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The Future of Marketing:

The Case for Storytelling

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Introduction

Storytelling is an art - and a lost one at that. For generations, storytelling has been an integral part of our culture, with ancestors sharing stories to enlighten, inform - and most importantly, protect those that will listen.

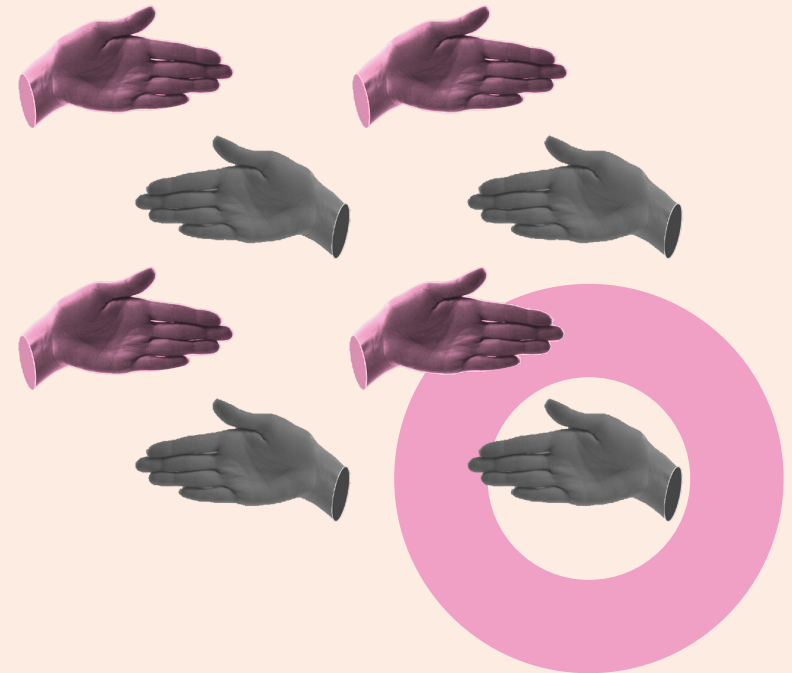
Not a process, not a tactic - and certainly not a to-do list item - but an art. Much like the great creatives of our time, storytelling requires **commitment, motivation, vision, skill** - and **practice**. It's a long-term commitment, but once your team has mastered the art of storytelling, your campaign becomes a veritable success story. The unfortunate part of all of this is that without the story - the strategy is devalued.

We live in a fast-paced, digital world. One that is run by instant gratification and vanity metrics - even so, the value of a good story can't be understated. It's not all about the perfect campaign, the foolproof strategy, the right audience, or the great bidding tactic.

Your story is the single aspect that humanises your brand, makes you relatable, and nurtures your authenticity efforts. Your campaigns, funnels, and marketing efforts are only as good as your story - it's time to master the art!

Storytelling is an **irreplaceable tool** for any marketer. In this guide, you'll discover the fundamentals of storytelling, along with tips and tricks for you to use to master the art.

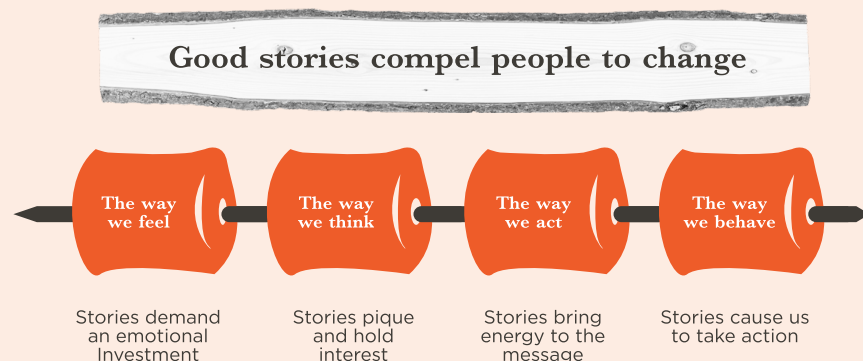
Let's go!



What is storytelling?

"You're never going to kill storytelling because it's built-in the human plan. We come with it." -

Margaret Atwood, author of *The Handmaid's Tale*



The practice of blending fact and fiction to explain something to your audience is known as storytelling. Some stories are true, while others are dramatised or made up to better express the central point.

Storytelling is one of the most effective methods to bring your brand, school, or company to life, and it's often referred to as one of the most important aspects of a content marketing strategy. You may take your target audience on a journey they want to take by giving your products and services a personality by documenting and sharing the tales behind them. In this case, narratives must be honest, imaginative, and motivating in order for prospects to develop a **personal link** with your objectives.

Emotional branding is a forward-thinking marketing technique that has the ability to boost sales or enrollments and conserve customer (or student) retention. Whether or not a consumer buys your product, or signs up to your programme is usually determined by how they feel about your brand. A brand is based on how people perceive it. You create an experience that connects with your customers when you tell a tale that embodies human issues.

