

# What Are Your Signature Stories?

**David Aaker**  
**Jennifer L. Aaker**

*A signature story is an intriguing, authentic, involving narrative with a strategic message that enables a firm to grow by clarifying or enhancing its brand, customer relationships, organization, and/or the business strategy. Signature stories represent a critical asset that can be leveraged over time and which can provide inspiration and direction both inside and outside the firm. The challenges are to find, evaluate, gain exposure for, and give legs to signature stories. (Keywords: Brand Management, Brand Equity, Marketing Strategy, Marketing)*

**A** Nordstrom customer in the mid-1970s walked into the Fairbanks, Alaska, store and asked to “return” two worn snow tires. It was an awkward moment. Nordstrom, which had evolved from a shoe store to a department store, had never sold tires (although another company once did at this store’s site). Despite that fact, the salesperson that had been on the job only a few weeks, relying on a customer-first culture supported by a generous return policy, had no doubt what to do. He promptly took back the snow tires and refunded what the customer said he had paid. The co-founder of Nordstrom, John Nordstrom, is said to have witnessed the event. The Nordstrom story brings to life the generous return policy; the customer supportive culture; and the authority, competence, and attitude of the sales people.

The Molson Canadian beer firm decided to create a hockey rink in a remote spot of the Purcell Mountain range in the Canadian Rockies for use by a few people who would do “Anything for Hockey.” It took two weeks and many helicopter trips to build the rink complete with an iconic Molson refrigerator. Players were selected from thousands who submitted their personal stories demonstrating their obsession with hockey. Eleven contest winners (along with the actual Stanley Cup, the ultimate hockey symbol) were flown in for a game at this one-of-a-kind rink. The story detailed the program execution—finding the location, building the rink, getting the winners, the helicopter’s role, and the game itself. The story vividly shows that Molson has a shared interest with customers in hockey and has given that shared

David Aaker is Professor Emeritus of Marketing and Public Policy at the Berkeley-Haas School of Business and Vice-Chairman of Prophet Brand Strategy.

Jennifer L. Aaker is the General Atlantic Professor of Marketing at the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University.

interest a program with energy, “Can you believe?” uniqueness, and emotional impact.

Leon L. Bean, an avid outdoorsman, returned from a hunting trip in 1912 disgruntled because of his cold, wet feet. With little resources but a lot of motivation and ingenuity, he invented a new boot by stitching lightweight leather tops to waterproof rubber bottoms. The boots worked so well he offered them for sale via mail order as the “Maine Hunting Shoe” using lists of nonresident Maine hunting license holders. Unfortunately, most of the first 100 pairs sold had a stitching problem and leaked. Mr. Bean faced a defining moment. His response? He refunded the customers’ money even though it nearly broke him and fixed the process so that future boots were indeed watertight. The L.L. Bean story shows a firm that has an innovation culture, a heritage around fishing and hunting (which has since been generalized to the outdoors), a commitment to quality, and a customer concern reflected in the legendary L.L. Bean “Guarantee of 100% Satisfaction.”

These three stories are strategic assets to their brand and are what we call “signature stories.”

## Defining Signature Stories

A story is a narrative with a beginning, middle, and an end (not always portrayed in that order). Importantly, it is not simply a set of facts (or features). A story may incorporate and communicate facts, but it does it in the context of a narrative.

So what is a *signature story*? A signature story is an intriguing, authentic, involving narrative with a strategic message that clarifies or enhances the brand, the customer relationship, the organization, and/or the business strategy. It is a strategic asset that enables growth, provides inspiration, and offers guidance both internally and externally over an extended time period.

A signature story needs to be *intriguing* so that it can grab attention. There needs to be a reason for the audience to notice and process the story. The story should attract the eye and mind of a target audience member by being some combination of thought-provoking, novel, provocative, interesting, informative, newsworthy, or entertaining.

*Authenticity* means that the story audience does not perceive the story to be phony, contrived, or a transparent selling effort and that there is substance behind it. The story does not have to be real; it can be fictional, but it cannot precipitate a conscious belief that the story is unbelievable or obviously motivated by a selling goal. For example, an AT&T story of a realistic car accident caused by distracted driving is powerful even though it is clearly fictional—but it has verisimilitude. Further, there should be substance behind the story and, more particularly, its message should be in the form of programs, policies, or transparency. With respect to the Nordstrom story, for example, their *only* employee rule, “Use good judgment in

all situations,” empowers their people. The presence of substance confirms and supports the message, while the absence of substance ultimately tarnishes the brand and undercuts the story’s authenticity.

*Involving* means that the audience member gets drawn into the story, which usually should precipitate a cognitive, emotional, or behavioral response. For the Nordstrom story, perhaps the audience member will add a visual image of the scene or a conclusion that employees at Nordstrom can do much for the customer on their own. Emotionally, an involving story can precipitate feelings about the empathetic characters or sometimes about the surprise contained in the story. Behaviorally, the audience may be stimulated to change what brands are considered in the next purchase or to pass along the story to others.

