**What Is Your Signature Story?**

This assignment is worth up to 48 points. Please read the following article: [**What Are Your Signature Stories**](http://homepages.se.edu/cvonbergen/files/2018/11/What-Are-Your-Signature-Stories.pdf).

(If this link does not open then you may want to find this article in an electronic data base in the *California Management Review*, 2016, Vol. 58, No. 3, pp. 49–65 by David Aaker & Jennifer L. Aaker). This article can also be found on Dr. Von’s web page ([**https://homepages.se.edu/cvonbergen/**](https://homepages.se.edu/cvonbergen/)) in Class Resources for Behavioral Management. Then scroll down and find *What Are Your Signature Stories?*)

As you can see, the article focuses on *organizations’* signature stories, but for this assignment I would like for you to create your *own, personal* signature story. The above article talks about a firm’s brands, but for exercise YOU ARE THE BRAND! You might also might want to view the following YouTube video on creating a personal signature story: [**Jennifer Aaker: Harnessing the Power of Stories**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9X0weDMh9C4).

Briefly, signature stories are 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. Your story might be used in interviewing situations, conversations, meeting new people, training seminars, retreats, sales and marketing situations, or other settings.

Please submit your signature story before 11:30 p.m. on Sunday, January 20 by going to **BlackBoard > Week 1 > Signature Story**. The paper should have your name prominently displayed on the first page and should be no more than 2 pages. Please type your story in Times New Roman 12-point font having 1-inch margins and double spacing. Please also ensure that your paper has a short Executive Summary/Abstract and a least one reference listed in American Psychological Association style. Please cite the reference (e.g., Von Bergen, 2013) in the body of your paper and the full reference at the end of the paper (e.g., Von Bergen, C. W. (2013). Misconstrued tolerance: Issues for multicultural and diversity training. *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal, 27*(2), 9-12.)

The following factors will be considered: Is it a story?; Is it intriguing?; Is it authentic?; Is it involving?; Does it have empathetic story characters?; Is there a meaningful challenge or obstacle?; Does the story have conflict and tension?; Is there a surprise?; Does the story provide a visual image?; and Does the story provide enough detail?

**What does a signature story consist of?**

Aaker and Aaker identify four key ingredients that make signature stories irresistible:

1. *Intriguing.*A strong signature story derives from the consumer’s life-world. It thrills the audience, raises attention and provokes engagement.
2. *Authentic.*People love listening to great stories but not to great sales messages. Your story can either be true or fictional but it shouldn’t be phony or contrived. It needs a genuine substance.
3. *Involving.*Successful storytelling draws its audience into the plot. Your listeners become one with your narrative. A cognitive, emotional or behavioral response is more likely. And that’s marketing’s ultimate goal, isn’t it?
4. *Strategic.*The message of your story needs to convey your brand’s competitive advantage. Whatever that might be. For Ritz-Carlton it’s the “we-do-anything-for-you” service promise. For you, it could be your brand’s image, personality, relevance or value proposition. Or the organization’s heritage, culture, and values. It could even be your current business strategy or future vision.

While I have discussed a signature story in terms of a business or organization, this assignment is about YOU!  
  
I look forward to reading your signature story! In the past we have seen some very interesting—indeed captivating—stories from our students. Of course, we will keep them confidential. At the end of this document is the rubric that will be used to grade this assignment.

--Dr. Von

=====================================================================

Here is an executive summary of the article, **What Are Your Signature Stories?**

By David Aaker and Jennifer L. Aaker

**Introduction**

In 1912, Leon L. Bean, an avid outdoorsman, returned from a hunting trip disgruntled because of his cold, wet feet. He decided to invent a new type of boot by stitching lightweight leather tops to waterproof rubber bottoms, marketing the footwear via mail order as the “Maine Hunting Shoe.” Unfortunately, the stitching on most of the first 100 pairs sold was faulty and began to leak. Bean faced a defining moment. He chose to refund all of his customers’ money even though he nearly went broke, and went on to fix the manufacturing process so that future boots would be watertight. This early commitment to quality is reflected in the legendary L. L. Bean “Guarantee of 100% Satisfaction.”

Bean’s choice marked a turning point in the early history of the company, and this story itself has become a strategic asset to what is now one of the most respected brands in the outdoor industry. The best companies stand apart: not only are their names recognized and respected, but their core values – and even their founding narratives – have integrated themselves deeply into the public’s positive perception of the brand.   
  
**Defining Signature Stories**

A signature story is an intriguing, authentic, involving narrative with a strategic message that clarifies or enhances the brand, the customer relationship, the organization, or the business strategy. It is a strategic asset that enables growth, provides inspiration, and guides the brand over time.

Not just any narrative can qualify as a signature story. The story must be *intriguing* so that it commands attention. It must be *authentic*, so that the audience doesn’t perceive it to be phony, contrived, or salesy. And a signature story must be *involving*, drawing the audience into the story and eliciting a cognitive, emotional, or behavioral response.

A compelling signature story will be an asset with enduring relevance and the capacity to inspire, enable growth, and provide long-term direction for the company. As they continue to be told, these stories gain authenticity, traction, and influence.

