

#1 Wall Street Journal Bestseller

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BUILDING A STORY BRAND



Clarify Your Message
So Customers Will Listen

Use the 7 Elements of Great Storytelling to Grow Your Business

Building a StoryBrand

Clarify Your Message So Customers Will Listen

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THE KEY TO BEING SEEN, HEARD, AND UNDERSTOOD

Most companies waste enormous amounts of money on marketing. We all know how mind-numbing it is to spend precious dollars on a new marketing effort that gets no results. When we see the reports, we wonder what went wrong, or worse, whether our product is really as good as we thought it was.

But what if the problem wasn't the product? What if the problem was the way we talked about the product?

The problem is simple. The graphic artists and designers we're hiring to build our websites and brochures have degrees in design and know everything about Photoshop, but how many of them have read a single book about writing good sales copy? How many of them know how to clarify your message so customers listen? And worse, these companies are glad to take your money, regardless of whether you see results or not.

The fact is, pretty websites don't sell things. Words sell things. And if we haven't clarified our message, our customers won't listen.

If we pay a lot of money to a design agency without first clarifying our message, we might as well be holding a bullhorn up to a monkey. The only thing a potential customer will hear is noise.

Still, clarifying our message isn't easy. I had one client say that when he tried to do so, he felt like he was inside the bottle trying to read the label. I understand. Before I started StoryBrand I was a writer and spent thousands of hours staring at a blank computer screen, wondering what to say. That soul-wrenching frustration led me to create a "communication framework" based on the proven power of story, and I swear it was like discovering a secret formula. The writing got easier and I sold millions of books. After using the framework to create clear messages in my books, I used it to filter the marketing collateral in my

own small company. Once we got clear, we doubled in revenue for four consecutive years. I now teach that framework to more than three thousand businesses each year.

Once they get their message straight, our clients create quality websites, incredible keynotes, e-mails that get opened, and sales letters people respond to. Why? Because nobody will listen to you if your message isn't clear, no matter how expensive your marketing material may be.

At StoryBrand we've had clients double, triple, and even quadruple their revenue after they got one thing straight — their message.

The StoryBrand Framework has been just as effective for billion-dollar brands as it has for mom-and-pop businesses, and just as powerful for American corporations as it has for those in Japan and Africa. Why? Because the human brain, no matter what region of the world it comes from, is drawn toward clarity and away from confusion.

The reality is we aren't just in a race to get our products to market; we're also in a race to communicate why our customers need those products in their lives. Even if we have the best product in the marketplace, we'll lose to an inferior product if our competitor's offer is communicated more clearly.

So what's your message? Can you say it easily? Is it simple, relevant, and repeatable? Can your entire team repeat your company's message in such a way that it is compelling? Have new hires been given talking points they can use to describe what the company offers and why every potential customer should buy it?

How many sales are we missing out on because customers can't figure out what our offer is within five seconds of visiting our website?

WHY SO MANY BUSINESSES FAIL

To find out why so many marketing and branding attempts fail, I called

my friend Mike McHargue. Mike, often called "Science Mike" because he hosts a successful podcast called *Ask Science Mike*, spent fifteen years using science-based methodologies to help companies figure out how their customers think, specifically in the tech space. Sadly, he left advertising when a client asked him to create an algorithm predicting the associated buying habits of people with diabetes. Translation: they wanted him to sell junk food to diabetics. Mike refused and left the industry. He's a good man. I called, though, because he still has incredible insight as to how marketing, story, and behavior all blend together.

At my request, Mike flew to Nashville to attend one of our workshops. After two days learning the StoryBrand 7-Part Framework (hereafter called the SB7 Framework), we sat on my back porch and I grilled him with questions. Why does this formula work? What's happening in the brains of consumers as they encounter a message filtered through this formula? What's the science behind why brands like Apple and Coke, who intuitively use this formula, dominate the marketplace?

"There's a reason most marketing collateral doesn't work," Mike said, putting his feet up on the coffee table. "Their marketing is too complicated. The brain doesn't know how to process the information. The more simple and predictable the communication, the easier it is for the brain to digest. Story helps because it is a sense-making mechanism. Essentially, story formulas put everything in order so the brain doesn't have to work to understand what's going on."