A signature story will have a strategic message that clarifies or enhances the brand, customer relationship, organization, and/or business strategy. It can clarify or advance the brand’s visibility, image, personality, relevance, and value proposition. It can define or support the customer relationship (as Molson’s mountain hockey rink does). It can communicate or leverage the organization’s heritage, culture, and values. Finally, it can help articulate not only the current business strategy, but also the future vision for the organization with a story arc for how to get there.

A compelling signature story will be an asset with enduring relevance and capacity to inspire, enable growth, and provide direction over a long time period. As they get retold and reappear, signature stories gain authenticity, traction, and influence. A signature story thus can be evaluated by its anticipated life as well as its message. It can be contrasted with *tactical stories*, which are used to achieve a short-term communication objective, perhaps in an advertisement or on a website. There is a qualitative difference between tactical and signature stories that affects how they should be resourced and managed.

The degree to which a signature story qualifies with respect to the four criteria—intriguing, authentic, involving, and having a strategic message—will have to be made by those developing and using them. The temptation to elevate to signature status a story that is weak on one or more of the dimensions should be resisted.

## Signature Story Sets

Signature stories come in two varieties. First, there are the stand-alone stories like those of Nordstrom, Molson, and L.L. Bean that have one complete version of a narrative. The story may be leveraged with programs, products, events, or ads but it is its own entity. Second, there are signature story sets consisting of several or many stories around similar messages and story arcs. Blendtec, Skype, Molson’s elaboration stories, and the Prophet story portfolio are examples. The variety of stories can enhance and clarify the theme adding power, breadth, and freshness.

Blendtec’s “Will it blend?” challenge vividly demonstrates the power and versatility of the Blendtec blender and also the personality of the brand—confident,

fun-loving, and humorous. In videos posted on YouTube since 2006, company founder Tom Dickson attempted to blend a host of items (including silly putty, golf balls, marbles, cell phones, credit cards, BIC lighters, and imitation diamonds) using the Blendtec blender. In each story, Dickson discusses the challenge by describing the object and posing the “Will it blend?” question. The blender always performs and earns a response of “Yes it blends!” The ads, which have created a “Can you believe?” reaction, have very likely achieved the most viral response to any digital series of ads.<sup>1</sup> The one featuring blending an iPad got over 17 million views and the total views during the first seven years of the program were over 300 million, all with a zero media budget.

Skype solicits users, termed “moment makers,” to share their favorite Skype moment. Selected stories are placed in the Skype story bank site and provide an inspirational portrayal of how broadly and creatively Skype can be used to do amazing things and the resulting emotional impact it has on lives. A conductor in New York was attracted to New York subway musicians. How to harness and expose that talent? The solution? Create a symphony played by eleven subway musicians, each in their normal performing place but being visible to the conductor via Skype on eleven laptop computers each resting on a folding chair.

Another Skype story involved two girls, Sara from Indiana and Paige from New Zealand, who were both born without half of their left arm. At an early age, their mothers wanted to connect them. But how were they to have a relationship when they lived so far apart? The solution? Use Skype to connect daily, sharing living with the handicap and creating a deep friendship. The Skype video telling their story, which included an emotional in-person meeting in New York, got nearly 3 million views on YouTube and exposure on Ellen and other television shows.

A story can also be elaborated with additional stories. The Molson mountain hockey rink story was elaborated with stories about each of the contest winners, which added texture and emotion to the master story. There was Vitaly whose father Andrei was a hockey-loving Estonian who moved his family to Canada 17 years earlier with a dream of his son (then 12 years old) playing hockey in Canada. Vitaly eventually had success as a player, becoming a member of the Quebec Major Junior League with his father there to watch his every goal. Molson set out to help Vitaly thank his father by playing a one-on-one game at the “top-of-the-world” rink. The video describing that event got 1.3 million views.

A portfolio of signature stories may be needed to represent multiple strategies and audience targets. For example Prophet, the brand and business strategy consulting firm, has a set of five client-facing problems/solutions (such as “transform customer experiences” and “accelerating growth”) each of which has its own signature story. Further, each of the five areas has three or four subareas all with signature stores of their own. For example, the “transform customer experience” has subareas such as “understanding the customer,” “analyzing touch points,” “using design and digital to transform,” and “bridging brand silos.” There are 18 signature stories, each giving a take on the Prophet

client experience from a different perspective but with a similar story arc. A client with a particular problem will then see a signature story that will be helpful to him or her specifically rather than providing a less-relevant generic story.

## The Power of Stories

Why use stories strategically to communicate the brand or the organization? The motivation—which is supported by logic, communication theory, and empirical evidence—comes in part from a realization that stories are simply a powerful way to gain awareness, communicate, persuade, change behavior, and precipitate discussion. They are almost always far more efficient and impactful than simply communicating facts (or features). As a result, stories have become a hot topic in marketing communication today. Many firms have added journalists, editors, and filmmakers to their staffs to create or find meaningful stories and present them in a compelling way.

In order to justify investing in creating and leveraging signature stories, it is important to gain an understanding and acceptance of why stories are potentially so powerful. When facts are put into story form they become powerful because: they are remembered, they are persuasive, and they spawn social communication.

