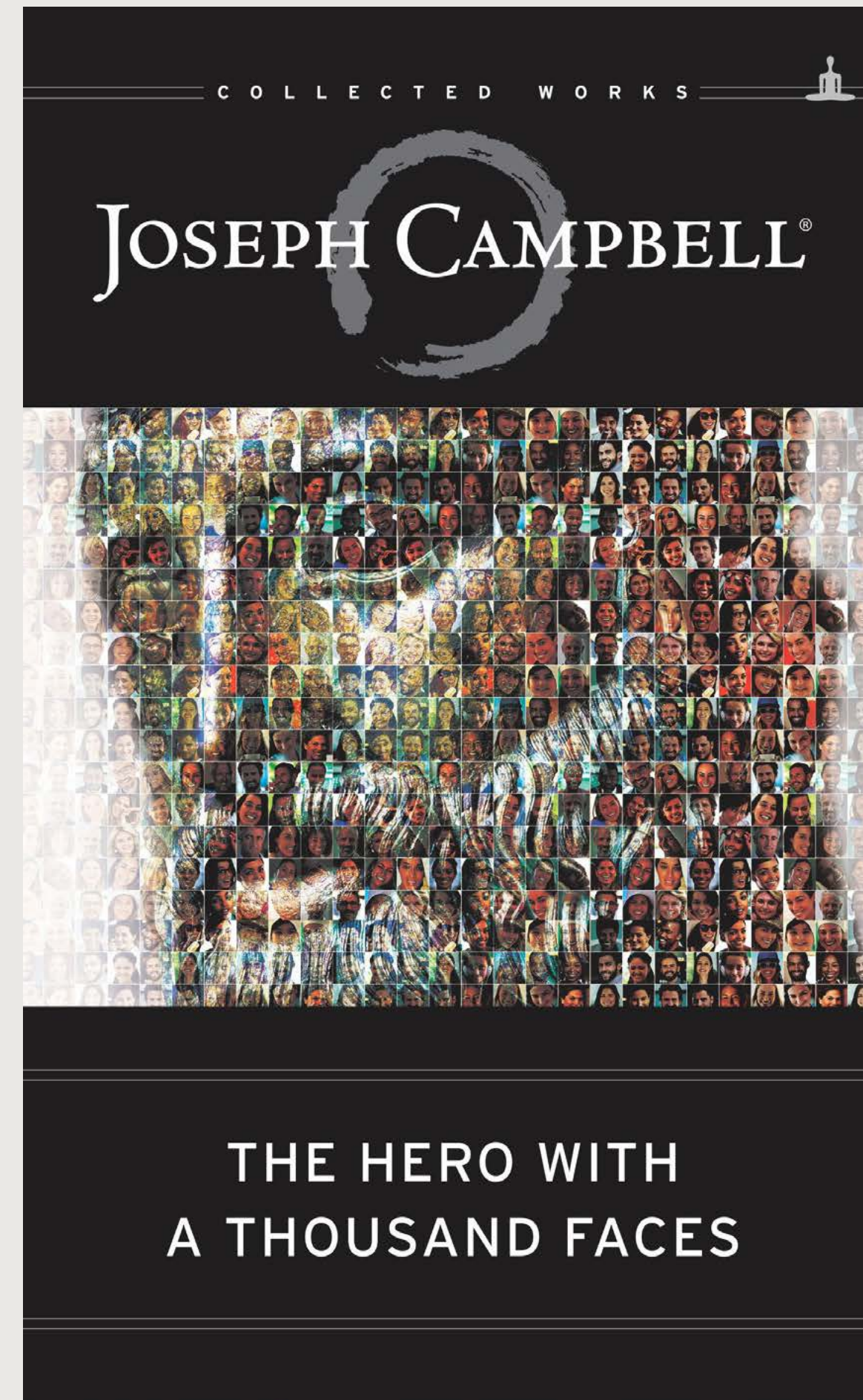
Evidently, brand stories are much more than narratives with a beginning and an end. Still, they share the same roots as the stories in our books, movies and plays. Many are familiar with the “Hero’s journey,” popularised by Joseph Campbell in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

“As a brand, you don’t want your story to end”

A typical Hero’s journey narrative goes as follows: a protagonist lives in an ordinary world. Their world gets disturbed by a call to adventure. At first they refuse the call, but with some external coaxing, sometimes of supernatural nature, they agree to set out on a journey into the unknown (the Hero’s journey). Along the way, our hero finds companions and mentors that guide them through trials and help them combat enemies. After overcoming key obstacles, they have a revelation about who they are and become a true hero.

The hero accepts their new role and has to face a final obstacle before finally returning into their old, familiar world, where order is at last restored and the hero takes on a new status. The hero’s journey applies not only to historical works, but to most modern books and films as well. From *Moby Dick* and *Jane Eyre* to the *Matrix*, *Finding Nemo*, *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings* or *Black Panther*, they all follow the structure of the Hero’s journey.

Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand faces* has become an inspiration to novel writers and marketers alike.



The story of empowerment and representation told by *Black Panther*, Marvel’s afro-futuristic blockbuster, may be more important than its plot.



A story that never ends

While the Hero's journey is an incredibly effective storytelling model, it is not fitting for brand building activities. The major limitation in the Hero's journey model is that the story always comes to an end ("...and they lived happily ever after").

As a brand, you don't want your story to end. You want to keep your customers endlessly engaged without having to reinvent the wheel every year. Take British rock megagroup Coldplay. When the band released *Viva la Vida or Death and All His Friends* in 2008, they called themselves the "greatest band in the world" and said the album was their masterpiece. Effectively, they told the world they had

peaked, and what happened from that point is that interest in the group started to fade. By comparison, computer tech and IT consulting company IBM centres its story around the idea of building a smarter planet. The planet can always become smarter, and thus, their story can be unending.

Intermarché, a French supermarket chain, claims to "unite against high costs of living." Because of inflation, living costs are guaranteed to rise endlessly. This never-ending story works particularly well with the French - prone to come together and revolt against what they see as unfair.

British band Coldplay in 2017.



French retailer Intermarché promises its customers it will always fight against "high costs of living".



Case Study

When building a new brand story for the Institut International de Lancy (IIL), a private international school in Geneva, we wanted to make sure that the lifelong benefits of an IIL education would be accurately portrayed. Learn more about how we created the story of an "Education for Life" → [here](#).



When is brand storytelling useful?

Brand storytelling can be used at any stage in a company's life: when starting out on a new venture, when repositioning an existing business, or when strengthening an established one. Brand storytelling is a strategic tool that aligns all stakeholders around a common understanding of an organisation's role.

Ultimately, storytelling creates value for companies by improving the customer-brand relationship and increasing brand awareness and brand loyalty. Here are four situations in which storytelling can come in handy.



1. Standing out

Millions of brands launch every year. That makes standing out hard. Well-thought-out storytelling helps get customers' attention and connect with them on an emotional level. Since great stories generate free press and word of mouth, they should be a no-brainer for start-ups with limited resources.

Take Beyond Meat, a Los Angeles-based producer of meat substitutes. Perhaps surprisingly, the main focus of their story is not sustainability. Instead, they claim to offer “meat without guilt”, a tasty junk-food experience that doesn't harm animals or the environment.

With this approach, and compared to traditional healthy or sustainable food brands generally seen as less tasty or less fun, Beyond Meat was able to reach out to meat-loving Americans directly and grow exponentially by partnering with large fast-food chains such as Burger King.

From burgers to crepes, Beyond Meat has become ubiquitous on retail shelves and restaurant menus.

By offering a positive story, Beyond Meat has avoided many of the controversies that plague other meat alternatives.

2. Business transformation

Digitalisation – alongside the Covid-19 pandemic – is prompting companies across industries to reinvent their business models and their processes. As they transform, companies must also evolve their narrative so clients and business partners understand what it is they stand for.

Storytelling acts as a “stabilising agent” in periods of organisational transitioning. Take Geneva-based IEM Group, historically a manufacturer of parking automats, now under pressure to reinvent their business as their star product becomes obsolete.

The company story speaks about “developing solutions for smart cities” and not just building machines – a story that is linked to their past while giving an aspirational vision of its future.

3. Organisational alignment

A key challenge in brand communication is ensuring that your message doesn’t get diluted and distorted by your teams even before reaching the end recipient.

Stories are far more powerful than communication standards and guidelines – because they are easy to communicate and easy to remember. Heritage brands, such as the ones owned by luxury giant LVMH, have fully internalised this learning.

New recruits at Guerlain or Moët & Chandon are extensively briefed on their brand’s history and products, and product training is offered not just to the Sales and Marketing teams, but to support functions as well.

Smart parking meters are part of IEM Group’s strategy to make our cities “smart”.

LVMH’s Institut des Métiers d’Excellence is part of the group’s strategy to reinforce its luxury image, and train the next generation of craftspeople.




