

Editors' Note: Arts-based brand consultancy On Your Feet explores a structure—"Story Plotter"—for organizational stories that help businesses and brands differentiate themselves from their competition and develop a culture of action.

Stories That Inspire Action

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We hear stories all the time. We tell stories. We are stories. Think about your own name, for example. Why did your parents give you that name? Does your surname have special meaning? Do you have a nickname, and if so, how did you get it? We have asked hundreds of people these questions and have been captivated by moving, funny, obscene, sometimes unforgettable stories. Here is one of our own:

"When I was on the freshman basketball team at Lincoln high school, my teammates Rawlin Nolte and Eddie Peterson gave me the nickname 'Doof.' Mostly it was because I walked around with my mouth open and a blank expression. I somehow managed to turn this name into a huge compliment. For four years people called me 'Doof' or 'The Doofer.' Somehow, though, I differentiated those two names from the more pejorative 'doofus.' If anyone ever called me that, I would immediately correct them and say, 'Hey, it's Doof.'"—Brad Robertson

Stories are told in business, too: by managers, by co-workers around the water cooler, by consumers upon leaving a store. Stories are told pretty much everywhere except in those silent elevators.

But unorganized stories may not be enough to inspire either internal or external organizational action. They need a structure, so that people better understand

what the stories are about and how the stories can help catalyze action. This article explains how we created the "Story Plotter" and how you might use it to organize your stories and inspire action within your organization.

A Snow Story

About three years ago we were working with a large group of managers at a global overnight shipping and delivery company. They were talking about excellent personal customer service. Indeed, one of their stated brand attributes is being personal. When asked what that meant, a few people recited the tagline on the printed internal literature. But when asked to tell a story about this language in action, a woman in the back of the room grabbed the microphone:

"I work in the Rocky Mountain region. One of our carriers responded to a pickup call halfway up a mountain in a remote area. There was an author who was working in one of the cabins who needed his manuscript to get to New York the next day. The driver arrived just as a typical Rocky Mountain snowstorm was assaulting the cabin. Indeed, when he tried to start his truck in the cabin driveway after picking up the package from the author, he discovered that his truck was quite stuck. The driver calmly looked at the author and asked, 'What is your shoe size?' The author replied, '9.' The driver

then asked if the author had any skis. He squeezed his size-9.5 feet into the author's downhill skis and skied the package down the hill to the road. It was delivered on time the next day."

This story was news to most of the people in the audience, and someone on the other side of the auditorium even stood up and said, "We did that? That's fantastic!"

The snow story got us thinking: How many other stories were embedded in the company? How many other stories would generate a similar inspired response? How could we help get these stories told? And, once told, how could they inspire similar action?

The Use of "Fat Words"

Instead of utilizing stories, organizations often try to drive action by developing phrases or words they hope will inspire and motivate. The global overnight shipping and delivery company had developed a values-based language they hoped would inspire good customer service. They used words like "connecting, simplicity, and certainty." Our friend Brian Lanahan (who was once a brand manager at Coke and now collaborates with us through a consultancy called Character) describes such language as "fat words;" words that are so universal that they can mean something different to anyone using

them. These words don't arrive in a vacuum; they can be based on real beliefs, founder visions, and organizational philosophy. But the words alone fall short for several reasons:

- Often this language is aspirational, describing what the organization wants to be rather than who they currently are.
- From company to company, the language all sounds alike (for example, most advertising agencies say they value creativity). So the language does not help differentiate the organization or brand from any other.

- This language doesn't seem to help the people internally make decisions, respond, and act.

- Last, the customer knows the difference between talk and action. Consumers in the information age are more knowledgeable and savvy, and they have access to more information than ever before. The wall between consumers and the brand has become much more transparent. Consumers do not experience the intention of the brand no matter how honorable; they experience what the brand does. So if a company says they are caring but then underpay their employees, the public will find out. Today a brand is as strong as its relationship with its customers. To create a strong relationship, there must be alignment between what an individual, brand, or organization says and what it does. In the end (as the saying goes), actions speak louder than words.

Story Plotter

We developed Story Plotter to help the handful of our clients who had realized fat words are not enough. We worked with a professional basketball organi-

zation that wanted to bring its brand values to life by finding distinctive actions to exemplify these values throughout every level of the organization. A few years ago we helped a global advertising agency that was interested in finding other ways for its clients to communicate who they are to their consumers, looking beyond brand communication and focusing on internal actions. We worked with our friend and collaborator Arnie Jacobson and his research firm, QRC (they bring to life a whole other set of stories, that of the consumer), to help a Hollywood studio find new actions for its character-based consumer products division.