### *Stories are Remembered*

There are many studies that document how facts are much more likely to be remembered if they are part of a story. For example:

- Stanford professor, Chip Heath, gave students data on crime statistics in the U.S. and each was then asked to give a talk on either why crime is a huge problem or why it is not. After a filler task, the students then were asked to write down what other speakers had said. Although only 10% of the speakers formed the data into stories while the rest relied on statistics, 63% recalled stories and only 5% recalled any statistics.<sup>2</sup>
- Researchers at the University of California, Irvine, showed subjects a series of matched stories except that one of the pairs had a higher level of emotional arousal caused by subtle changes in the narration. The stories with elevated arousal enhanced the long-term memory of the content.<sup>3</sup>

There are several reasons why stories are remembered more than facts. First, stories can command more attention because they are interesting and often connect to the audience. As a result, the story listener is more attentive and involved than the same person receiving a recitation of facts. When the story includes a surprise or an emotion, the listener's attention will increase as will the impact on memory. Second, a story provides a way to organize information, making it easier to remember. Third, a story provides links to prior knowledge and thus is embedded in memory in a more robust way than a set of facts would be. In fact, stories are processed in the brain differently than facts. Fourth, the story arc becomes, in essence, one thing to remember rather than a list of facts.

## ***Stories are Persuasive***

That stories help persuade has been known throughout time. Think of *Aesop's Fables* or the parables in religious writings that are used to make a point. Think of the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the bestselling novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One scholar suggested that its story affected the outcome of the Civil War because it raised abolitionist sentiment in the North and helped kept Britain from fighting alongside the South.<sup>4</sup> A story that resonates can be powerful.

A host of studies have supported the hypothesis that facts presented in story form lead to greater changes in beliefs, which in turn lead to changes in attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Virtually all of the studies control for content, some, for example, by comparing the impact of a series of sentences formed into a story with those that are not.<sup>5</sup>

Signature stories involve and draw people in. Psychologists call the process whereby an audience loses itself in the story "*narrative transportation*"—people are transported from existing reality into the story or narrative. Narrative transportation is usually accompanied by empathetic characters and visual imagery. Research shows that when narrative transportation happens, perceptions, attitudes, and intentions change to reflect the story. In fact, a review of some 132 studies reported in 76 articles since 2000 shows that elevating narrative transportation has a statistically significant and meaningful impact on story-consistent beliefs, affective responses (liking), story-consistent attitudes, and story-consistent intentions plus a decrease in critical thoughts.<sup>6</sup> The more real the story appears, the greater its impact.<sup>7</sup>

Stories persuade for several reasons.

- First, stories are effective at changing attitudes because, in a story context, people deduce the logic themselves, and we know from research and common sense that self-discovery is much more powerful than having people talk *at* you.<sup>8</sup> If Blendtec had asserted that its product was powerful and durable even with believable data to support the fact, the end result would be much less likely to persuade than having the audience digest the "test" that happened in front of their eyes. A story communicates 2 plus 2 as the path to four, not simply the answer four.
- Second, stories persuade by inhibiting counter-arguing. The power of the story distracts and breaks down suspicion. A wide variety of studies have confirmed that a story gets in the way of a tendency to confront and then counter facts.<sup>9</sup> Further, because the beliefs that emerge from the story are not contradicted or refuted, they will carry the day. A story will be particularly effective when there are strong prior beliefs and counter-arguing is likely. In fact, it is remarkable how ineffective the most compelling facts, in the absence of stories, are in changing strongly held beliefs.<sup>10</sup> The classic evidence was a study by Leon Festinger et al. of a doomsday cult that became more strongly committed to their beliefs even when the predicted day passed without the end of the world.
- Third, a story and its associated emotion and affinity to the characters create an aura that can become associated with a brand. It would be inconsistent to have a positive feeling about the characters or the plot and have a



negative feeling about the brand that was in some ways a driver of the story or its outcome.

- Fourth, a storyteller is usually more authentic, credible, and liked than a person attempting to persuade with facts. Certainly founder Tom Dickson in a storytelling context is more persuasive than were he to appear as an ad spokesperson (even with the same content) where he would be perceived as selling rather telling a story.

### ***Stories Spawn Social Communication***

When signature stories stand out because of their ability to be thought-provoking, novel, provocative, interesting, informative, newsworthy, or entertaining, they are more likely to be repeated in social media and elsewhere. Facts have to achieve a much higher level of attention and interest to inspire social activity.

There has been considerable research identifying why people engage in word-of-mouth communication and what types of content tend to stimulate it.<sup>11</sup> A story tends to be shared when it contains useful information (making the sender feel knowledgeable and giving), when it makes people care (in part by creating an emotional response), when it is in some way remarkable (perhaps with a “can you believe” moment), when it has “insider” information (an obscure but interesting story), or when it generates physiological arousal (e.g., the feeling of awe, amusement, excitement, or anger).

### ***Stories Beat Facts***

Compare, as illustrated in Figure 1, the two ways of communicating the current version of the Maine Hunting Shoe called the Bean Boot—the list of facts or the legendary story of how the first Maine Hunting Shoe was created. Which will have the best chance of achieving communication objectives such as being remembered, changing perceptions, persuading, and being retold? The list of facts (or features) is unlikely to even gain attention, while the story can become a vehicle to lasting impact.