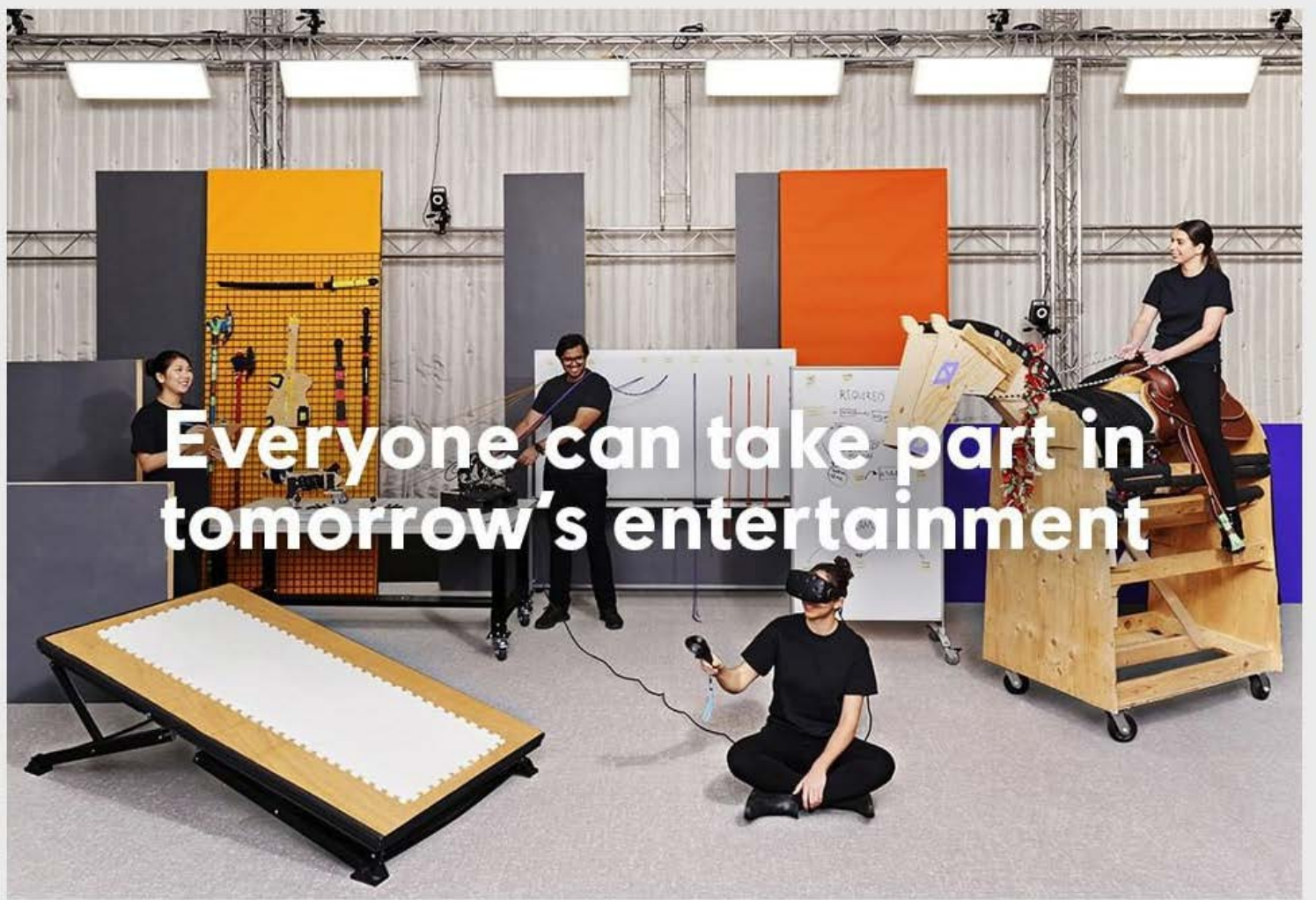



4. Talent acquisition

A global study from media agency Havas found that “meaningful brands” outperform the stock market by 206%. “Meaningful brands” articulate a purpose that goes beyond making money. Conveying a sense of purpose attracts, engages and retains talents - millennials in particular.

By contextualising an organisation’s activity, storytelling clarifies its reason for being. It links their higher purpose to their working philosophy and modus operandi. This is why some companies not generally seen as “glamorous,” such as EY or SAP, can attract top talents with their “great places to work” reputation.

Conversely, the strong aspirational pull of companies like Tesla or Ubisoft can lure top talents despite numerous workplace complaints over the years.

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Even after multiple workplace scandals, Ubisoft remains an attractive target for young graduates.

Case Study

When the prestigious EMBA programme at Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) decided to overhaul their branding, one of their main objectives was to attract a new generation of talented candidates. To learn more about how we helped the EPFL achieve that goal - and more - read our case study [→ here](#).



The Brand Story Canvas

Combining extensive research and learning from countless consulting assignments, our method for building brand stories is taught at top universities such as ESSEC in Paris, the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne (EHL).





The *trigger* is the element that gets the story started



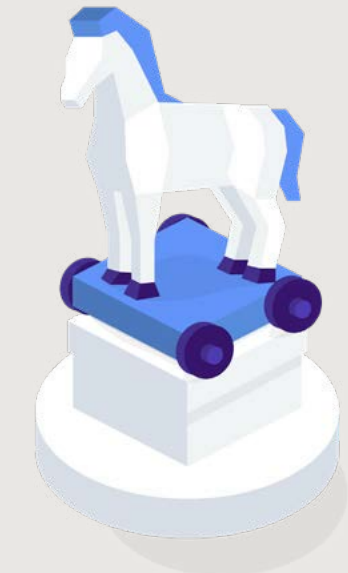
The *themes* are the (external) topics connected to your brand



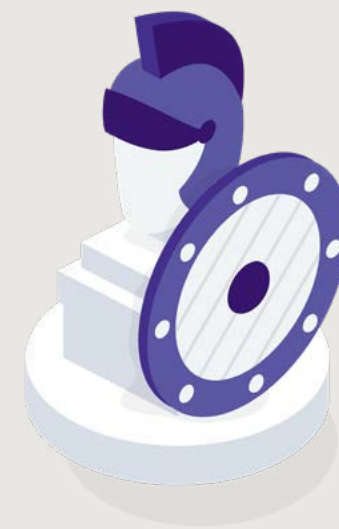
The *context* is the (external) environment in which the story takes place



The *ideal* is the raison d'être of a brand



The *resources* are the tangible and intangible assets of your brand



The *hero* is the brand personification (values, beliefs and characteristics)



The *plot* covers the actions taken to reach an ideal

The 7 components of a brand story

Now that we have clarified the importance of storytelling for brands, it is time to look at the “behind the scenes” of brand storymaking. What makes a good brand story? How do you create one? Are there differences between companies’ sectors or maturity levels? To answer these questions, we developed our own “storymaking” model: *the Brand Story Canvas*. In this section you will discover the model and learn how to use it to develop your own brand stories.

The Brand Story Canvas is a visual map of all the elements that make up a brand story. It is made up of 7 essential components: context, trigger, themes, ideal, hero, plot and resources.

[Download the Brand Story Canvas](#)

A versatile tool

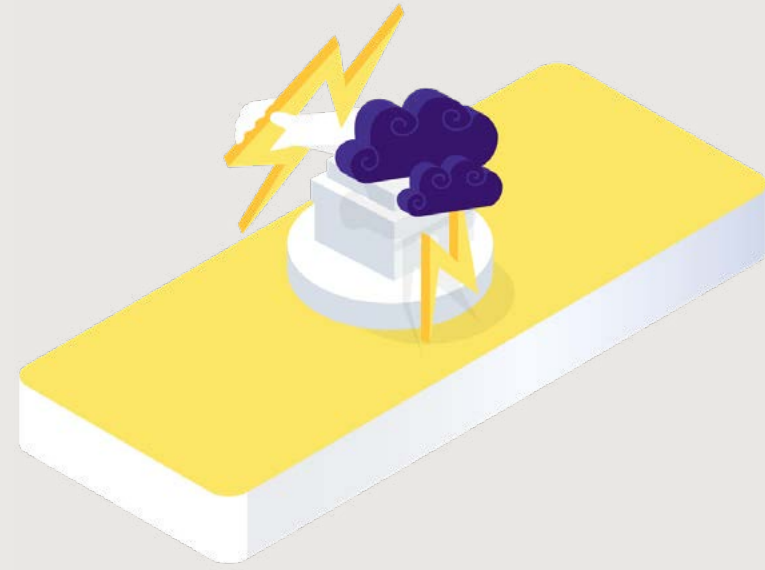
The canvas shows that any brand story can be broken down into these components, as most stories are built around common narrative traits. The model works regardless of an organisation's size or sector and can be tailored to a specific product or audience.

The Brand Story Canvas is a versatile tool that can transform the way a company thinks about its brand. Here are just a few useful applications of the Canvas:

- Analysing an existing brand to better understand their underlying branding strategy.
- Using it as a workshop tool to engage your staff and partners, building a common narrative that everyone can relate to.
- Streamlining your communications strategy by deriving your key topics from a single source.

[Download the Brand Story Canvas](#)

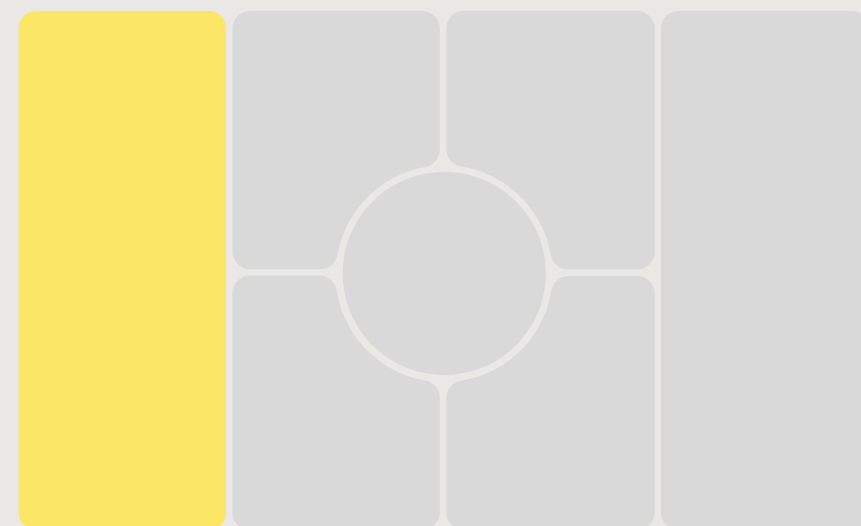




The Context

Where the story takes place

Setting the stage for your story



For carmaker Tesla, global warming is not a problem: it's a sales argument.