To assist these clients, we asked them to tell stories of things that happen in the company. We heard stories of gritty reality, stories illustrating failure, communicating learning, and acting as a warning. As these stories emerged, we asked ourselves a question: Could there be a simple, sensible way of organizing and classifying stories that could be useful in helping organizations live their brand, find alignment, discover new actions, and look beyond language? The Story Plotter, a taxonomy for organizing stories, emerged from this inquiry. We identified four kinds of stories and designed the Plotter to help organizations and brands do the following:

- Talk about who they are by telling stories of what they do.
- Learn to be more of a listening organization, by incorporating consumer stories and input into company communication.
- Share knowledge internally and externally.
- Find meaningful new actions for exemplifying values.

IMPROVISED STORIES

Our take on stories comes from the world of improvised theater, where stories are made with no script, plan, rehearsal, budget, or, on occasion, talent. The job of the improviser is to instantly create stories and scenes that engage and enthrall the audience. One of the many skills that help an improv actor survive under these seemingly impossible conditions is an ability to create vivid and authentic characters. It is vital that the audience knows as much as possible about these instant characters so they can become immersed in the story.

When I was first studying to be an improviser, I was convinced the best way to tell a story was to tell the audience all about my character; what was important to him, what he wanted, and so on. I might start a scene with another performer by proclaiming: "Hello, I am the honest baker," speaking more to audience than to the other actor. "Welcome to the Honest Bakery. Do you like our new uniforms with 'HONEST' written across the chest?" I figured if I simply told people who I was, then I could get on to the funny stuff. One of my acting coaches pulled me aside and said:

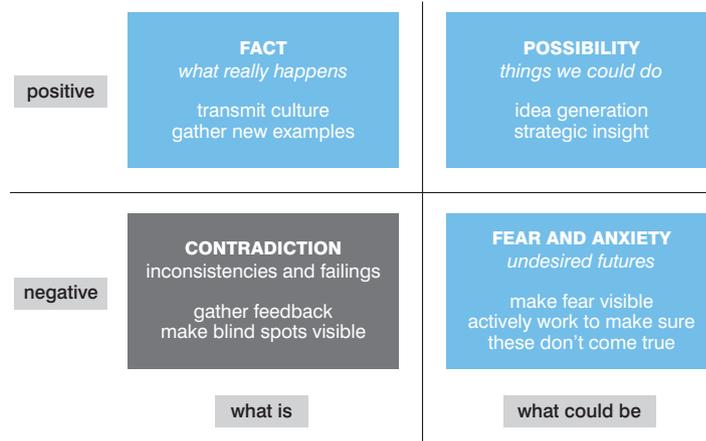
"It's not like your characters are an ad for floor cleaner or running shoes. It's not convincing or very engaging to say you are honest, or reliable, or nimble, or inspiring. Your characters need to communicate who they are through what they do. If you are an honest baker, then behave honestly, tell people what's in the muffins, return the wallet that was left on the counter. Let the customer know that she has a piece of spinach in her teeth. You don't have to tell the audience anything. They are smart. Simply be it." —G.H.

STORIES OF ACTION

While waiting for luggage at the Phoenix airport, a friend of mine had an encounter that inspired our quest to find more stories of alignment. Here is what he told us:

"At baggage claim I patiently watched the empty carousel go around when I suddenly heard a 'clunk' behind me. I turned around to see a large surfboard being unloaded at the oversize-baggage area. A surfboard in a landlocked desert state? A gray-haired older gentleman in a suit walked up to claim the oblong baggage, and I asked him what he was doing with the surfboard. He smiled at me and answered in a thick Australian accent, 'Oh mate, not sure where I'll surf but I'll find someplace. I have to... it's in my contract.' He went on to explain that he was the CFO of an Australian surfboard company and it is written into every senior executive's contract that they must surf at least once a month. This gentleman was on a three-week business trip, so he took his board.

STORY PLOTTER



- Develop aligned ideas, products, positioning, and communication.
- Discover new touch points with the audience.
- Make conscious deliberate choices instead of knee-jerk ones.
- Follow through on promises.
- Demonstrate authenticity.
- Understand how internal and external audiences see and understand the brand.
- Transmit their culture, especially to new hires.
- Identify areas of strength and weakness.

Story Plotter emerged as a structure for organizing stories and action. The left-hand column captures stories of the current reality, what is happening now. The stories in the right-hand column capture what we would call future stories—stories of new possibility, new ideas, new action, and future fears and anxiety. The top row describes stories and action worth keeping and cultivating. The bottom row captures stories and actions that might be most constructive if stopped or discouraged from coming into fruition.

Stories of Fact. These are stories of things that have actually happened (even if they have been embellished in the telling). These

stories capture actions that flesh out and make real whatever language the company uses to describe itself. One company we worked with valued integrity. A story of fact they told us described how they realized they had made an error in a shipment. In this case the train had left the station, literally, with thousands of mislabeled packages. They had a choice: ignore the mistake and hope their retailers didn't notice, or call the train back, unload it, be a week behind in fulfillment, and fix the error. They also told us that their retailers often made similar labeling errors when sending shipments back. Our client never complained. But of course, this is a factual story about integrity. They turned the train around, relabeled the boxes, and apologized for the shipment being late without revealing the extra effort they put in to get the shipment there correctly.