Compare also the efforts of Under Armour, the fast-growing and technology-driven sports clothing firm, to gain a place in customer’s minds with its HeatGear products. Under Armour founder, Kevin Plank, was a college football player when he got tired of sticky wet clothing. In his basement, he developed products that would stay dry using fabric from women’s lingerie. His innovation, introduced in 1996, became the start of a major performance apparel clothing company with a supporting story that is both memorable and authentic. Competitors—such as Nike’s Dri-FIT, Uniqlo’s AIRism, and Hanes’s Cool Dri—had to engage in a communication effort in a crowded and messy space emphasizing functional benefits without the support of a story.

Believing that signature stories have strategic power and value is only part of the task. There are four challenges, as suggested by Figure 2. First, signature stories need to be found or created. Second, they need to be evaluated. Third, they have to be put to work, which involves getting exposure. Finally, they need to be actively managed so that they can be an influence over time.

**FIGURE 1.** Facts vs. Stories

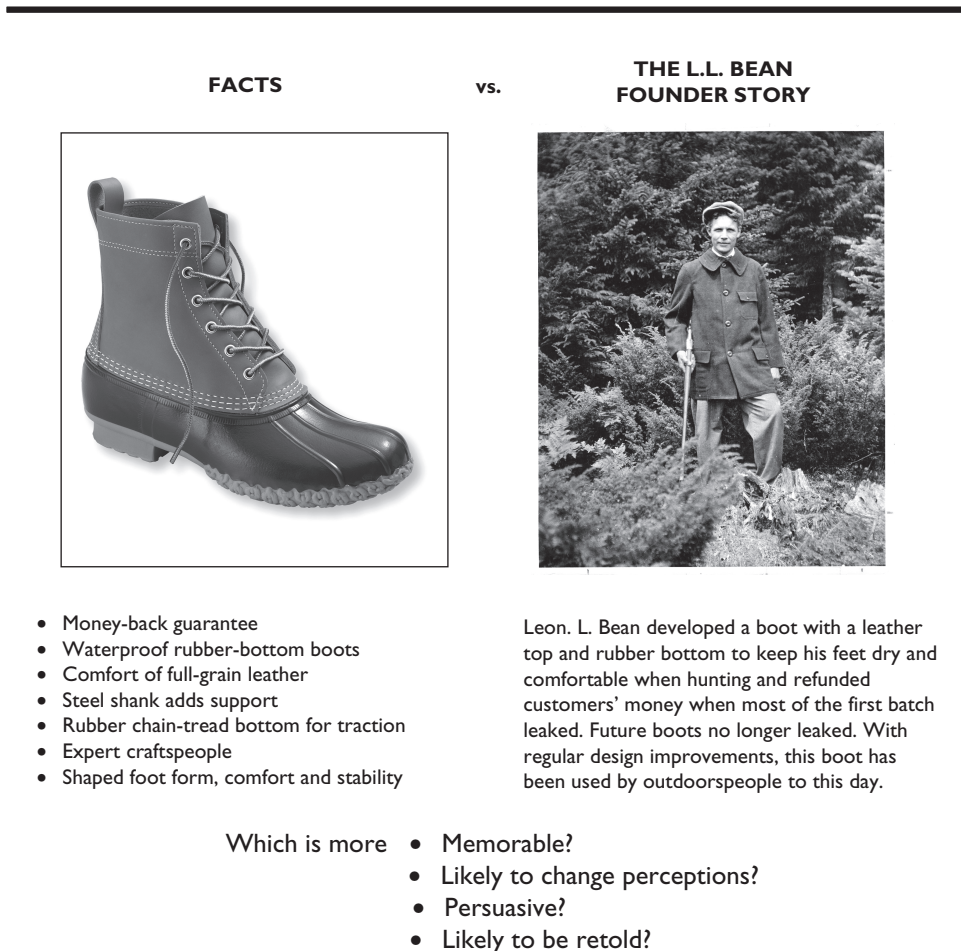


Photo credit: courtesy of L.L. Bean.

**FIGURE 2.** Creating and Leveraging Signature Stories



## Finding Signature Stories

Many firms will have signature stories in their history and the task is to identify those that can serve to play important strategic roles. For some firms, however, particularly those that are new or are facing a culture change or a



new strategy involving different products or markets, it may be necessary to create signature stories.

In either case, look for story heroes that are intriguing, authentic, and involving; that will inspire employees and motivate customers; and that will advance the strategic message of the brand, organization, or business strategy.

Eight such hero types are described below. Four of these—customers, programs, suppliers, and the offering—are often employed to motivate customers. Four more—the employees, founder, a business revitalization strategy, and a future business revitalization strategy—are usually oriented to inspiring employees. A story will often have multiple heroes, but there is usually one that is driving the story idea.

The *customer as hero* can be effective because the customer story is likely to be closely linked to either the organizational values or the brand's value proposition. Further, there is a growing consensus that customer experience and associated stories are becoming more important elements of brand building and marketing because customers value information that comes from or is based on the experience of other customers rather than commercial sources.