**The Power of Stories**

Signature stories come in two varieties. They can either stand alone as a narrative (as with the  
L. L. Bean example above) or consist of many stories revolving around a similar message or story arc. Blendtec’s “Will it blend?” challenge, for example, demonstrates the quality of the Blendtec blender, along with the core personality of the brand – confident, fun-loving, and humorous.

But why rely on stories? Simply put, stories are a powerful way to inform, persuade, change behavior, and precipitate discussion. They are almost always far more efficient and impactful than simply communicating facts (or features), for four key reasons:

* **Stories are Remembered**  
  Many studies have demonstrated that facts are much more likely to be remembered if they are part of a story. Narratives are inherently interesting to people – providing a better sense of connection with the audience, along with a means of organizing information in a more memorable way. Stories also provide more natural links to prior knowledge and thus are more readily embedded in memory than a set of random facts would be.
* **Stories are Persuasive**  
  We’ve relied on the persuasive ability of stories throughout human history – think about *Aesop’s Fables* or the parables in religious writings that are used to make a point. Many studies indicate that facts presented in the form of a story lead to greater changes in beliefs.
* **Stories are Social**  
  When signature stories stand out because of their ability to be thought-provoking, informative, or entertaining, they are very likely to be shared by word-of-mouth or on social media.
* **Stories Beat Facts**  
  Facts must achieve a much higher level of attention and interest in an audience to inspire people to engage and share that information. Facts like “waterproof rubber-bottom boots, shaped for comfort and stability” aren’t memorable as the story of Leon L. Bean’s early commitment to quality and 100% customer satisfaction.

**Developing Signature Stories**

Many firms will have signature stories in their history. The task is to identify those that can serve to play important strategic roles. To isolate a signature story, look for story heroes that are intriguing, authentic, and involving.

A story hero might be a *customer* who achieved something remarkable with the help of your brand. The hero might be a *supplier*, who lends credibility to the brand: Clif Bar has an ingredient series called “Farmers Speak,” for example. The hero could also be a *founder* or *employee*, as was the case with L. L. Bean. In certain situations, a story hero doesn’t have to be a person at all – a *program* or *strategy* could also be framed within an effective narrative in order to guide brand perception. T-Mobile effectively leveraged the “Un-carrier” story to communicate the advantages of its new no-contract program over direct competitors like AT&T.

Here is an example of a signature story. One day, a guest staying at Ritz-Carlton decided to do some standup paddling. While paddling he lost control, plunged into the water and his sunglasses sank to the ocean’s ground. In the afternoon, an employee of the hotel handed him his recently lost sunglasses. The guest was flabbergasted and speechless. Although he hadn’t mentioned anything to the staff, the savvy employee observed the guest’s misadventure and recovered the sunglasses. This story might be true. Or it might be made up. It doesn’t matter. It tells customers, employees and executives what Ritz-Carlton stands for — and that’s the promise to fulfill every single wish of its guests. Even the unexpressed ones.

Aaker and Aaker call these kinds of stories *signature stories:*They are a powerful way to communicate a brand’s strategic assets. Storytelling is common to every culture. Most people enjoy listening to stories. Storytellers have catered for the need for a ‘good story’ since the beginning of civilization. Most people have their own favorite story from childhood and, often, these tales are both fascinating and frightening. These stories may include legends, myths, and folktales.

[Here’s another story although not mentioned in the article. Tom Watson Jr., founder and CEO of IBM between 1956 and 1971, was a key figure in the information revolution. Watson repeatedly demonstrated his abilities as a leader, never more so than in the following short story: A young executive had made some bad decisions that cost the company several million dollars. He was summoned to Watson’s office, fully expecting to be dismissed. As he entered the office, the young executive said, “I suppose after that set of mistakes you will want to fire me.” Watson was said to have replied, **“Not at all, young man, we have just spent a couple of million dollars educating you.”** This story provides a strong message of support and a reminder that some of the most powerful lessons we can learn are from our so-called failures or difficult times.]

[Here’s another story that is mentioned in the article but perhaps a bit shorter. Part of the reason that Nordstrom’s (a high-end department store) is legendary for its customer service stems back to a tire story. Many years ago, a customer rolled a pair of tires into a Nordstrom store and asked for his money back. Nordstrom has never sold tires and the fellow did not produce any kind of a receipt, but legend has it that the gentleman was given a refund by its founder, John Nordstrom. This story has become one of the most famous customer-service anecdotes in corporate America. This story has passed into legend.]

However, not all stories are worth elevating to signature status. Stories must be evaluated to make sure that they are intriguing, authentic, and involving. Signature stories should also feature empathetic heroes facing meaningful obstacles, and – like any good narrative – have a conflict or tension that is resolved in a memorable or surprising way.

Once a story has been created, it must be communicated. Companies can choose to integrate the story in articles, books, blogs, website copy, interviews, or simply via paid advertising. Social media also plays a central role in promoting signature stories because stories have a greater impact when they are spread by customers themselves.

**Implications**

A good signature story can guide and inspire a host of stakeholders. When used effectively, a simple narrative can inspire employees, enhance customers’ attachment to the brand, and help to formally articulate the core organizational values of the brand as a whole. Consequently, the best brands recognize the power of signature stories, and work proactively to develop and communicate them.