Definition

Setting the context is a prerequisite to any good brand story. In a broad sense, context refers to all of the external forces impacting your organisation, whether political, economical, technological etc. Say you are a large industrial machine manufacturer: trends like automation and trade policy are likely to affect your business. But the main difference between context and a standard macroeconomic analysis is that brands

can, to an extent, choose their context. They can set the stage, so to speak, so that the forces they choose to highlight are ones they can use later in the story. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted every business on earth, but if you are an artisan shoemaker or baker, then the health crisis has little to do with your brand story – although it will certainly affect parts of your business strategy.

Key questions to ask

1.

What are all the external forces affecting your organisation? Which forces can you react to?

2.

Is your context similar to your competitors'? What are the main differentiating factors?

3.

How relevant will your context be in the future, 5 or 10 years from now? Can you update your context without jeopardising the logical progression of your story?

Key considerations

When choosing which elements will feature into your context, it is important to start with a broad view, before gradually whittling down your list to its essentials. The first way to do that is to focus on the forces that your organisation can react to in some way. The political state of your home country may affect your ability to manage your organisation, but unless you are actively and publicly engaged in political activism or lobbying, it is not something that deserves to stay on your list.

Similarly, not all forces are of equal strength, and strength can vary from one organisation to another. The threat of global warming might be a key brand context element for a brand like Tesla, but it is less so for Ferrari or Cadillac – two brands that have chosen not to react to that particular force, from a storytelling standpoint at least.

Watch out for

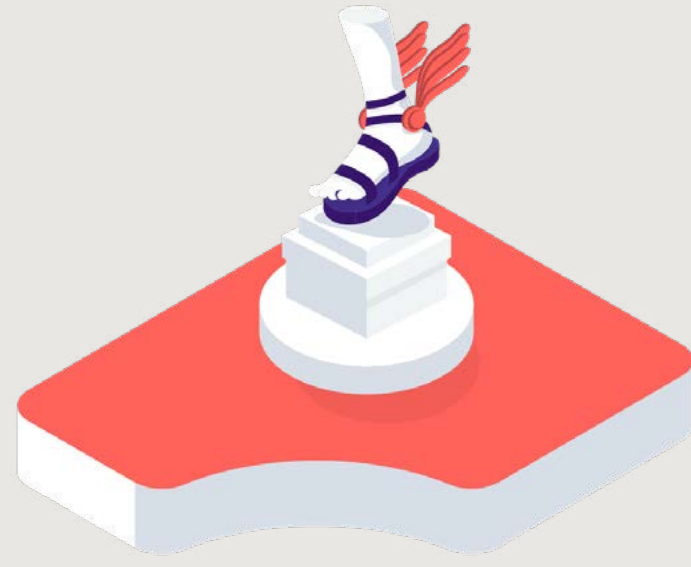
When laying the backdrop for your story, it is better to avoid referencing specific events or short-lived trends unless these have long-lasting consequences. As time passes and both your brand and its story become more rich and complex, some of your contextual references might become dated and will need to be updated to maintain coherence and relevance.

It's also important to try and go beyond the obvious contextual elements of your industry, especially if your competitors already reference them in their own story. When that happens, you should either find other references, or change the angle to stand out more.

Case Study

Opening a hotel is not easy. Opening a hotel in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic is even more challenging. To learn more about how changing luxury and health trends informed our storymaking for new Parisian hotel Nuage, read our case study [→ here.](#)

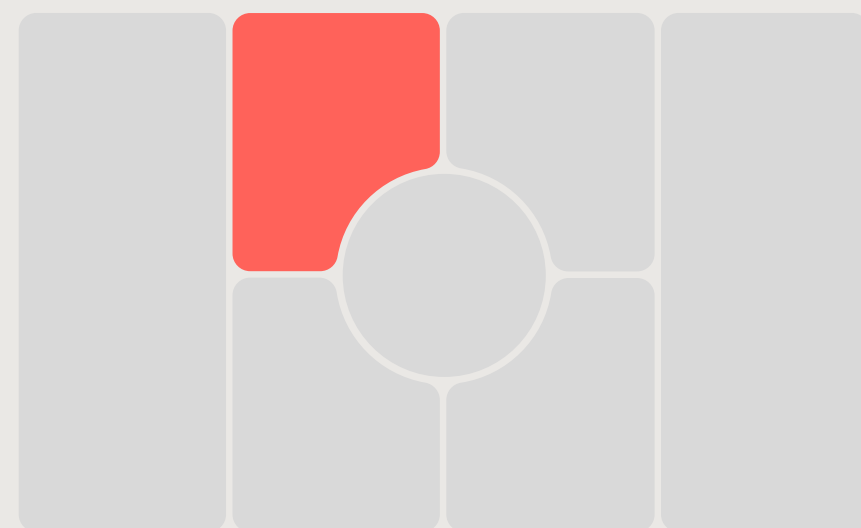




The Trigger

What gets the story started

Your brand story shouldn't have an end, but it needs a beginning



Shinola was founded in 2011 partly to help restore Detroit's position as an American manufacturing centre.

Fashion brand Philipp Plein uses provocation as a way to keep the audience interested in its story.



Definition

The trigger is the starting point to your story. It marks the transition from exposition to action, from the objective context to the subjective point of view (your brand's perspective). It can be a precise event or moment, or something more intangible such as a feeling of injustice or rebellion, a challenge to the status quo in your industry. The trigger is also the first point of contact between your brand and your audience – it's the perfect occasion to draw them into your story.

Key considerations

A good trigger puts tension in your brand story. As science-fiction author Eric Nylund says, “No tension, no story.” The trigger creates tension by casting a doubt, challenging the status quo, highlighting a problem or encouraging a change in the current context. Take American luxury design brand Shinola. Shinola was founded in Detroit in 2011, a city hit hard by de-industrialisation and the Great Depression. Reacting to that context, Shinola set out to “bring back a bygone era of quality and integrity” to the heartland of American manufacturing.

*“No tension,
no story”*

While in many cases the trigger exists to elicit tension between the brand and its context, some brands choose to engage with their audience instead. The trigger becomes a call to action, or even a manifesto. Such is the case for controversial fashion brand Philipp Plein, whose trigger appears to be a message to its audience: “Life is too short to be boring.”

Watch out for

It is tempting to think a brand story can have multiple triggers. After all, people, organisations and markets form a complex ecosystem. So why choose just one starting point? The fact of the matter is that multiple triggers relating to different events or beliefs rarely converge later on in the story. It creates confusion and can lead to a suboptimal resource allocation when it comes to communication. Picking just one trigger is best, and adapting the context if need be to start creating a logical “golden thread” to run through your entire story.



The Shinola watchmaking workshop in Detroit, a prime example of a classic American success story.

Key questions to ask

1.

Does your trigger create tension in your story?

2.

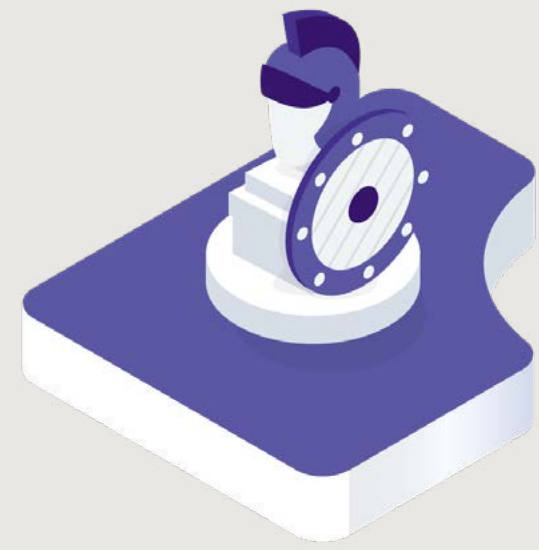
Is your trigger focused on the context or on your audience? In both cases, is it relatable to your audience?

3.

Does your trigger fit with your overall brand narrative?

4.

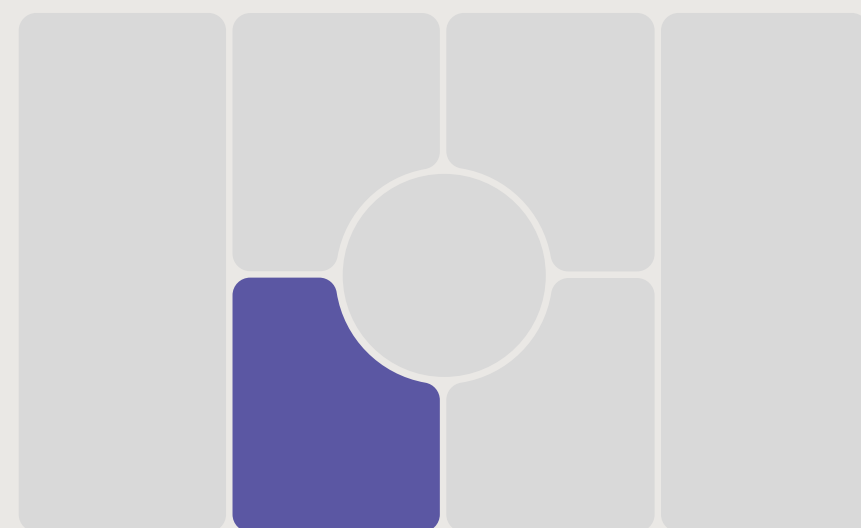
Is your trigger credible? Is it interesting enough for your audience to want more?