It has been said that those who tell stories, rule the world. In this case, stories bleed opportunity - it's through them that you can sell, and do so effectively. In the world of education marketing, we're not selling a product that has an expiration date, or one that will sit on a bookshelf collecting dust. We're selling hopes, dreams, and the chance at a future.

To do that effectively, it simply must have a moving story.

Let's consider your audience.

Education marketers face a unique challenge, and that is that their audience is made up of both **parents** and **students**. To boost enrollment, each needs to be part of a long-term story, that not only plays on emotion - but leverages it too. Let's say that your school has introduced a new undergraduate programme, and you're attempting to create awareness and drive parents into your funnel.

Before you consider your story - consider your audience. What makes them happy, or sad? What motivates them to make decisions? What do they need to hear in order to make a life-altering decision?



Let's look at this as a marketer selling this undergraduate programme to their prospects' parents. The vast majority of parents dedicate their entire lives to their children. Each waking moment, from conception, is about the children. No matter how hard their lives, jobs, or relationships become - the focus of the parent is always on the child. Now, as a parent who has successfully raised a well-rounded, well-educated child - the next step involves taking a step back, and trusting that you've raised them well enough for them to make adult choices, and understand the severity of potential consequences. Sure, no parents ever really let go - but in this case, there is an opportunity to address the love that a parent has for their child, as well as support them in their decision-making process.

This story could play on the heartstrings - think a long-form video ad, that keenly summarises the most memorable moments experienced as a parent. The video could begin with a depiction of infancy, a mother protecting their newborn from the world, keeping them safe in the bubble that is a mother's arms. This could be followed by the same mother playing with the child as a toddler, stopping them from making decisions that would literally end in tears. The video would continue throughout the life of both the mother and the child, each ageing at an appropriate pace - each frame speaking to the core of parenthood - and that is - love. The video could end with an older version of the mother, helping her now-adult child pack their car before they head off to university.

Simply captioned, "you've always put them first, why stop now".

In this example, we have successfully created a story that would elicit an emotional response in the target audience, because it is:

- Relatable
- Authentic
- Poignant

Telling a story is similar to painting with words. While anybody can tell a story, some people hone their storytelling skills and become storytellers for their company, brand, or institution. These people are commonly referred to as marketers, content writers, or public relations experts.

There's a reason why stories are so intriguing. We are drawn to the values we learn, the exhilarating adventures we embark on, the wisdom we gain, and the ability to let our imaginations run wild from childhood to adulthood.

Storytelling can be a method of approaching a project, as well as a means of writing and creating content that combines personal and existing stories with the brand narrative. Some argue that good content is all about telling a story. That is a misconception. Sometimes factual content is all that is required. It's not even about you, your brands, or your solutions/products when it comes to good storytelling. It's about how your brand elicits emotions, experiences, and needs, as well as the written and unwritten pictures linked with these feelings and needs.



Where does it start, and where does it end

“Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.” - *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author*

All businesses seek to attract potential clients' attention. So you try to come up with a clever tweet, publish an intriguing photo, design a memorable logo, and locate the ideal brand style. While all of these efforts are great for building a brand and capturing your audience's attention, you'll need something extra to keep them engaged. You'll need to tell a memorable brand story in particular.

According to a survey, 92 % of customers favour brand advertising that feels like they're telling a story, and 55 % of those who appreciate a company's story are more inclined to buy their items.

Traditional banner adverts and old marketing promises are losing favour with today's decision-makers and consumers. If you want to capture your customer's attention in today's highly competitive business world, you'll need to create a lot more than simply a flashy billboard or television commercial. Today's consumer is different - they've grown up learning the ins and outs of being sold to - and they're just not having it. What interests them though, is the brand narrative. This might be in part due to the rise of streaming services - allowing movies, podcasts - and audiobooks to be easily integrated into our days. These stories offer an escape or an alternative - and this is what your audience is used to.

Now - your brand narrative is more than your elevator pitch, and it's not your USP either. It's your identity. Your background. Your voice. Your reason. It's how, and why you communicate with your prospects (and your internal team).

We all know that marketing is a fast-paced industry, our days are spent juggling content creation, copy, strategy development and campaign objectives. You might be wondering where storytelling fits in, (or where you'll find the time to develop it). The truth is - your story comes first. It doesn't matter what your USP is (or how amazing it is), how tight your strategy is - or how appealing your creatives are. If you haven't nailed your story before you start anything else, then you're already starting on the back foot. Your story doesn't end either. It might evolve, or transcend into something greater - but the point is - it will always be relevant, required, and valuable.

There's a reason it works...

Before we tell you how to do it - let's learn a bit more about why it works.