LinkedIn has a series of professionally created one-minute stories about "Creating Your Own Success" that involve leveraging LinkedIn. Dr. Chavez told about his dream of getting pets off of processed foods using LinkedIn to share his big idea. Jenni was laid off during the financial meltdown and several months of intense networking led to a marketing position and, ultimately, supported a decision to be on her own. Tim got advice and information using LinkedIn that helped him fulfill his dream of opening a distillery. Several of these stories got over one million views and provided evidence of the power of the LinkedIn network. Customer stories can be observed or customers can be motivated to reveal them. LinkedIn offers members the opportunity to tell their own success story, and the most compelling receive a professional video treatment.

The *program as hero* often works because a program, often not related to the marketing of the actual offering, is more intriguing than any product story. It can provide substance behind the strategy, which is the currency of authenticity. That was the case for the Molson ice rink story.

A program story involving the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, provides substance to their commitment to four defining principles—Question the Status Quo, Confidence Without Attitude, Students Always, and Beyond Yourself—which have served to differentiate and inspire. The driving insight was that in addition to instilling these values into existing students, the admissions process would detect whether an applicant was "value-friendly." As a result, applicants are now told that candidates are sought who demonstrate a strong cultural fit with these principles. They are invited to use the three required essays (about topics such as "an experience that has changed how you view the world") to reflect on and share these values. As a result of this process, the MBA student body at Berkeley-Haas was found to be much more cohesive and positive than prior classes.

The *supplier as hero* can provide credibility to a value proposition. For example, retailers and food companies that want to earn credibility about claims of being organic and natural can develop supplier stories. Clif Bar & Company has an ingredient series called “Farmers Speak.” One episode told the story of how Burroughs Family Farms, an almond supplier, made the transition from conventional to organic almond farming, along with details such as how they allowed their chickens to roam the orchards to provide compost and support the vegetation. The story included the challenge, the decision itself, the rationale, the process, and the outcome.

The *product or offering as hero* is often a part of most signature stories as it was in the Nordstrom, L.L. Bean, Skype, Under Armour, and LinkedIn cases. However, it can also be the principle hero as it was in the Blendtec case. The classic Timex ads, also in this category, placed the watch in at-risk contexts. A cliff diver in Mexico, for example, undertakes a scary dive while wearing a Timex watch. Will the watch survive? After the diver struggles to reach the shore, we all look to see if the watch works. The narrator, the newsman John Cameron Swayze, reports that the Timex is working and in fact “takes a licking and keeps on ticking.” The product-as-hero stories require little interpretation because the brand is an integral part of the story.

The *employee as hero*, as the Nordstrom story illustrates, can be the source of a strong and memorable signature story. Zappos.com, the online shoe store, has a set of signature stories around its ten core values, one of which is to deliver “Wow” customer service. One such story involves a Zappos.com call center employee who at 3 A.M. received a call from a customer who could not find an open pizza store. Instead of gently turning the customer away, the employee actually found a pizza store open and arranged a delivery.

Employee stories often need encouragement to surface. Mobil before its merger with Exxon had “Leadership,” “Partnership,” and “Trust” as the corporate brand values. The firm held a contest for any employee or groups of employees to nominate a person, group, or program that best exemplified one of these three values with the winner to get to be in the infield in the Indy 500. They got over 300 entrants and some incredible stories.

The *founder as hero* can be a powerful signature story source because the core values and value propositions are often apparent at the firm’s origin. We saw this in the L.L. Bean story. Another is from the founder of Clif Bar & Company, Gary Erickson, who was on a 175-mile bike ride in 1990 and out of energy. He just could not eat another unappetizing, sticky, hard-to-digest energy bar. This experience inspired him to make a better tasting bar with nutritious ingredients. And he did.

Signature stories around a firm’s heritage can provide a “north star” guide to ongoing business strategy or a route back to basics when a firm has strayed and is struggling. Adidas is one of many firms that have reinvigorated themselves by going back to their firm’s core values as represented by their heritage stories. The image of founder Adi Dassler talking to athletes about their needs, trying out ideas in the field, and examining used shoes in order to learn what was wearing out helped Adidas chart a course when, in the early 1990s, the firm had lost their way and were faltering in the face of the Nike challenge.

The *business revitalization strategy as hero* can represent a new culture and strategy. The resulting story can provide clarification and motivation for a major change in the organization and in its strategy and brand vision. Consider the story of Zhang Ruimin who became the CEO of a troubled Chinese appliance manufacturer Haier in 1982. Early in his tenure, he needed to replace a customer's faulty refrigerator and found that twenty percent of his inventory was also defective. Zhang promptly had the dud refrigerators lined up on the factory floor and destroyed them with a sledgehammer in front of the whole staff to tell them and the world that poor quality would not be tolerated any more. The next year, its refrigerators sold well in major domestic markets and Haier has gone on to be a major Chinese success story with a global footprint. However, the signature story still gets retold and underlies the firm's culture and strategy.

