The other side of the story
The stories that we tell, and the stories that we easily recall, aren’t the only ones governing our lives. If brands want to become standout storytellers, they need to unearth the deeper narratives hidden in the minds of their audiences.
Brands have become obsessed with the art and craft of telling stories. Human beings, we are repeatedly told, prefer stories and anecdotes to facts and statistics. If you want somebody to remember something, you must put it in a story. If you want them to believe it, be fired and inspired by it, then again, a story is what you need. In an age when corporate speakers consult the same coaches as Hollywood screenwriters, and when the brains behind hit cable TV series troop off to Cannes to tell the advertising world how it’s done, there seems to be no marketing-related ailment that a well-told story can’t cure.

It’s become fashionable to argue that any brand story is a good brand story, that by adopting narrative techniques or standard story structures, brands can automatically increase the effectiveness of their messaging. Yet this isn’t how storytelling works. A great storyteller knows how to connect his or her own tale with the deeper narratives that exist in the minds of the audience; narratives that those audience members rarely remember, and which they would struggle to relate themselves. Learn the art of listening to and interpreting your audience’s hidden stories and you will earn the ability to tell strikingly original tales that connect on a deeper level. Press on with storytelling without doing so, and you risk telling a story that everyone has heard before – or worse, a story that nobody relates to at all.
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Take Castle Lager’s stirring tale of South African expats battling the hectic streets of New York City to deliver a crate of Castle to a rooftop braai, and create their own corner of the Rainbow Nation. This was a popular ad, well executed, that aimed to stir patriotic feelings amongst all South Africans in the years following the country’s first democratic elections. Its endline, “The taste that’s stood the test of time” embodied Castle’s intended brand narrative perfectly: proud of its heritage but equally proud to be part of a new South Africa.

There was just one problem. It didn’t work. Far from securing Castle’s leadership in its category, the campaign was part of a marketing strategy that coincided with a disastrous decline in share.

**Stories, memories and experience**
Castle’s narrative was an uplifting one; but it wasn’t a narrative that connected with the stories its core audience were actually experiencing. Moving to Manhattan wasn’t something that the millions of Castle drinkers still struggling with poverty in their home country could relate to. Although the ad painted an aspirational view of South Africa’s future, it was a narrative that had lost touch with the country’s present. Had Castle been able to unearth the deeper stories within the minds of its audience, it could have crafted and owned a story that resonated more powerfully with them. But like many brands, it was too busy telling its own story to understand those already occupying the minds of others.

Stories are in many ways pre-packaged memories, connecting events and people together and doing so with a powerful charge of emotion. The way they interact with the memories already embedded within our minds has a huge influence over their success. Just as our existing memories govern what we pay attention to and how we interpret our experience in the present; so the brain’s existing stories govern which stories we are ready to respond to.
Trapped within our own stories
As qualitative market researchers we are very aware of the individual narrative that each respondent carries with them; the stories that they construct over time and into which they fit their judgments, decisions and actions. Many of these stories become self-fulfilling, compelling people repeatedly to play a particular role: living out their own ‘rags to riches’ tale provides many with a strong work ethic; heavy drinkers frequently reinforce their self-destructive behaviour with a story casting them as rebel, outlaw or rock star.

In the age of social media and Google Hummingbird, there is an even greater opportunity for stories to become self-perpetuating and repetitive. Shortened attention spans encourage us to consume only those stories that fit neatly into our existing narrative; and the channels through which we access content learn to prioritise the things we appear to enjoy and be interested in. In digital knowledge economies, human beings are less and less likely to encounter stories that challenge their personal narrative and provide an opportunity to broaden it. Since novelty is one of the most important factors in earning our attention, a world of increasingly similar stories is one in which any storyteller struggles to stand out.

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The forgotten art of interpreting stories
Yet storytellers don’t have to settle for this. If they can connect to the deeper narrative themes within the minds of the audience, they can challenge convention whilst establishing a far more powerful connection. In the American auto market of the 1950s the prevailing narrative encouraged in the minds of every car buyer was that a big car was better: it conferred status, it involved a better driving experience – it was where the story of driving was headed. What role did a vehicle like the VW Beetle have to play in this narrative? Its role seemed inevitable: it would be playing the part of “too small.”

The genius of VW advertising for the Beetle (one of the most famous campaigns in the industry’s history) was that it didn’t ignore this prevailing narrative. Instead, it found a way to turn it on its head; twist it towards a conclusion that nobody saw coming and in the process, connect it to deeper themes and narratives that the audience had forgotten they cared about. In VW’s hands, small became smart, savvy, independent and free-thinking. These associations have been available all along, but every other auto brand had largely ignored them.

Any would-be storyteller needs the ability to detect the stories that aren’t being told as well as those that are. They must learn to listen in context, seeking to recreate situations and draw deep-lying memories and rich, personal narratives to the surface. Only by doing so can they craft compelling stories that can reach across individual experiences, rewrite mental chapters, open up new developments and offer new ways of resolving the tensions in each person’s on-going narrative.

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The techniques best suited to playing this role are those of observational, in-context research, which embodies the skills of effective story listening. Projective and enabling techniques draw out the inter-relationship of different themes and the emotions associated with different characters in a personal story. Cognitive interviewing helps to recreate context, drawing out the stories that are not regularly told, but which still exert huge influence over a person’s personal narrative. By interpreting the stories of an audience in this way, qualitative researchers can provide a brand with the essential raw material for bridging the gap between its own story and that of the people it wishes to tell it to.

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Aids to the story listening:

**Projective techniques**
A collection of techniques designed to encourage participants to project their feelings and thoughts onto other things, making it easier to reveal deeper emotions and associations, and bring hidden aspects of a personal narrative to the surface.

**Cognitive interviewing**
An interviewing technique that helps surface affective memories by recreating the context for people's experience in greater depth. It is a vital tool for helping to reveal the hidden connections within individuals’ personal narratives.

**Observational research**
Approaches employing face-to-face or technology-enabled immersion in real-life contexts, that provide a unique opportunity to observe or meet people in their own environment rather than in a research-based context. By unveiling insights from common, everyday activities that might appear ordinary at first glance, these approaches help reveal important things that people leave unsaid in other forms of research.
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**Freeing the brand story**

Hearing these stories may lead a brand to challenge its own internal narrative, to question the version of its place in the world that it has put together internally. This shouldn’t be seen as a sign of weakness; in fact it is the essence of powerful storytelling.

The recent evolution of Axe deodorant’s advertising shows just how powerful the shift from surface-level stories to deeper narratives can be. For years, Axe had told the story of how a simple spray can magically transform awkward men into irresistible lotharios. It’s a story that men enjoyed – and it’s always been told with humour and panache. After a while though, the story’s ability to connect declined. It was a tale that men were becoming fed up of hearing about themselves.

Then, suddenly, Axe told a very different story: the story of the woman in every young man’s life whom he is simply too terrifyingly enamoured of to ever actually speak to; the opportunity he let slip by and always regrets. Narrated by Kiefer Sutherland and trailed imaginatively on social media, ‘Susan Glenn’ was one of the most impactful advertising campaigns of recent times. Its story wasn’t the story that most men are happy to talk about; but it was the story their deeper, personal narratives were most ready to respond to.

From the first campfire tales to today’s social media channels, the most effective storytellers know that they are part of a sharing process. By understanding the narratives of others, they can know precisely which stories their audience needs to hear – and how to tell them effectively. Brands that aspire to become storytellers must embrace this commitment to listening and interpreting as well as telling tales themselves. In interpretative qualitative research, they can find the inspiration to do just that.

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