The Hero

The main character in the story

Time to meet Mrs or Mr Brand



Luxury carmaker
Mercedes-Benz is not afraid of bringing wit and pop culture references to its campaigns in order to widen its appeal.

French beauty brand
Horace cultivates a fun and relaxed personality to attract male customers.



Definition

The hero of a brand story is the brand itself. The hero part of the Storytelling Canvas is where you describe your brand as if it were a person. What is it like? What is its personality? Looking at Mercedes-Benz for example, you could say the brand is German, elegant and elitist. Mini, on the other hand, is quintessentially British, witty and dynamic. The hero part is especially important since it informs many components of the brand identity, from tone of voice to photography.

Elon Musk's outsize social media presence has been a mixed blessing for the companies he founded.

Key questions to ask

1.

What personality do you want your brand to have?
What adjectives would you use to describe it?

2.

What traits set your brand apart from its competitors?

3.

Does the personality of your brand resonate with your audience?

4.

Can your brand's personality evolve and grow with time?



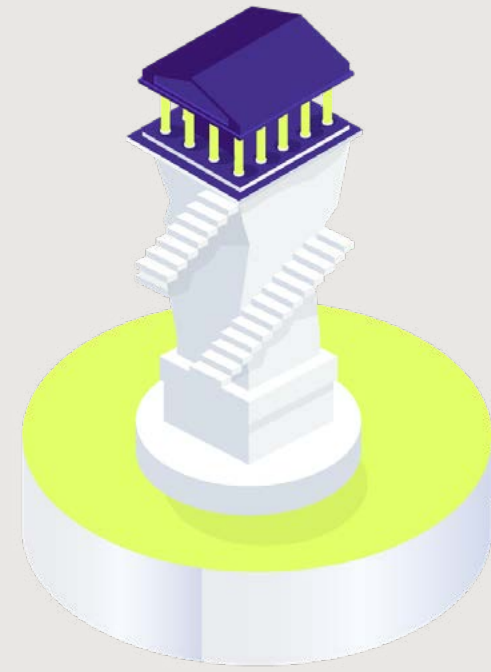
Key considerations

The possibilities for describing a hero are endless. Gender, personality, place of origin, sense of humour, etc. The important part is for your portrait to be coherent and relevant to your audience. For example, French beauty brand Horace bridges the gap between a startup and a traditional beauty brand by subverting traditional industry norms. It is unapologetically French, Parisian even, but not pretentious or snobbish. It is inclusive (as shown by its diverse roster of models) and perhaps ironically, focuses on results rather than appearances. Interestingly, though the brand caters mostly to men, it often relies on women for promotion, authority, and to appeal to women shopping for the men in their lives.

Yet diversity does not equate to exhaustivity. Past a certain point, the more detailed your brand personality is, the fewer people will feel a genuine connection to it. As your brand grows over time, a copiously detailed personality will also make it harder for you to change it.

Watch out for

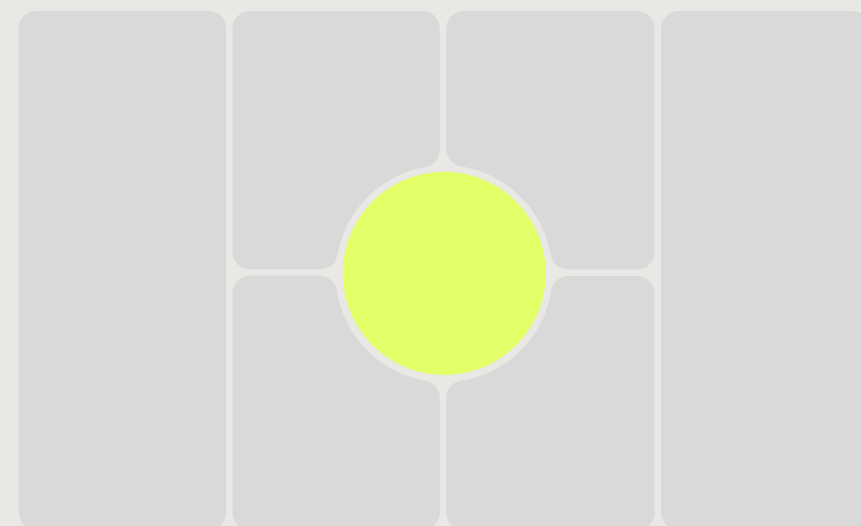
For many entrepreneurial brands, the brand's personality can blend with that of its founder. Richard Branson in the 90s, and Elon Musk in recent years, have become respectively synonymous with the Virgin and Tesla brands. While this can be an incredible asset, it also leaves the brand more vulnerable to the whims and eccentricities of their founders. Elon Musk's social media activism has created numerous PR storms and financial turbulences for Tesla over the years, and many Silicon Valley brands have faced similar issues due to the founder's personality affecting the perception of the brand. Likewise, it's important to distinguish between the hero's personality and that of customers. Customers are not the hero of the story, however the hero's traits should resonate with them so that they can identify with the brand to an extent.



The Ideal

The hero's reason for being

*When it comes to branding,
the story should never end*



Definition

The ideal is the central component of the brand story. It is what gives the hero direction, the overarching raison d'être of the brand. In branding literature, the ideal is also sometimes referred to as the why or the purpose of a brand. All the components of the brand story must be aligned with the ideal, and build up to it too. Airbnb's aspirational tagline "belong anywhere", is a good example of how uplifting a brand ideal can be. Even though the ideal appears simple, the broadness of the statement allows the reader to derive whichever meaning fits them best, whether that's: "if you stay at an Airbnb, you will feel like a local", "the Airbnb community is where you belong" or even "if you don't want to feel like a tourist, use Airbnb".

*"Your brand ideal
cannot be: sell
products, make
money, close the
company and retire."*

Key considerations

Beyond its immediate relevance to your activity, a good ideal should be both aspirational and never-ending. As a brand, your ideal cannot be "sell products, make money, close the company and retire." Every organisation has an impact on its stakeholders. A brand owner must understand that impact and use it to build an ideal that promotes a positive societal outcome. The ideal of the New York Times Company, for instance, goes beyond providing news coverage to its subscribers by promising to "seek the truth and help people understand the world."

A good brand story doesn't have an ending. In a perfect world, the brand keeps growing and growing, constantly innovating to improve itself and its products and stay relevant to new generations of customers. A good brand ideal can help drive this ambition by setting a target that is either very hard or downright impossible to reach. For example, the American Cancer Association ideal is to create "a world without cancer." Though that goal may be impossible to reach, the underlying objective of "a world where no one dies of cancer" may not be, which helps galvanise support among members, and drive donations for research.

Airbnb's "Belong Anywhere" campaign was strongly tied to its ideal, and helped set the brand apart from traditional hotel chains.



Case Study

Key questions to ask

1.

What positive impact can your brand have on its stakeholders? On society at large?

2.

Is your ideal in line with your activity?
Are you living up to your own ideal?

3.

Is your brand ideal aspirational enough and (nearly) impossible to reach?

4.

Is your ideal clearly conveyed both internally and to your audience?

5.

Does your ideal flow naturally from your context and trigger?

Watch out for

Though an ideal is hard-to-reach by design, it should still be realistic. There should be no dissonance between your ideal and your actions as a brand. If a brand's ideal is to "sell products that bring joy" but their products are being manufactured by children in coal-powered sweatshops, the brand is going to have a problem. Additionally, it's best to avoid generic or overly broad ideals like "make the world a better place." Not only will you not stand out, but your consumers will (rightly) question your actual commitment, not to mention the link with your products or services.

More broadly, the cacophony of terms relating to a brand's purpose, mission or ideal can be confusing even for hardened marketing professionals. All experts, as well as most agencies, have their own home-brewed definition of what these terms mean, as included. A mission statement, for example, should relate to something that can be achieved on a regular basis (no one wants to fail a mission), whereas an ideal should be an aspiration that you can build towards but never quite reach. This is why it is so important for brands to have a clear definition for the terms they use. The idea is to minimise confusion and ensure internal alignment.

Sometimes, starting from the past can carry your brand story into the future. To see how you can create an ideal that will endlessly carry your brand, read the case study from our work on Terrass' Hotel in Paris [→ here](#).