Consider also the story of IBM's Lou Gerstner who transformed the troubled firm when he became CEO in 1993. At that time, IBM was threatened with bankruptcy, ruled by product and country fiefdoms, and poised to break itself up into seven companies. Should he proceed with the break-up of the firm? To make that decision, he solicited customer feedback by having each of the top fifty executives and their direct reports visit five customers. A major finding was that customers loved IBM but wanted to buy integrated solutions from one firm. As a result, he killed the proposal to break up the firm and instead worked to make the product and geographic silos communicate and cooperate under the global IBM brand to deliver systems solutions.

The *future business revitalization story as hero* occurs when the new business strategy is in progress but the endpoint has not yet been reached. The focus is thus on the future rather than the past; it is about the road map for how to get there. The story can clarify and motivate the new strategy and inspire employees and customers alike.

At the end of 2011, T-Mobile saw its proposed merger with AT&T denied. It was in a declining market position behind AT&T, Verizon, and Sprint; it had a weak brand relying on price; and its employees were discouraged. Something needed to be done. The conventional answer would have been to upgrade marketing by communicating improved phone coverage, enhancing awareness, and engaging in effective promotions—the safe options. Or, T-Mobile could take a big risk and reinvent the whole category. Research showed that customers were mad about the category with its two-year commitment, restrictions on usage, complex and confusing pricing, and failure to reward customer loyalty. It showed that they would move to any brand that could change that paradigm. T-Mobile decided to remove these pain points through its “Un-carrier” program emphasizing simplicity, fairness, and value. The program story, even at the outset, provided energy and momentum to customers and employees. The story changed the culture at T-Mobile and created marketplace buzz around the brand.<sup>12</sup>

The T-Mobile Un-carrier program did in fact change the whole category. It resulted in over 4 million total net customer additions during 2013, making T-Mobile the fastest-growing wireless company in the nation. By early 2015, it passed Sprint to become third in the market. The story then changed its focus from the promise of the future to a symbol of an ongoing program representing innovation, success, and consumer advocacy.

## Evaluating Signature Stories

Not all stories are worth elevating to signature status. There needs to be an evaluation process to identify the strength and promise of story candidates. A prospective signature story or stories set needs to score high on two dimensions, the quality of the story and its message.

### *The Ability of the Story to be Intriguing, Authentic, and Involving*

Story criteria rely on questions regarding the definition of a signature story.

- *Is it a story?* It should have a narrative with a beginning that captures our attention (the challenge of Blendtec to blend something like an iPad), a middle that creates interest (the blending test), and a resolution (“Yes, it blends!”). If it is a stand-alone set of facts (or features), it will not qualify.
- *Is it intriguing?* Does it have some combination of being thought-provoking, novel, provocative, interesting, informative, newsworthy, or entertaining? If the story does not score high on one or more of these dimensions, it will not be a good candidate for a signature story.
- *Is it authentic?* Do the settings, characters, and challenges feel real? Or is the story likely to be perceived as phony, contrived, or a transparent selling effort? Is there substance behind the story and its message? Or is does it represent wishful thinking or even deception? As noted, it can be fictional. In fact, a story that is clearly fictional may actually lead to a reduction in critical thinking.<sup>13</sup>
- *Is it involving?* Does it draw people in? Does it make you care? Does it stimulate a cognitive response such as a change in belief or an emotional response such as a feeling of warmth or awe? Will it precipitate some action such as a decision to share the story or alter which brands are being considered.

It is also helpful if stories have:

- *empathetic story characters*—Can the listener put him or herself into the story context to have real empathy for the characters that will stimulate the same emotions the characters experience?
- *a meaningful challenge or obstacle*—The challenge should be real and worthwhile and it should be overcome by the story hero. If the customer has a problem of getting clothes clean and fresh, the problem will appear too familiar, commercial, and mundane. Who cares? If the story is set in rural Mexico where there is a water problem that affects the life of a family in a village, there is a meaningful challenge to which people can relate. When Downey Single Rinse—which works with much less water—used a customer story with this challenge, it got traction.
- *conflict and tension*—The story should create an emotional involvement. Lou Gerstner’s choice between breaking up IBM and becoming a unified systems firm represents palpable conflict.
- *a surprise*—It should precipitate an “I can’t believe...” moment that some in the audience will be motivated to talk about and share.

- *a visual image*—Visualizing aspects of the story enhances memory and impact and makes it more likely that the content will be processed holistically, which accentuates the effect of the positive elements of the story.<sup>14</sup>
- *detail*—Putting the audience “in the room” will often enhance authenticity and engagement. However, the level of detail needs to be managed because too much can make the story ponderous.

### ***The Strategic Message***

The signature story should have a message that is strategically important to the brand, the customer relationship, the organization, and/or the business strategy. The potential importance and impact over time of the strategic brand message needs to be evaluated. How important is it? What is its impact going forward? Is it central or just peripheral? Does it clarify or enhance a point of strength or neutralize a point of weakness? How enduring will it be? Will the nature of this message fade in importance over time? Is the message supported by substance and honesty? Will it help to enable growth in key success measures such as sales, profits, and market position?