Mike went on to explain that among the million things the brain is good at, the overriding function of the brain is to help an individual survive and thrive. Everything the human brain does, all day, involves helping that person, and the people that person cares about, get ahead in life.

Mike asked if I remembered that old pyramid we learned about in high school, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. First, he reminded me, the brain is tasked with setting up a system in which we can eat and drink and survive physically. In our modern, first-world economy this means having a job and a dependable income. Then the brain is concerned with safety, which might entail having a roof over our heads and a sense of well-being and power that keeps us from being vulnerable. After food and shelter are

taken care of, our brains start thinking about our relationships, which entail everything from reproducing in a sexual relationship, to being nurtured in a romantic relationship, to creating friendships (a tribe) who will stick by us in case there are any social threats. Finally then, the brain begins to concern itself with greater psychological, physiological, or even spiritual needs that give us a sense of meaning.

What Mike helped me understand is that, without us knowing it, human beings are constantly scanning their environment (even advertising) for information that is going to help them meet their primitive need to survive. This means that when we ramble on and on about how we have the biggest manufacturing plant on the West Coast, our customers don't care. Why? Because that information isn't helping them eat, drink, find a mate, fall in love, build a tribe, experience a deeper sense of meaning, or stockpile weapons in case barbarians start coming over the hill behind our cul-de-sac.

So what do customers do when we blast a bunch of noise at them? They ignore us.

And so right there on my back porch, Mike defined two critical mistakes brands make when they talk about their products and services.

Mistake Number One

The first mistake brands make is they fail to focus on the aspects of their offer that will help people survive and thrive.

All great stories are about survival — either physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual. A story about anything else won't work to captivate an audience. Nobody's interested. This means that if we position our products and services as anything but an aid in helping people survive, thrive, be accepted, find love, achieve an aspirational identity, or bond with a tribe that will defend them physically and socially, good luck selling anything to anybody. These are the only things people care about. We can take that truth to the bank. Or to bankruptcy court, should we choose

to ignore it as an undeniable fact.

Mike said our brains are constantly sorting through information and so we discard millions of unnecessary facts every day. If we were to spend an hour in a giant ballroom, our brains would never think to count how many chairs are in the room. Meanwhile, we would always know where the exits are. Why? Because our brains don't need to know how many chairs there are in the room to survive, but knowing where the exits are would be helpful in case there was a fire.

Without knowing it, the subconscious is always categorizing and organizing information, and when we talk publicly about our company's random backstory or internal goals, we're positioning ourselves as the chairs, not the exits.

"But this poses a problem," Mike continued. "Processing information demands that the brain burn calories. And the burning of too many calories acts against the brain's primary job: to help us survive and thrive."

Mistake Number Two

The second mistake brands make is they cause their customers to burn too many calories in an effort to understand their offer.

When having to process too much seemingly random information, people begin to ignore the source of that useless information in an effort to conserve calories. In other words, there's a survival mechanism within our customers' brain that is designed to tune us out should we ever start confusing them.

Imagine every time we talk about our products to potential customers, they have to start running on a treadmill. Literally, they have to jog the whole time we're talking. How long do you think they're going to pay attention? Not long. And yet this is precisely what's happening. When we start our elevator pitch or keynote address, or when somebody visits our website, they're burning calories to process the information we're sharing.

And if we don't say something (and say something quickly) they can use to survive or thrive, they will tune us out.

These two realities — the reality that people are looking for brands that can help them survive and thrive, and the reality that communication must be simple — explain why the SB7 Framework has helped so many businesses increase their revenue. The key is to make your company's message about something that helps the customer survive and to do so in such a way that they can understand it without burning too many calories.

STORY TO THE RESCUE

Mike agreed the most powerful tool we can use to organize information so people don't have to burn very many calories is story. As he said, story is a sense-making device. It identifies a necessary ambition, defines challenges that are battling to keep us from achieving that ambition, and provides a plan to help us conquer those challenges. When we define the elements of a story as it relates to our brand, we create a map customers can follow to engage our products and services.

Still, when I talk about story to business leaders, they immediately put me in a category with artists, thinking I want to introduce them to something fanciful. But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about a concrete formula we can use to garner attention from otherwise distracted customers. I'm talking about practical steps we can take to make sure people see us, hear us, and understand exactly why they simply *must* engage our products.