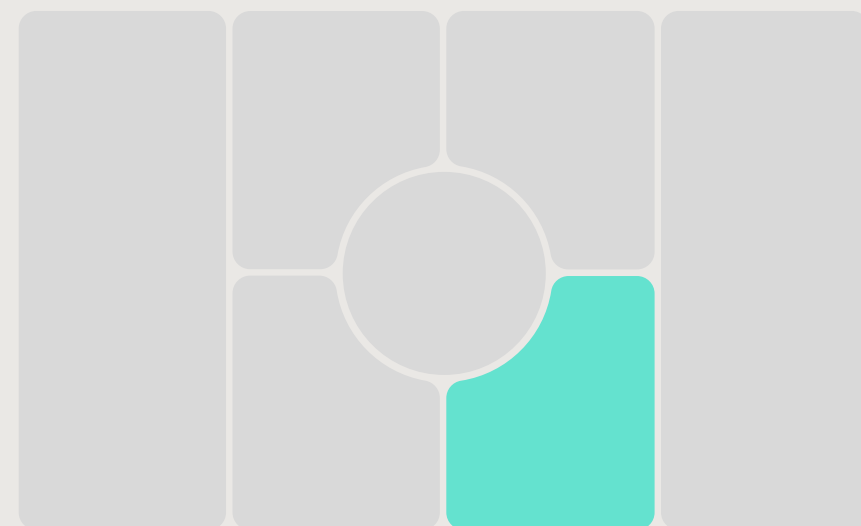




The Plot

The actions taken to reach the “ideal”

In branding, the journey is as important as the destination



Definition

The plot is the intrigue of your brand story. It describes how the hero (the brand) acts in order to reach its ideal. These actions cover the distinctive processes, methods and activities that help move the story forward, and are not always linked to the company’s core product or service offering.

Take energy drinks manufacturer Red Bull. Their story revolves around an ideal of active emancipation (“Red Bull gives you wings”), but more so than the product itself, it is their massive sports media and partnership division that helps get that ideal across.

Covering everything from winter sports to base jumping, Red Bull’s sports division has become one of the brand’s most effective communication outlets.

Key considerations

Not every action a company takes can become part of its story. As for every section of the Canvas, building a plot for your brand story is a process of curation. Only actions that both serve to move the story forward and keep true to the brand ideal can become part of the plot. French sports retailer Decathlon illustrates this well. Their ideal is to help everyone become an athlete by creating high performance, sustainable and accessible sporting gear. However, a large chunk of Decathlon's turnover used to rely on selling third-party products from the likes of Nike or Adidas – different brands with different ideals. So, in 2018 for the sake of maintaining coherence in their brand story, Decathlon chose to stop promoting third-party brands. The retailer took on short-term revenue losses but built up recognition for its own product lines. Today, Decathlon products account for over 80% of their turnover.

Watch out for

While the Brand Story Canvas can be used at both institutional and product levels, it is important not to mix the two. In this section, this means not reducing the plot to your company's advertising strategy. It also means your products might actually be a resource rather than an element in the plot. Depending on the specifics of your story, the plot can include manufacturing best practices, charity outreach initiatives, workplace improvements, and much more.

French retailer Decathlon's portfolio of brands now accounts for over 80% of its turnover.



Key questions to ask

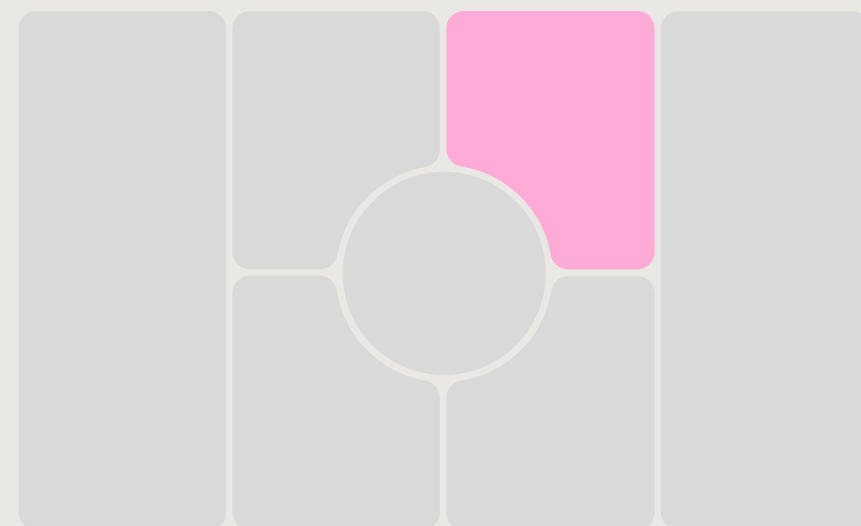
1. What actions/activities is your hero taking to reach its ideal?
2. Which actions/activities set you apart from the competition?
3. Is your product part of your plot, or part of your resources?
4. Can you group your actions/activities into specific categories?



Themes

The main topics of the story

Make your story part of the conversation



Definition

Brands don't exist in a vacuum. They are connected to the world through people, relationships and products. With this in mind, brand themes are the general topics of interest a brand can leverage to create a strong association of ideas. They can be broad (travel, technology, sustainability) or niche (workplace innovation, entrepreneurial success stories), and within these themes, your brand is one of

many participants in a global conversation. One brand objective is to "own" a theme (or at least be considered an authority or thought leader on the subject). Louis Vuitton, for example, benefits from its strong association to the theme of travel, while UBS has long used its ties to the art world to drive business with high-net-worth collectors.

From exotic advertising campaigns to iconic City Guides, travel has become closely associated to Louis Vuitton's brand image.



There are journeys that turn into legends. Bahamas Islands. 10:07

Sir Sean Connery and Louis Vuitton are proud to support The Climate Project.

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LOUIS VUITTON

Key considerations

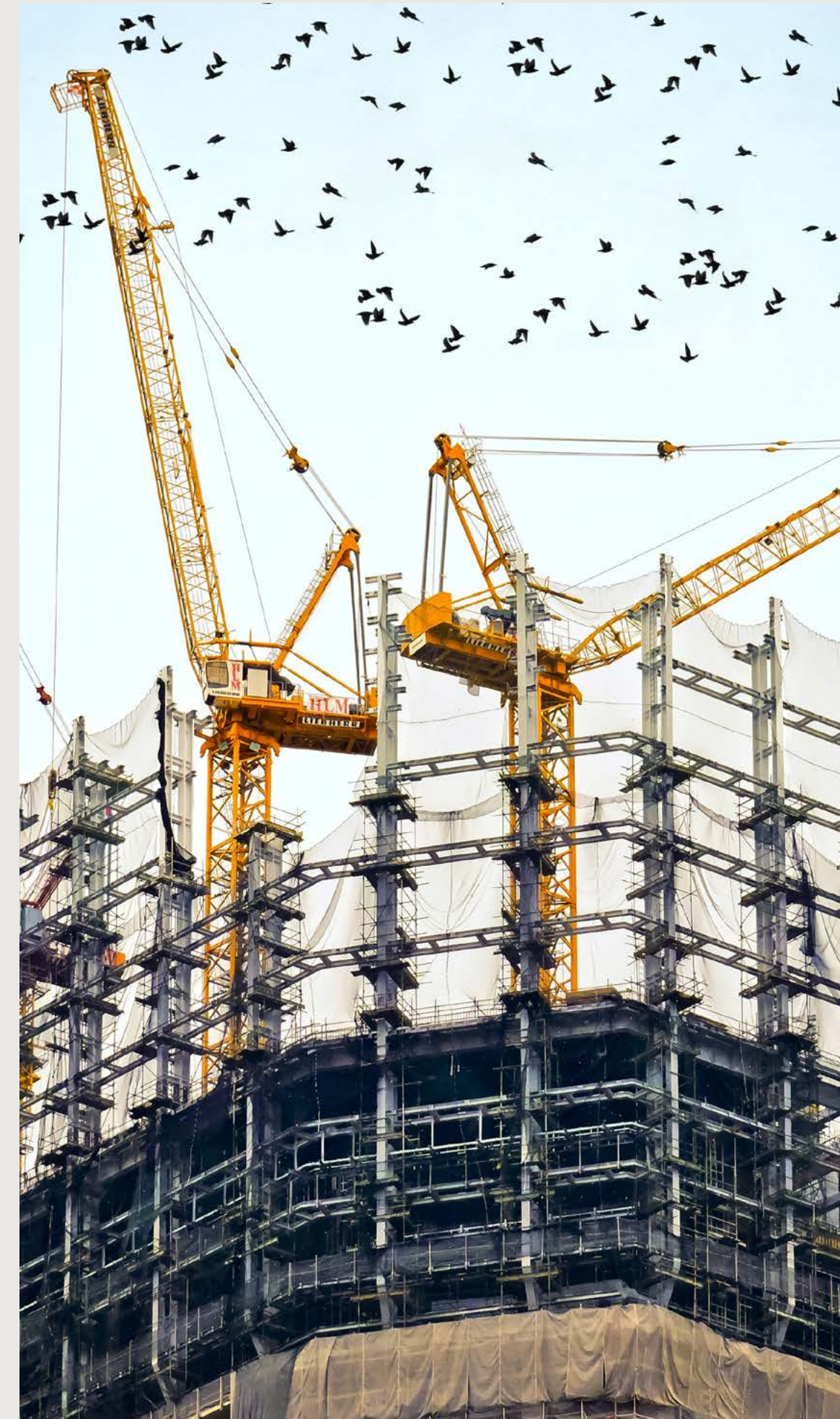
Brand themes can serve as a base for organisations to develop an editorial line, and thus should be considered as major communication channels. On the brand side, “owning” a great theme can increase the standing of a brand. Some industry blogs managed by McKinsey or BCG are read by thousands of professionals, most of whom are not customers. Conversely, a strong brand presence on a trending theme is a great way to be discovered by prospects, especially in a B2B context.

That being said, not all themes have to be at the forefront of industry innovation. It might be difficult for a medium-sized business selling auto parts to have a voice in the global conversation on the future of transportation, after all. What’s important is for brands to zero in on themes that are closely aligned to their story, but also of interest to their customer base. For smaller companies, it might be interesting to choose themes that are of local or regional interest. When it comes to share of voice, it’s better to be a big fish in a small pond.