The story also needs to link its message to the brand. If the brand is one of the heroes, the link will be strong, but if the brand link is at risk of being overshadowed by the plot or characters, then its potential strategic value will be weak.

### **Gaining Exposure for Signature Stories**

Having compelling signature stories is only part of the game. The challenge is to gain exposures to the target audience. Without exposure, the signature stories cannot perform their role. Gaining exposure internally and externally does not happen automatically, it requires creative programs that can allow the power of stories to work their magic.

The challenge internally is to integrate signature stories into the process of communicating and getting buy-in among employees and partners to strategic initiatives and, in particular, to the brand vision and organizational values of the organization. Executives should draw on signature stories to communicate and leverage the culture internally. It can be helpful for employees to have the opportunity to create or find signature stories as a way of expressing their beliefs about the values and path forward of the brand and organization.

Managing signature stories in their external role can involve articles or books, blogs, websites, media appearances or interviews, public relations contacts, or simply paid advertising. When there are many signature stories, internal brand spokespeople can have a problem accessing them for a communication task whether it is a speech, an advertising campaign, or an article. One tool is a categorized story bank that is well-structured and easy-to-use. When effective stories become part of an active library they do not have to be rediscovered again and again.

Social media needs to play a central role in exposing signature stories because of its power to gain exposure and because stories have a greater impact

when they are told or spread by customers. The core social media challenge is to get a critical mass of interest. Employees are good candidates to spread the story and in many companies there is a program to channel their social media contacts and activity.<sup>15</sup>

Whether the context is internal or external, the presentation of the story—the style, the presenter, the visual effects, the links to the audience, and more—will affect the ability of the story to get traction. The presentation will rarely make a story but it can break it. In general, a presentation should add interest, feel right, and certainly not detract.

## Giving Legs to Signature Stories

A key challenge is to make sure signature stories have legs, that they are kept alive over a long time period. That is the essence of their strategic role. Ongoing signature story management is different for a stand-alone story and for story sets around a theme.

### *The Stand-Alone Story*

When the signature story is a stand-alone entity, keeping it relevant and alive is a big challenge because why tell a story twice. Consider the following approaches.

Create a larger narrative by generating companion stories as Molson did with the stories of those that played hockey in the mountain rink. The founder of L.L. Bean had a stream of stories all making or reinforcing the original boot story and his passion for hunting, fishing, and the outdoors. For example, in 1936 he wrote in his fishing catalog, “These flies are the result of years of testing in New England waters. I have decided that eight flies in two sizes are all that are necessary and in many cases, three or four will answer nicely. When salmon won’t take one of these flies, you may as well call it a day.” This story, and others like it, enrich and solidify the narrative about fishing, the outdoors, innovation, and quality and keep alive the story of L.L. Bean and the Maine Hunting Boot.

A symbol can help keep a signature story alive by acting as a trigger.<sup>16</sup> There is a statue of the original L.L. Bean boot in front of the home office and a vehicle with a huge likeness of the same boot that travels around the country. One of the sledgehammers used by Zhang at Haier is on display at their headquarters. The story of how Bill Hewlett and David Packard started a company by making products that practicing engineers needed is vividly symbolized by the still-standing HP garage. You just have to see the garage to recall the story and the customer-driven innovation it represents.

Use events branded by the story to bring it back. For example, Apple’s 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mac celebrated the story behind it, including the famous 1984 Super Bowl ad that launched the Mac and the innovative Apple products that followed the Mac vision. As part of the anniversary, a short film shot entirely with iPhones on a single day in 10 countries highlighted how people use the Macintosh, iPhone, and iPad to accomplish incredible feats in their everyday lives.



The anniversary not only reminded people of the heritage story and the Apple personality, but also provided a vehicle to link the heritage to the products and values of today's Apple.

### ***Managing a Story Set***

The signature story, as noted at the outset, can involve a set of stories under an umbrella theme that may have a tagline or image associated with it. A flow of stories can provide freshness and energy but can also create story overload. How can the flow be made appealing enough to process and how can it be leveraged?

One tactic is to create a cadre of regular viewers that are motivated by outstanding, arresting content. It helps to use social media and other push options to provide a way to notify them of new content and entice them to access it. Blendtec and Red Bull regularly create new stories that are able to keep a set of regular viewers involved and provide material worth passing on. Blendtec was successful in developing new stories for its "Will it blend?" challenge all with the familiar tension and "surprise." Red Bull, the energy soda, sponsors dozens of sports such as wakeboarding and motorcycle racing, events such as the Red Bull Air Race, and athletes such as motocross star Ashley Fiolek. All have stories that reflect the power of overcoming physical limits in accomplishing incredible goals. The Red Bull story set demonstrates the energy and core personality of the brand.

A second tactic is to make the stories more accessible to audience members by providing a way to screen stories for relevance. The Skype stories, for example, are organized into the most popular stories: "Workplace" stories showing how Skype makes the workplace more productive, and "Play" stories that show innovative Skype uses outside of work. Screening is an antidote to story overload.

