

## No tall tale: The art of corporate storytelling

A powerful brand can do more than just generate interest and cultivate customer loyalty—it can become a driving force that influences behavior and creates consistency, alignment and stability for an organization. This paper explores the role corporate storytelling can play in defining an organization’s brand while bringing together internal and external stakeholders in the process. Our goal is to prepare you with a strategic approach to assessing and refining your brand identity while finding the most effective execution to convey it to your audiences. Backed by a powerful brand to inform business processes and marketing activities, successful organizations can seamlessly reinforce their customers’ perceptions of them with everything they do.

First things first: what are we talking about, exactly? In essence, corporate storytelling is a means of defining what an organization or business *really* does—and what that says about the organization's values. It's a way of making sense of and giving meaning to the seemingly disparate activities that businesses engage in every day to find commonalities that reveal the organization's character—and articulating them in a simple way that makes it real. From the grand scale of new ventures, mergers and acquisitions to incremental changes to organizational structure and internal processes, each decision a business makes is a carefully considered action. The goal of corporate storytelling is to determine *why* and *how* those decisions are made and present the rationale in a compelling way.

This may seem straightforward or, on the other hand, unnecessary. It's easy to assume that many choices are simply "part of doing business"—but if that were true, every organization would be doing the same things (and we all know that's hardly the case). Moreover, the rationale behind some decisions may seem obvious to some yet opaque to others, exciting to all or compelling to none. Corporate storytelling offers a way to create internal alignment and mutual understanding around a core definition of your business, providing basic knowledge to inform the entire organization. And by portraying and sharing that definition in an engaging way, it can generate enthusiasm. When employees are excited to be working for their organization and understand why it does what it does, they're better prepared to project that self-understanding externally. The result? A compelling brand story that ensures a cohesive identity and is easily communicable—both internally and externally. In fact, leaders of some of the most influential companies credit their success to the strength of their brand. With internal alignment and external consistency, the message of your organization is more powerful. Thus equipped, your business activities can bolster the strength of your brand to enhance your connections with your customers.

It would be natural for any organization to be a bit skeptical about the practicality of storytelling. In fact, while the term may be a buzzword increasingly common within marketers' and content strategists' vocabularies, its relevance to corporate branding may not be obvious. This is a missed opportunity. Corporate storytelling can serve two distinct and vital functions for an organization that should make it an important part of your brand-related activities. It provides your workforce with "need-to-know" background and it creates a "reason to believe" that can inspire.

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No matter the organization, its structure, its activities or its industry, there's always some level of background that all employees need to know to not only fulfill their roles, but to integrate into the company as well. Familiarizing employees with the company's history and heritage is a great example of how to provide an introduction to the culture of the organization—after all, culture is defined as a set of meanings and beliefs shared by a group. Keeping employees aligned with a shared understanding of who they are, who the company is and how their role affects the organization does more than increase efficiencies, it creates an emotional connection between employees and their work.

With a compelling and aspirational corporate narrative, you can renew enthusiasm while giving employees a reason to believe in the work that they—and the organization—do. This preempts the “what’s the point?” or “why am I doing this?” questions that can distract from a business’s ultimate goals and helps give employees a broader vision that provides context and insight into the significance of their individual roles. But to work, the narrative must recognize the inherent challenges. Work isn’t easy—we all know that—so why cover it up? As Robert McKee, renowned writer, director and consultant, suggests, the best leaders “appreciate that the people who work for them love the work and live for the small triumphs that contribute to the final triumph”.<sup>1</sup> Having a bold goal in sight is important, but to tell a compelling corporate narrative, an organization must also “display the struggle between expectation and reality in all its nastiness”.<sup>1</sup>

Told in an aspirational way, the corporate narrative can build passion and excitement among employees—emotions that they’ll communicate externally. In McKee’s words, “if you look your audience in the eye, lay out your really scary challenges and say, ‘Well, we’ll be lucky as hell if we get through this, but here’s what I think we should do,’ they will listen to you”.<sup>1</sup> By openly and honestly telling the story of your organization’s challenges—past, present and future—and laying out the plan to overcome them and reach your goals, you create a tale into which your employees can place themselves.

This draws attention to an important characteristic of successful stories: making them relatable. Being able to identify with a narrative and its characters allows audiences to put themselves into the story, creating a connection and investment in the outcomes. For a corporate narrative, this means making the struggle aspirational yet honest so that stakeholders can relate to the challenge and want to be a part of facing it. When that happens, they can clearly identify with their roles. And when all employees are aligned on who they are, their external communications convey the same consistent message.