Watch out for

It is important not to confuse brand messaging and brand themes. Brand messaging is centred on your brand (your products, your history, your ideal, etc.), whereas brand themes exist independently from your brand. People will keep talking about the future of construction whether or not Saint-Gobain, Holcim or Cemex are part of the conversation.

“Owning” a theme is a long-term, resource-intensive endeavour. That is why brands can only choose to take part in a limited number of conversations. Depending on your aim (visibility, business development, M&A opportunities), some themes can reap more benefits than others. Following themes tied to industry innovation could lead to uncovering potential new rivals or acquisition targets, while a company that’s viewed as a thought leader on work-life balance may find it easier to attract top talents.



Even in B2B-focused industries like construction, companies still need to invest and “own” brand themes.

Key questions to ask

01.

If your brand was a magazine, what are the themes you would write about?

02.

In which field(s) can you be recognised as a “thought leader”?

03.

What are your communication objectives when choosing a brand theme?



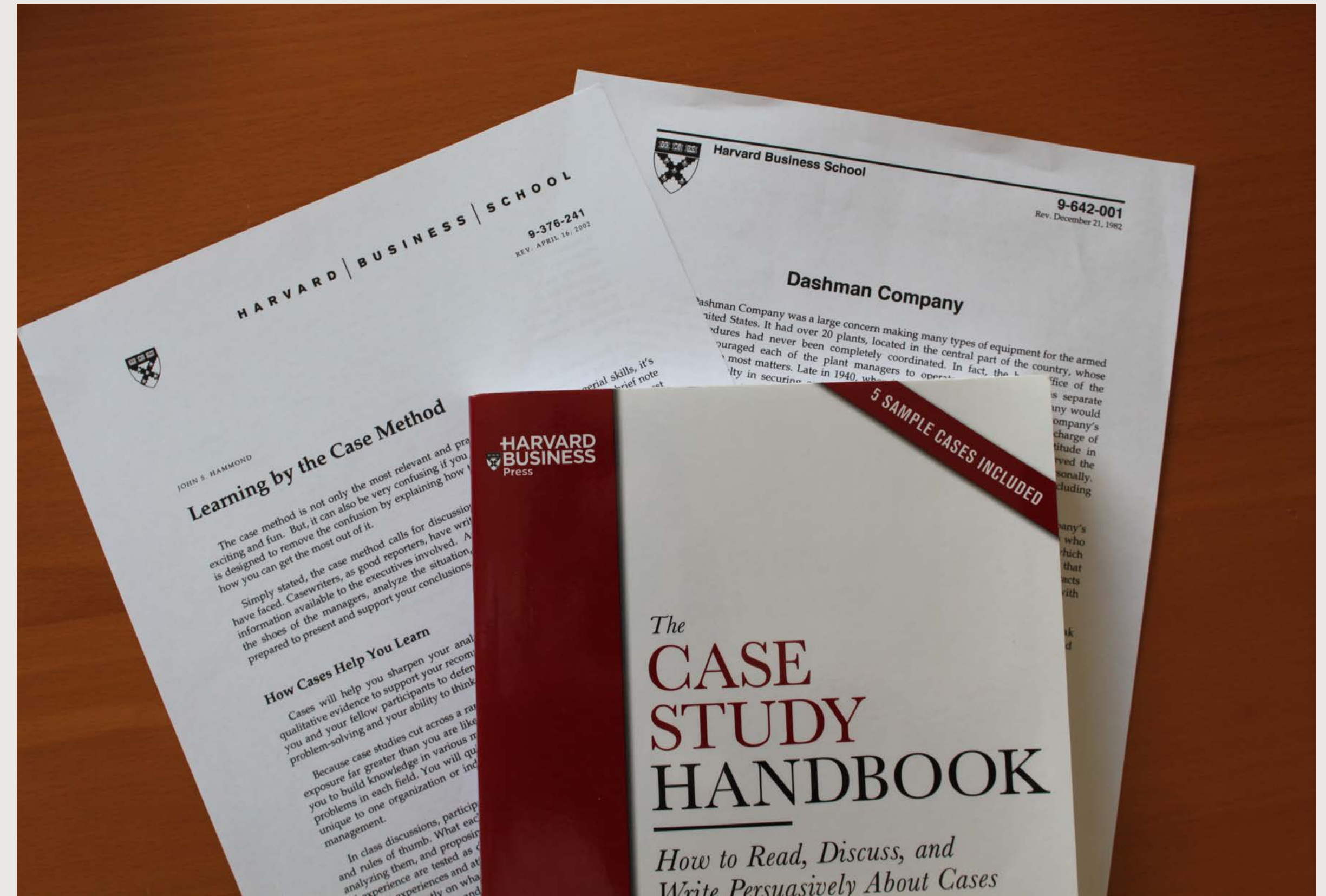
Resources

The resources available to the hero

Your brand has more assets than you know

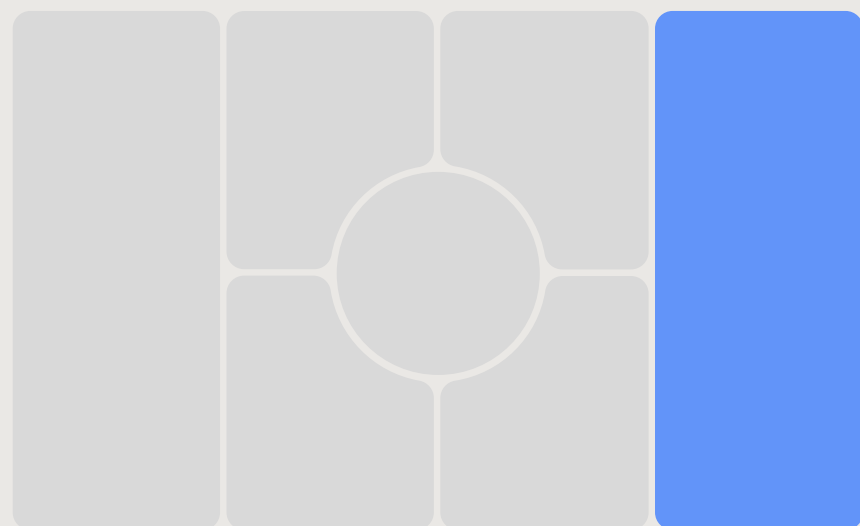
Harvard Business School has built an entire product and communication ecosystem out of its original case study method.

The Hermès ateliers are not just necessary for producing handbags. They help to convey the brand story as well.



Definition

The resources of a brand are comprised of all the assets it can use to achieve its goal. These can be tangible (people, factory, shops) or intangible (knowledge, reputation, community). For Coca-Cola, it's their secret recipe. For Harvard Business School, it's the case study method. For Hermès, it's the ateliers all over France. Ideally, such resources are unique to your brand.



Key questions to ask

1.

What patents or trademarks does your company have?

2.

What skills are unique to your company?

3.

Is your brand hero using all available resources to reach its ideal?

4.

Can you leverage common resources that your competitors take for granted?

Key considerations

Making a list of your brand's resources is a straightforward process. Anything that is seen as a differentiator, anything that can be marketed as a positive asset can fit into the category. Of course, not all resources will end up being featured in the story. But the simple act of considering every element of your company under the prism of "how can I use or market this?" can completely change your viewpoint.

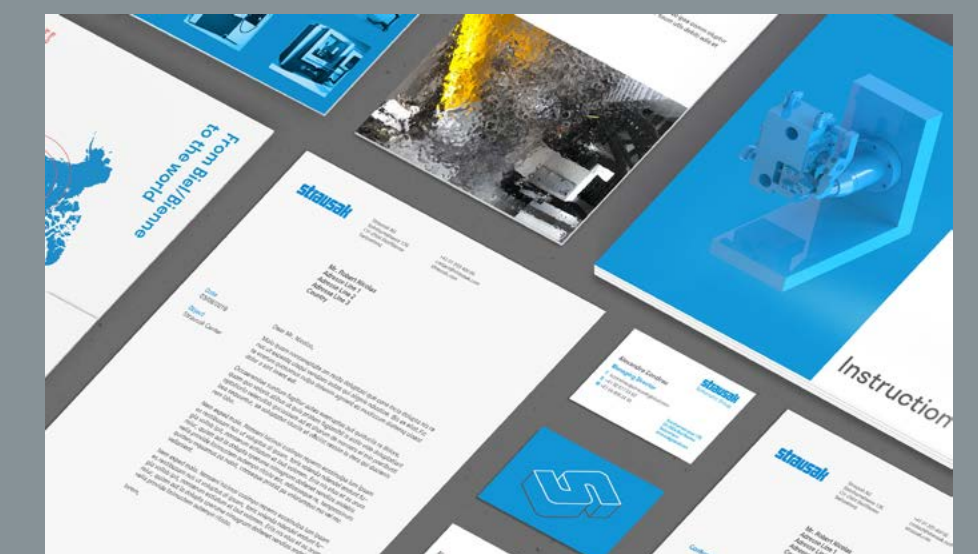
Even employees and managers sometimes fail to see the full range of assets at their disposal. Intelligence reports compiled by the Sales department don't always find their way to Marketing or to the CEO's office. Senior factory workers' knowledge and know-how is not always fully utilised before they retire. That's why it is important to involve people from different backgrounds and departments in the storymaking process.