THE FORMULA FOR CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Formulas are simply the summation of best practices, and the reason we like them is because they work. We've been given great management formulas like Ken Blanchard's Situational Leadership and formulas we can use in manufacturing like Six Sigma and Lean Manufacturing. But what

about a formula for communication? Why don't we have a formula we can use to effectively explain what our company offers the world?

The StoryBrand Framework is that formula. We know it works because some form of this formula has been active for thousands of years to help people tell stories. Talk about a summation of best practices. When it comes to getting people to pay attention, this formula will be your most powerful ally.

Once you know the formulas, you can predict the path most stories will take. I've learned these formulas so well that my wife hates going to movies with me because she knows at some point I'm going to elbow her and whisper something like, "That guy's going to die in thirty-one minutes."

Story formulas reveal a well-worn path in the human brain, and if we want to stay in business, we need to position our products along this path.

If you're going to continue reading this book, I have to warn you, I'm going to ruin movies for you. I mean, these things really are formulaic. They're predictable. And they're predictable for a reason. Storytellers have figured out how to keep an audience's attention for hours.

The good news is these formulas work just as well at growing your business as they do at entertaining an audience.

THE KEY IS CLARITY

The narrative coming out of a company (and for that matter inside a company) must be clear. In a story, audiences must always know who the hero is, what the hero wants, who the hero has to defeat to get what they want, what tragic thing will happen if the hero doesn't win, and what wonderful thing will happen if they do. If an audience can't answer these basic questions, they'll check out and the movie will lose millions at the box office. If a screenwriter breaks these rules, they'll likely never work again.

The same is true for the brand you represent. Our customers have questions burning inside them, and if we aren't answering those questions, they'll move on to another brand. If we haven't identified what our customer wants, what problem we are helping them solve, and what life will look like after they engage our products and services, for example, we can forget about thriving in the marketplace. Whether we're writing a story or attempting to sell products, our message must be clear. Always.

In fact, at StoryBrand we have a mantra: "If you confuse, you'll lose."

BUSINESS HAS AN ENEMY

Business has a fierce, insidious enemy that, if not identified and combated, will contort our company into an unrecognizable mess. The enemy I'm talking about is noise.

Noise has killed more ideas, products, and services than taxes, recessions, lawsuits, climbing interest rates, and even inferior product design. I'm not talking about the noise inside our business; I'm talking about the noise we *create* as a business. What we often call marketing is really just clutter and confusion sprayed all over our websites, e-mails, and commercials. And it's costing us millions.

Years ago, a StoryBrand client who attended one of our workshops pushed back. "I don't think this will work for me," he said. "My business is too diverse to reduce down to a simple message." I asked him to explain.

"I have an industrial painting company with three different revenue streams. In one division we powder-coat auto parts. In another we apply sealant to concrete, and in another we have a sterilized painting process used specifically in hospitals."

His business was diverse, but nothing so complex that it couldn't be simplified so more people would hire him. I asked if I could put his website on the giant television screen so the entire workshop could see it.

His website was thoughtful, but it didn't make a great deal of sense from an outside perspective (which is how every customer views your business).

The man had hired a fine-arts painter to create a painting of his building (was he selling a building?), and at first glance it looked like the website for an Italian restaurant. The first question I had when I went to the website was, "Do you serve free breadsticks?" There were a thousand links ranging from contact information to FAQs to a timeline of the company's history. There were even links to the nonprofits the business supported. It was as though he was answering a hundred questions his customers had never asked.

I asked the class to raise their hands if they thought his business would grow if we wiped the website clean and simply featured an image of a guy in a white lab coat painting something next to text that read, "We Paint All Kinds of S#*%," accompanied by a button in the middle of the page that said, "Get a Quote."

The entire class raised their hands.

Of course his business would grow. Why? Because he'd finally stopped forcing clients to burn calories thinking about his life and business and offered the one thing that would solve his customers' problem: a painter.

What we think we are saying to our customers and what our customers actually hear are two different things. And customers make buying decisions not based on what we say but on what they hear.

STOP SAYING THAT

All experienced writers know the key to great writing isn't in what they say; it's in what they don't say. The more we cut out, the better the screenplay or book. The mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal is often credited for sending a long letter stating he simply didn't have time to send a short one.

(Continues...)

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