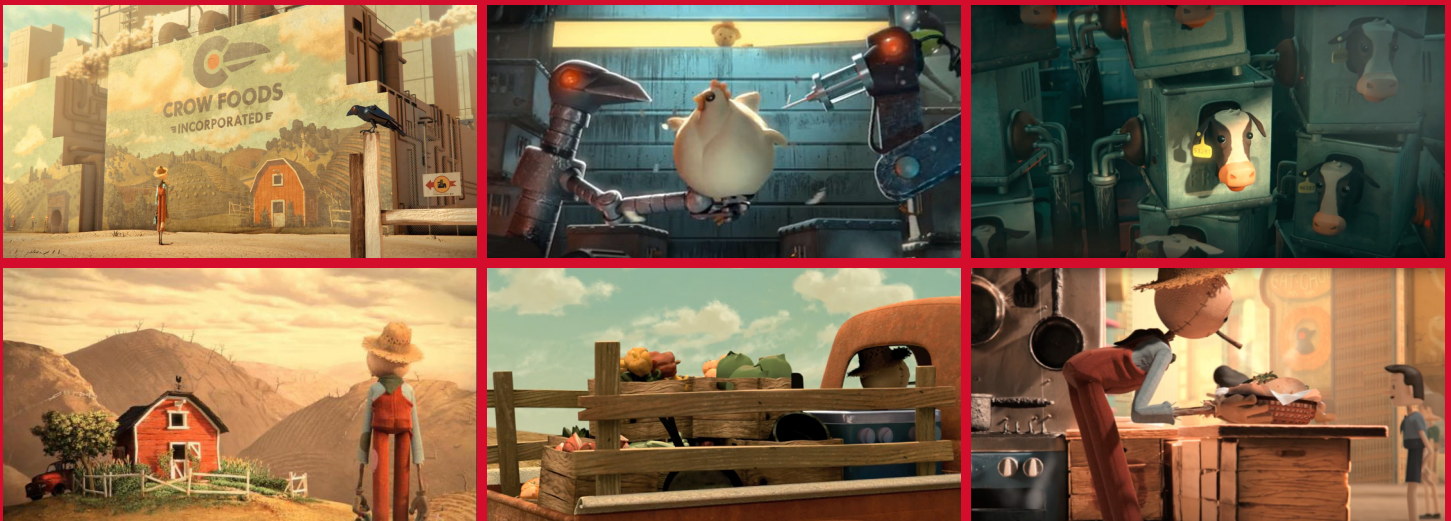
### ***The goal of corporate storytelling is really a matter of creating a culture—and culture is a powerful tool for creating sustainable success.***

The more consistent a brand message is, the more powerful, engaging and reliable it is for its audience. So it should be no surprise that the same is true of a corporate narrative. That’s because a well-defined and well-presented narrative encompasses a brand’s identity with effects both internal and external. The goal of corporate storytelling is really a matter of creating a culture—and culture is a powerful tool for creating sustainable success. Because as business activities cohere with the corporate narrative and brand message, that narrative becomes a driver for a range of processes, practices, ventures and more.

So, why do we do it? There is a range of possible outcomes to be gained through corporate storytelling, and each desired result will influence the best approach to take. We’ve noted that distilling the essence of an organization, its identity and its mission can help explain it and encourage internal alignment. The main point of that, though, is often to enable change. It could be evolutionary (like launching a new product), revolutionary (like reorganizing a production pipeline) or simply general change (like initiating a new campaign).

## Chipotle: Turning narrative into impressions

Chipotle's *The Scarecrow* campaign is an excellent example of engaging storytelling coordinated to explain—and capitalize on—a business decision. The campaign, launched in late 2013 through social media channels, centers around an ambitious video depicting the tale of a scarecrow who eschews the dystopian industrial food production plant he works at to begin growing wholesome, unadulterated food on his own farm. It's a touching animated tale complete with haunting soundtrack, and it's a way for Chipotle to start a conversation about food ethics that isn't overt marketing per se but nonetheless draws attention to its commitment to ethically raised livestock and family farms. Through a simple story, Chipotle connected to its core Millennial audience with staggeringly positive results and over 126 million impressions.<sup>3</sup>