Watch out for

Many companies proudly list their resources like a checklist, believing that a long list will automatically appeal to their audience. Just because a company has "patented technology," "great customer service" and a "long history", customers should buy their products. Unfortunately, that's not always how it works. Unless you have a slew of unique and extraordinary assets, chances are your competitors' checklists look a lot like yours. You need to use your resources in the context of your story, turning bullet points into meaningful assets.

Case Study

Many brands, especially B2B brands, underestimate the resources that can be used to create a compelling story. In our work with manufacturing company Strausak, we brought together the people, places, history and technology of the company to go beyond product advertising. See how we did [→ here](#).



Story Roadmap

Now that you know all the building blocks of great storymaking, you're on your way to creating your own unique story. To help get you there faster, we've listed some tips and advice to help you plan out your next storymaking session.

Key Principles



Have a clear audience

Your audience dictates many of the finer points of your story. Your tone of voice, subjects that can or cannot be mentioned and your use of humour are all affected by your audience. The first question a marketer should ask him/herself is: who am I talking to, and what story will get their attention? An older, conservative and suburban audience has vastly different needs and expectations than a young and urban one. Only with a clear picture of your audience can you develop your brand story.



Focus on emotions

Emotion is what's left when people have forgotten your story. As stories get told and retold over and over again, the repetition can lead to numbness or even indifference. But an emotional bond is much harder to alter, even if your story or your products change. This connection influences everything from price sensitivity to how people engage with the brand and how likely they are to become brand advocates.



Let your story grow

When trying to design a successful brand story, you could be inclined to create one that's as solid and future-proof as possible – altering your brand identity can be a long and resource-intensive process, so it makes sense to get as much bang for your buck as possible. Yet the best way to future-proof your brand is not to set its story in stone, but rather to build room within the story for evolution and growth.

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel”

Maya Angelou,
American poet and civil rights activist

The Storymaking Session

Creating your brand story is a reflective and ideative process. Like any creative task, you generally need to be in the right physical and mental space for new thoughts to take shape. Here is some insight into how to best lead a creative storytelling session.



Location

A quiet meeting room where you won't be disturbed, or a virtual whiteboard

Participants

2 to 10 participants (open-minded and with different profiles)

Duration

At least 2 hours for the workshop, more for the refinements

Material

Post-its, colored markers, tape

Step by Step



1.

Map the narrative elements

Using the canvas, go through each section one by one. It is recommended to follow a specific order (Context, Resources, Trigger, Ideal, Hero, Plot, Themes), and to list as many ideas as possible at first.



2.

Simplify

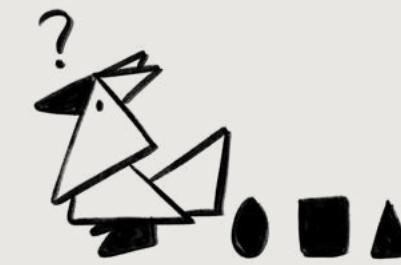
Once you have gone over the whole canvas, come back to each section and start grouping your ideas in clusters. You can use this time to make sure nothing important has been left out and that every participant agrees with the idea grouping.



3.

Build a flow

As you look over the key ideas in each section, start arranging them so they form a narrative: starting from the context and working your way to the ideal. You don't need to worry about wording at this point. Focus on the coherency and impact of the story you're building.



4.

Refine the brand ideal

The brand ideal is a critical component of your brand story. As such, it is worth taking the time to find a formulation that everyone connects with. If a clear consensus cannot be reached during the workshop, take some time to sift back through the best proposals (maybe including other decision-makers) until you find the perfect ideal.



5.

Iron out the details

This step usually takes place after the session. Draw up a synthesis of the ideas on the canvas, and make sure the key decision-makers in your organisation all agree with your conclusion.



6.

Write the story

Once you've prepared all the building blocks for your story, it's time to put pen to paper. Writing a brand story should be an iterative process: don't hesitate to have each draft reviewed and critiqued until you have at last concocted the perfect text. And if you don't have the internal resources to handle the writing, you can call upon a professional copywriter to help turn your ideas into a flowing and impactful text.

Frequently Asked Questions

I am active in different markets, can I have different stories for each market?

Yes and no. There should only be one story per brand, so communication efforts are coherent across all markets. If your various markets or audiences are too different, you may want to use different brands for each. Toyota created Lexus because its story of reliability and price-value balance did not fit the requirements of a luxury brand. But while the core of a story must be the same brand-wide, some aspects can be highlighted based on market specifics. Toyota might communicate its engineering quality and excellent four-wheel drive in a certain market, and the quality of its eco-cars in another.

Can a brand story be used for a B2B business?

Yes, of course. The principle and the structure is the same for B2B and B2C brands, but in the case of B2B brands the context may be more business-focused and the overall story may put more emphasis on the B2B value proposition. For example KUKA, a Chinese-owned manufacturer of industrial robots, built a story about “making automation intelligent” for their business partners.

We are a start-up without history nor resources. How can we build our story?

If you have little to say about yourself, talk about the (bigger than yourself) cause you represent. This way, you shift the narrative from an internal to an external focus. For example, TransferWise, a British peer-to-peer money transfer service, openly took on big banks that overcharge people for money transfers. It is a powerful “David vs Goliath” story, yet it doesn’t say anything about Transferwise’s technology or processes.

How long can we use the same brand story?

For as long as the context stays the same. E.g. British soaps and cosmetics retailer Lush capitalises on its story of “a responsible cosmetics maker in an industry where animal testing and chemical ingredients are common”. As the context evolves and industry players become more responsible, Lush’s story will have to change to retain customer interest.

Case Studies

Brands of all shapes and forms are capable of telling stories that capture our imagination. Through the prism of the Brand Story Canvas, we have taken a look at four brands that have mastered their storytelling.

FREE LETICS

Work out anytime, anywhere. No excuses. This has been Freeletics' mission statement since their founding in 2013. The German fitness app started by creating personalised workout plans designed for outdoor training.

With their increase in memberships – to date, 29 million users – Freeletics expanded their app to cover gym workouts, cardio and nutritional guidance. At the same time, the brand also branched out into retail with their own clothing line.



The Brand Story of Freeletics



Context

Increasingly wealthy urbanites don't have the time to keep physically fit. By observing this environment and choosing to solve a common problem, Freeletics was able to create a relatable connection with users.



Trigger

No excuse not to be fit. This observation is candid in its simplicity. It probably won't fuel your motivation to hit the gym or get that run in, but it can ignite the Freeletics brand that will help you do just that. The statement underpins the narrative and serves as a basis for the Freeletics brand to develop.



Hero

A coach that gives you exactly what you need – not more, not less. **A coach uninterested in superficial results.** Unlike trendy sports brands, Freeletics is here to nurture lasting habits and an all-around healthy lifestyle.



Ideal

To be the best version of yourself. It's the perfect example of a story that never ends. Freeletics supports their users to continually strive to reach peak performance – both mentally and physically.



Plot

Freeletics pushes their ideal by engaging app users through digital coaching and ambassadorships. In doing so, they nurture **healthy competition and a community** in which members encourage one another to achieve their next goal and, ultimately, their best selves.



Themes

Freeletics situates themselves as a holistic authority within the urban fitness world. Apart from coaching and nutrition, they explore the **medical side of fitness**, using science as a medium to boost their authority. In line with their ideal, they also communicate heavily on self-help and **self-improvement**, discussing issues like **mental discipline**, female empowerment, and mindfulness.



Resources

Much like their approach, Freeletics' main resources are no-fuss: **an app and a user base**. Since they have been able to build a larger community around a clearly defined story, **Freeletics have started creating related secondary products**. A water resistant sports bag and phone case now allow users to train in the rain. Yet even with these new products, their message remains the same: no frills, just the necessities. No excuses, no problem.

KUKA

Today Kuka is one of the leading suppliers of intelligent automations for industries ranging from F&B to construction. But it hasn't always been so. At the beginning in 1898, the German-based manufacturer was known for its welding and cutting expertise.

Needless to say, a lot has changed in the interceding years to make Kuka what it is today. That's why it was time to upgrade the company's identity to match its current global reach and cutting-edge technology.



The Brand Story of Kuka

KUKA



Context

With technological innovation at an all-time high and **the need to optimise industrial conditions more than ever**, Kuka is primed to take the stage. The company was able to rely on its heritage and the current climate to own global legitimacy across all sectors.



Hero

A human partner in automation. When presenting their products, Kuka avoids technical jargon and instead uses everyday language. Intelligent technology can seem daunting but it doesn't have to be. Kuka makes it accessible.



Themes

For a B2B company, Kuka covers a wide variety of themes. Of course, a lot of their communication revolves around the latest news and innovations in the world of robotics, but they also tackle tech-related topics like **blockchains, IoT (Internet of Things) and e-commerce**, local industry and societal news, and more. An interesting policy that probably requires significant resources, but one that may have both internal and commercial benefits down the line.



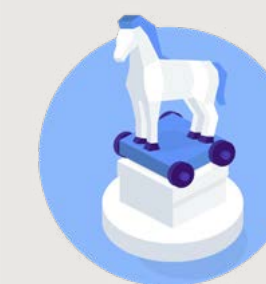
Trigger

The inevitable tension between humans and technology. Oftentimes, technological advancements spark fear of redundancy and the unknown. Kuka recast this tension and used it as a starting point for their story. Don't shy away from technological innovation; harness it. Their approach speaks to customers in the process of transforming themselves and trying to **find a balance between automated and manual work.**



Ideal

To impact an entire industry. **'Making automation intelligent'** is an on-going journey. One that doesn't end with the product but continues in the relationships with customers. At what point is automation intelligent enough? At what point is the job done? The answer to both is never.