Stories of Contradiction. By contrast, these stories capture actions that contradict or work against what the organization says it is. A manager at a large U.K. mobile phone company recently told us a story of contradiction. The stated value was honesty. He noted that his company charged by the minute.

But how honest was this? That meant that people were charged one minute for a five-second call. By making this visible, the company had a choice: continue the practice and be out of alignment, or change the policy.

Stories of contradiction point out areas of inconsistency and make them visible. They do not always lead to reversible action. The NBA team we worked with wanted to live the value of being more open. However, they had no desire to reveal their draft considerations. They knew this contradicted their stated values but decided that this was fine and made good business sense.

Stories of Possibility and Revolution. This is where brands explore and play with the future. We ask a lot of “what if” questions. Using a host of improv-based exercises, ideas for new actions and possible futures spring to the fore. Stories of possibility are “quick wins”; they capture actions that really ought to be happening and for some reason, possibly a trivial one, aren't. By asking people to create new stories of possibility, you can find the cheap and easy things that are obvious to somebody in the organization but that no one has yet put into action. Here is an example:

The baggage handlers at American Airlines knew something no one else had realized: The bags that go into the plane first are the last to come out of the hold. The handlers suggested that the first-class bags be put in last so the first-class passengers could get their bags first upon arrival. The company implemented the idea immediately.

Stories of revolution are stories of what could be, not what

is. They are much further ahead and more of a stretch than stories of possibility. For example, British Petroleum asked, "What if we were no longer in the oil business?" By asking people to tell stories, you free them up to think more laterally and creatively about the kind of things that would really embody the organization's identity.

Stories of Fear and Anxiety.

These are stories of things that you do not want to happen (at least at the present moment). They uncover possible or impossible futures and let the teller play out the details and nuances of their own fear and anxiety. These can flow from stories of possibility and revolution. We use these within our own organization. We often author future stories that capture a particular fear we might have, such as one of our partners being courted by a large megabrand consultancy. We use the practice of sharing stories with our partners. We find it is a helpful tool to bring concerns to the surface and helps us communicate around difficult issues.

So those are the types of stories, but what do you do with them?

1. *Transmit the Culture.* You can identify potent stories of fact and tell them. In doing so you are transmitting the culture and values in a much more immediate and powerful way than through a manual or presentation. And as you tell these stories, you can appeal for more. The stories you get back will clarify whether people have properly understood the stories. If they have, their examples will furnish you with new stories, so that you aren't just transmitting in one direction, but interconnecting stories and

actions from all over the organization. With one organization it became important to find a home for these stories and others. They created an evolving book, one that is constantly growing as new stories are discovered. This book can be used as a reference for being-the-brand behaviors without management being prescriptive and dictating, and it can be a resource for new employees to help them understand the history, norms, and actions of the company.

2. *Change Behaviors.* Stories of contradiction can help you discover places where behavior should change. These are often easy "wins;" you can decide to simply stop doing something you were previously accustomed to doing. Correcting your behavior can lead to new stories of fact.

3. *Generate New Action.* You can generate stories of possibility and revolution. This is a simple and direct way of exploring what could be done, either near or far in the future, and of seeing how the company's identity would play out in different scenarios. This gives you a tool to generate new ideas that could even grow into new products, processes, or services.

4. *Reveal the Anxiety.* Finally, by asking people to make stories of what they are afraid of, you can allow them to release a ton of tension. They can open up in ways that enable them to express and explore without fear of judgment. At On Your Feet we regularly ask each other for future stories of things we worry about in order to open up dialogue.

Story Plotter provides a framework within which stories can be told and gathered to help an organization live its

brand more effectively. It can be used to help people in different places, departments, and roles understand what the brand means and how it affects them. By hearing and telling stories, they can translate whatever language is used to describe the brand into action and behavior, including their own. Stories are not prescriptive or patronizing; individuals can interpret them in their own context. And by using a grid we give structure to the stories. This structure gives guidance and form to what would otherwise just be seen as anecdotes of incidental importance. It thus helps both the individuals and the organization to learn, improve, and communicate through action.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gary Hirsch is a rabid illustrator, improviser, and cofounder of On Your Feet. He has designed and led programs for Nike, FedEx,

Disney, Warner Bros, Intel, and others. Hirsch has been teaching and performing professional improv for 15 years. He is the founder of Super Project Lab improv (www.superprojectlab.com), and has served as a visiting faculty member at Templeton College at Oxford University, Portland State University, Oregon Graduate Institute, and at "12," the graduate school at Wieden + Kennedy advertising. Visit him at www.ojf.com



Before joining OYF in 1999, Brad Robertson was first the snow-cone king of Portland (really, it's true) and then the director of the business outreach program at Portland State University, where he

taught courses in small business consulting, organizational behavior, improv and business, and dialogue. Recent clients include Starbucks, Nike, Intel, Wieden + Kennedy, Lucent Technologies, and Saatchi & Saatchi.