A third tactic is to periodically have a story that breaks out of the clutter, that has a life beyond the website because it is so unusual and newsworthy in some way. The "jump from space" stunt was such a story for Red Bull. On Sunday October 14, 2012, some 9.5million people watched live (and another 30 million watched later) as Felix Baumgartner rose more than 24 miles above the New Mexico desert in the ultra-thin helium "Red Bull Stratos" balloon, jumped off, and reach 843.6 mph during a 9-minute descent. This stunt created the ultimate break-out story for Red Bull but it also provided visibility for the other Red Bull stories in part by stimulating visits to the Red Bull website. Thus, a strategy is to cultivate the big story. When a breakout story occurs, it should be creatively promoted using all the available social media assets.

### **The Payoff from Signature Stories**

A signature story can guide and inspire a host of stakeholders. However, there are three groups that will benefit most directly from signature stories—employees who are implementing the business strategy, customers who will respond to the brand and offering, and executives who are crafting the brand vision and organizational values.

### ***Inspiring and Guiding Employees***

A tough job in any organization is to communicate its values, brand vision, customer relationship model, and business strategy and to do so in such a way that is: motivating and even inspiring to employees and other partners, clear enough to provide strategic and tactical guidance to decisions and programs, and powerful enough to have an influence over time.

Signature stories can provide the vivid, sticky, clear communication that is needed in what is likely dynamic and ambiguous contexts. Think of the guidance to employees represented by the Nordstrom story of employee initiative or the Molson story of a program that advances the brand.

### ***Enhancing Customer's Attachment to the Brand***

Advancing the strategic position of the brand and organization in the eyes of existing and potential customers is challenging because of message clutter, media dynamics, growing customer ownership of context, and the complexity of social media. Signature stories not only provide visibility, but communicate the basic essence of a brand and organization.

A signature story does not always represent functional benefits. In fact, its usual role is to reveal the emotional side of the brand or organization. The Molson's mountain hockey rink story, for example, relates to customers who are not necessarily interested in the details of the beer or its production, but they are passionate about hockey. When Molson shows a shared passion, not just by sponsoring a team or game, but by building a rink in the mountains for ordinary hockey devotees, the brand and customer relationships are energized and elevated beyond functional benefits.

### ***Helping Articulate a Brand Vision and Set of Organizational Values***

The development of signature stories can be a vehicle to understand what a brand or organization should stand for at its core. Articulating a brand vision and organization values or can be preceded by a "warm-up" workshop where key organizational players come up with signature stories. This exercise provides a context in which the core of the organization is represented in a tangible and authentic way. It is likely that emotion will be baked into the stories, which is very different from a description of the functional benefits. Signature stories, as drivers of a brand vision and organizational values, can thus take on a conceptual role in the creation of strategy as well as a communication role in its execution.

### **Notes**

1. The campaign was at over 134 million views when in 2010 an analyst named it the top viral campaign ever. Michael Leamonth, "The Top 10 Viral Ads of All Time," *Advertising Age*, September 2, 2010.
2. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York, NY: Random House, 2007), pp. 42-44.
3. Larry Cahill and James L. McGaugh, "A Novel Demonstration of Enhanced Memory Associated with Emotional Arousal," *Consciousness and Cognition*, 4/4 (December 1995): 410-421.
4. P. Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1997).

5. Ton Van Laer, Ko De Ruyter, Luca M. Visconti, and Martin Wetzels, "The Extended Transportation-Imagery Model: A Meta-Analysis of the Antecedents and Consequences of Consumers' Narrative Transportation," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40/5 (February 2014): 798.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 797-817.
7. Melanie C. Green and Tim C. Brock, "The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79/5 (2000): 701-721.
8. In a review of 225 studies, active learning was shown to be significantly more effective than passive learning in school settings. S. Freeman, S.L. Eddy, M. McDonough, M.K. Smith, N. Okoroafor, H. Jordt, and M.P. Wenderoth, "Active Learning Increases Student Performance in Science, Engineering, and Mathematics," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111/23, June 10, 2014, pp. 8410-8415.
9. Melanie C. Green, "Narratives and Cancer Communication," *Journal of Communication*, 56/S1 (August 2006): S163-S183.
10. See Robert A. Burton, *On Being Certain* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2008).
11. For a good overview of "word of mouth" research, see Jonah Berger, *Contagious: Why Things Catch On* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013).
12. The consultancy Prophet worked with T-Mobile to develop the transformational strategy.
13. M.C. Green, J. Garst, and T.C. Brock, "The Power of Fiction: Determinants and Boundaries," in L.J. Shrum, ed., *The Psychology of Entertainment Media: Blurring the Lines Between Entertainment and Persuasion* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum), pp. 161-176.
14. Rashmi Adaval and Robert S. Wyer, Jr., "The Role of Narratives in Consumer Information Processing," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 7/3 (1998): 207-245.
15. For an excellent discussion of unleashing the power of employees in social strategies, see Cheryl Burgess and Mark Burgess, *The Social Employee: How Great Companies Make Social Media Work* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2013).
16. For a discussion of the power of triggers in promoting word-of-mouth communication, see Berger, *op. cit.*, Chapter 2.

Copyright of California Management Review is the property of California Management Review and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.