Let's take another example. When Alan Mulally, ex-CEO of Ford, first joined the company back in September 2006, the company struggled to unite a disparate portfolio of brands and faced projected losses of \$17 billion. To get the company back on track and develop a strategy for continued growth, Mulally returned to the roots of the organization, and he and his team discovered a painted ad from 1925 in the company archives that would inspire the story that could unite the company. The image depicts a family gazing into the distance at an industrializing America with the headline, "Opening the Highways to All Mankind." As Mulally describes in a 2013 interview with *Fast Company*, "There was the vision of Ford... and that could be the vision of Ford going forward, where everybody would understand what Ford stood for, and everybody could align themselves and their work to create an exciting, viable, profitable, growing company."<sup>2</sup> The company vision as conveyed in that historical ad became the story that would influence the company's decisions and drive Ford's culture going forward.

In each of its various forms, storytelling provides an important tool for bringing about change. It can help articulate the value proposition of a new venture, which provides an easier case for change internally and simplifies your external communications. Or, storytelling can help breathe new life into an organization, building excitement and stimulating internal support for an organization's activities.

Think about it. In the Ford example, employees needed a reason to get on board with Mulally's ambition or change would not have been achievable. But because his efforts fit with—and were inspired by—the company narrative with which they're all familiar, it's easier for employees to identify with the decision and they're more likely to support it. Effecting change becomes a lot easier.

Telling a great story takes more than a cast of compelling characters and an engaging plot. When it comes to telling the story of an organization, there are two main questions to ask, one self-reflective, the other tactical.

The timeline approach to storytelling is incredibly useful for defining an organization's identity. It requires taking a look back at the past and analyzing an organization's behavior, essentially asking, *how did we get to where we are today and what does that say about us?* It's a matter of taking an honest look at the organization, recognizing both its successes and failures, challenges and opportunities, strengths and shortcomings. Anniversaries are the classic time to do a retrospective assessment, yet many brands miss the opportunity to really derive value from a look back. But with a strong self-definition, you can then ask the more important question: *what does this past suggest about how we should act in the future?*

With the story defined, the next challenge is to execute and find the best way to tell it, share it and build some buzz about it. The greatest story in the world only has as much impact as the number of people it reaches and influences. There are, of course, a number of possible executions available, and the right one depends on the nature of the story you need to tell and the audience you're trying to reach. A video may be right for a presentation to customers, but a simpler graphic may be better for a shareholder meeting. In addition to the different audiences, each of these example scenarios has a very different goal with very different needs.

Aligning a story's execution to its audience is important for communicating effectively, but creating consistency for your brand is equally important. Just as traditional marketing activities should cohere to your core brand principles, so too should storytelling complement and reinforce your corporate identity to build a brand that your customers can trust. An easily communicable, engaging corporate story can give external audiences a foundational understanding of your business in much the same way it works for internal audiences. This gives your audience a way to make sense of your activities while ensuring that everything you do reinforces that core essence. And when business behaviors reinforce the message of your brand, your audience (i.e., customers) can better respond to your actions and message. That means that your audience has a clearer understanding of who you are, what you stand for and why you act the way you do, allowing you to create stronger connections with them and have ongoing influence over their perceptions of your brand.

***If you are interested in learning more about how to use corporate storytelling in your organization, please call us at 610.940.9030 or visit [www.baileybrandconsulting.com](http://www.baileybrandconsulting.com)***

## About this paper

We believe collaboration is the key to achieving successful results—and we put this into practice with both our clients and our internal teams on a regular basis. The paper you just read reflects that philosophy; it was a team effort, created from the observations and combined thinking of both our Client and Creative Services teams.

## About the author



As founder and CEO of our firm, Chris Bailey is responsible for overall management and direction, including shaping and implementing our vision and mission. In addition, he authors articles and speaks at national conventions on subjects including brand identity, environmental branding and brand package design.

## About Bailey Brand Consulting

Bailey Brand Consulting is a leading strategic marketing and branding firm that has been helping make brands matter for clients across the country and around the world since 1985. Our experienced teams of strategic thinkers, creative problem-solvers and world-class designers work in close partnership with our clients to uncover deep customer insights, develop powerful creative solutions and build effective brand strategies that drive business growth.

### Selected Sources:

1. McKee, Robert and Bronwyn, Fryer. "Storytelling that Moves People." *Harvard Business Review*. June 2003.
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