Resources

Being a tech-focused company, **Kuka's main resources tie into research, innovation and intellectual property.** Their staff and strong anchoring in Bavaria are also important, to the point that they have their own Kuka College: a collection of tailored training courses and seminars on robotics.



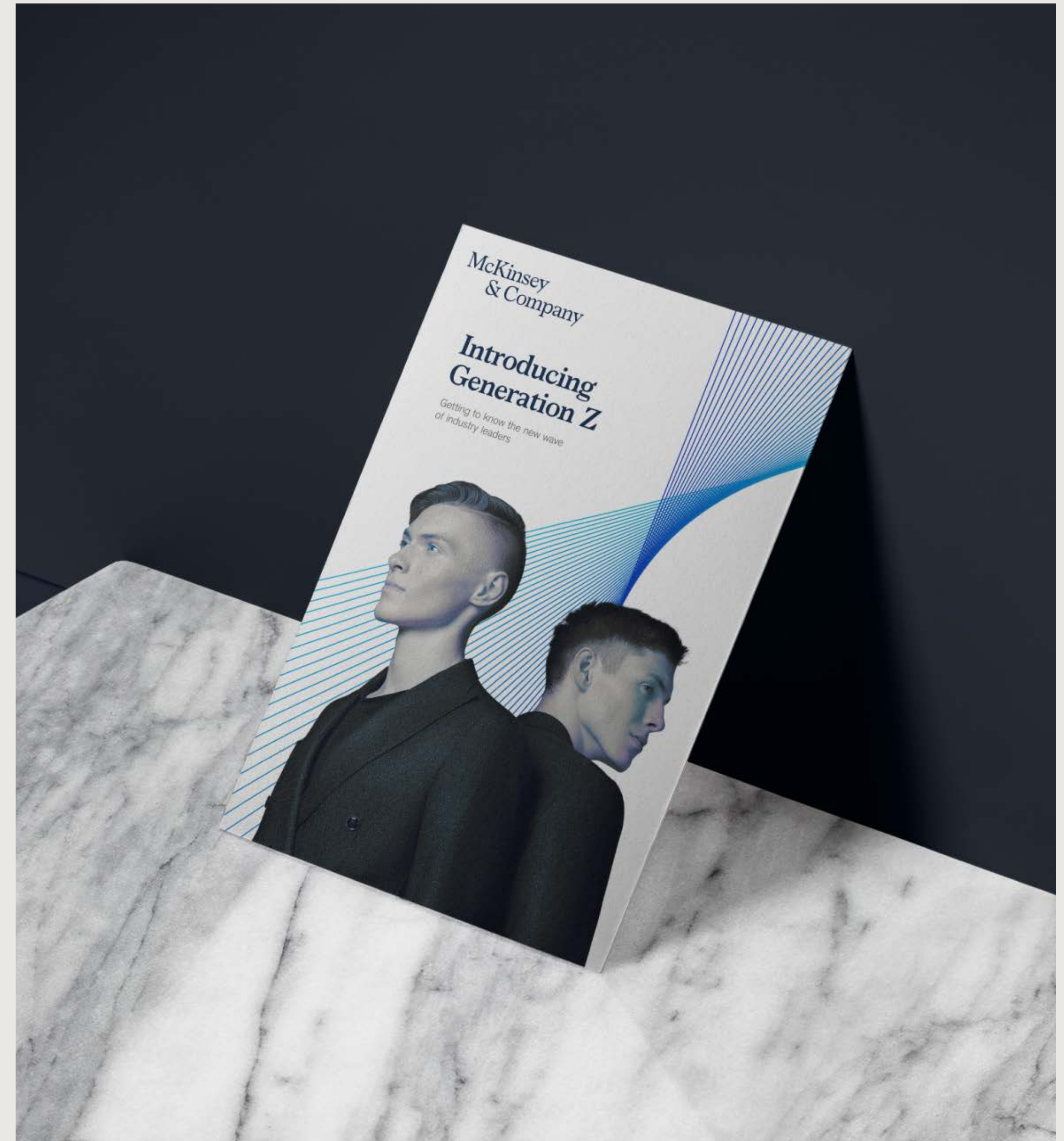
Plot

By **integrating people, software, hardware and mechanical systems**, Kuka aims to 'make automation intelligent'. Taking a holistic view of automation keeps Kuka products agnostic and thereby at the forefront, allowing them to adapt to the current environment.

McKinsey & Company

When management consulting company McKinsey says they're global, they really are – both in their reach and their approach. Founded in Chicago in 1926, McKinsey has grown to have offices in 65 countries and prides themselves in having a truly international mindset.

That means pulling perspectives and insights from all over the world and sharing them throughout the entire company. This way, they ensure they're aligned across the business and can give clients fully informed advice.



The Brand Story of McKinsey & Company

McKinsey & Company



Context

With the **business world becoming ever more fast-paced and global**, the risks individual companies face are on the rise as well. McKinsey realised early on that companies lack the time and consolidated knowledge to look beyond the present moment at how they stand up to their competitors. That makes it difficult for them to implement changes in their organisations that could help them gain ground in this increasingly risky world.



Trigger

The inability of companies to process their own shortcomings. Armed with this knowledge, McKinsey found their niche and positioned themselves as a trustworthy professional and an experienced outside perspective on how companies run their organisations.



Hero

An **intelligent business-savvy advisor with an international and human perspective.** McKinsey puts great emphasis not only on their global reach, but on the individuals who enable it. Creating human connections, both within their organisation and with their clients, is important for earning trust and getting a complete picture.



Ideal

To have companies **be successfully structured from the get-go.** In an ideal world, businesses would already be organised to achieve the greatest measure of success. As things stand, McKinsey is here to level the playing field and make sure everyone puts their best foot forward.



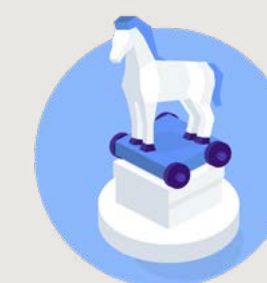
Plot

McKinsey's approach is essentially three-fold. **Analyse the environment** and context of a business, **boost their client** so they're at the top of their game, and then **teach them how to navigate the fast-paced digital world** without them.



Themes

As they are active in many different industries, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between McKinsey's brand messages and themes. **That makes the company somewhat of an unusual case, as it needs to project its authority on almost every trending subject to maintain its image.** That being said, the company still communicates on less commercial topics such as career management, work-life balance and social work.



Resources

McKinsey's main resource is its people. From **consultants to scientists, industry experts to lobbyists and political figures**, the McKinsey staff is a massive pool of talent and connections. Even outgoing consultants are encouraged to join their **alumni network**, which helps with finding new jobs while maintaining good relations with the firm. Other elements, such as their impressive client list, track record, and publications, should not be disregarded.



What differentiates On Running as a leading sports footwear brand? It's simpler than you think.

On framed themselves not as a 'performance enhancer' but as a 'protector' when it comes to running and runners. In other words, their running shoes are not just about performance, but mainly about comfort.

Since their founding in 2010 in Switzerland, On has grown exponentially – even expanding into clothing and accessories – thanks to their patented CloudTec cushioning technology which promises 'soft landings and explosive take-offs' for athletes and amateurs alike.



The Brand Story of On Running



Context

The **sports footwear landscape is a crowded one**, dominated by the likes of Nike and Adidas. But these **brands mainly focus on the performance aspect of their products**. Comfort is secondary. In fact, cushioning and comfort were long touted as a hindrance for performance in the past. On saw things differently. To them, comfortable shoes push performance, because if you're comfortable, you'll feel your best to do your best.



Trigger

A new technology that **balances comfort and performance**. This unique angle attracts not only runners but also positions On as an accessible brand for non-runners – from nurses, who are on their feet all day, to new mums pushing prams.



Hero

A **passionate, honest and style-conscious running buddy** – whether you're training for a marathon or running errands.



Ideal

To revolutionise the sensation of running. Running should be fun. It shouldn't hurt and you shouldn't come home with sore feet and blisters. By creating comfortable shoes, On hope to entice more sedentary folk to take part in the race and start a running revolution.



Plot

On is transparent in everything they do. From sourcing supplies to **testing their products in the Alps** and selling shoes in their stores. And now, On has even created **a sustainable subscription service** that allows customers to swap out run-down shoes for new ones. The old pair is then recycled in its entirety.



Themes

Through the themes they cover, On manages to expand the running experience beyond the shoe. With athlete highlights they communicate more on the professional athletes wearing their products. Conversely, their “Dedicated to the run” series tells more **personal stories about how running has changed some people's lives**. They also produce **content on sustainability** (in line with the plot), as well as city and nature guides to inspire and entertain runners.



Resources

On's main resource lies in the technology and design behind its shoes, that allow runners to feel as if they were “walking on clouds.” This is supported by **patents, such as CloudTec and Helion**. The company also relies heavily on the **Swiss brand** for its storytelling, as well as athlete partnerships.

About Us

Creative Supply is the branding partner for globally minded organisations.

Founded in 2015 in Zurich, Creative Supply works in consulting, education and publishing. We partner with clients across industries and locations, assigning to each one a dedicated team of independent creatives led by experienced consultants. We have built close ties with academia, and teach at leading universities such as the Ecole polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), ESSEC in Paris, the Geneva School of Business (HEG) and Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne. Building on our consulting and teaching experience, we publish original content to give business owners and executives an edge in growing their brand.



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