Numerous studies have shown that the human brain responds more favourably to a story than to a compilation of cold, hard facts over the years. We only use the language section of our brains to decode the message we're given when we're reading nothing but data. When we read a story, though, we activate other parts of the brain that would normally be engaged if we were actually experiencing what we're reading about.

To put it another way, from a neurological standpoint, storytelling allows you to enable your clients to perceive things from your point of view. Because our brains combine the stories we read with our own memories, stories are significantly simpler to recall than facts and figures. If that's not enough, the human brain is inherently story-hungry. We spend our entire lives looking for them, whether we're thinking about what we'll do on the weekend or planning how we'll get to work in the morning.

Our minds are always looking for diversions, and the only moment we can concentrate is when we are emotionally invested in a story.

The science of storytelling

As more brands make the move forwards content marketing, cutting through the noise is more vital than ever before.

If

100,000



Digital words are consumed by the average US citizen every day

92%



of consumers want brands to make ads that feel like a story

60x faster



rate at which the brain processes images in comparison to words

Then



Keep it short (and have a great title to grab readers attention)



Deliver content that is linear and expresses a clear narrative



Show don't tell. Use images for more compelling content

Essentially, whether you're attempting to persuade an entire generation that they can't live without your new scheduling app, or parents that your institution is the sound choice for their child, it's how you tell your narrative that will have the biggest impact on your prospects. You'll locate your sales narrative once you've discovered your story!

What makes a good story

"Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution -- more so than opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs let us hang on; the story told us what to hang on to." - Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story*

So we've defined what storytelling is - and touched on how it can add (incredible amounts) of value to your strategy. While the definition that we've given is accurate - there are actually a variety of ways that one could approach the art of storytelling. ReferralCandy takes it as far as describing what a story is - and what it isn't, and it is here that we find out what makes a good story.

Storytelling Is:

- Useful info in a Narrative
- What motivates your team
- What your brand stands for
- About your customers
- Emotional & Engaging
- A Beginning, A Crisis & A revelation
- An Interaction between your customers and your brand

Storytelling Isn't:

- Any 10,000 word article
- Your sales goals
- An advertisement
- About you brand
- Boring
- Something "Cool" that happened
- A sales pitch

Why do we tell stories?

Enter the art of immersion.

According to anthropologists, the narrative is essential to human survival. It can be found in every known civilisation. That it entails a symbiotic relationship between the teller and the listener, which we learn to navigate as children. The brain recognizes patterns in information in the same way it identifies patterns in visual forms of nature (a face, a shape, an animal) and in sound. Stories are identifiable patterns, and we locate meaning in those patterns. We tell stories to make sense of the world and to share what we've learned with others. They're the signal in the midst of the chaos.

In fact - our impulse to find a story in the mundane is so strong that as humans, we are wired to see stories - even when there may be none present.

It's not just entertainment - it's the cornerstone of humanity.

- We can share information through stories in a way that elicits an emotional response.
- They assist us in comprehending the material as well as each other, and they help us remember it.
- We can gain a higher knowledge of other people's experiences because stories generate an emotional connection. This not only allows us to better comprehend their lives, but it also allows us to apply the lessons they've learned to our own.

Stories solidify abstract concepts and simplify complex messages.

In marketing - storytelling is the most effective, direct, and diplomatic way to build a brand.

Now, what you find to be a good story, might be a story that your peer finds lacking. That's the thing about storytelling - its response is subjective to the reader. That said, there are some fundamentals that make for a considerable storytelling experience.

Great stories are:

- Memorable
- Inspiring
- Educational
- Relatable
- Organised

Here's what you need to include in your stories - to make sure that they meet the above criteria.

You need a hero.

Every good story is about someone (even if that someone is a 1 eyed green monster). The biggest mistake that both businesses and marketers make is making their institution the hero of the story. Otherwise termed as insecurity marketing - this is where the brand being represented hogs the spotlight (consider this hyperbole, "buy this toothpaste or your teeth will fall out and you'll be alone forever". Here - the brand is clearly portraying themselves as the knight in shining armour, and the buyer is just a cameo in their own movie).

Your audience has to be the star in a captivating content marketing story. And what makes someone a hero? The story's hero is someone who is turned from an ordinary person into someone exceptional as the story progresses.

You need an objective.

Good businesses are for one thing only, and that is - to solve a problem that their consumer faces. You need a goal - in other words: you need to know (understand, and respect) where your consumer (hero) is right now - and where they want to be.

It's all about the transformation - what are they looking to transform into? Are they looking for an international education that guarantees employment, or are they looking to master the art of professional English - maybe they're older, and after a career transformation? The point is - your prospect is essentially a butterfly, ensconced safely in the cocoon that they've built over the years. Once meeting, and engaging with you - they evolve, they transform - they become the butterfly.

- What does the transformation process look like?
- How will they be different after choosing you?
- What will they be able to do, that they can't do now?
- Will their beliefs change?
- Will their network expand and offer opportunities?
- Who will they be - after you?

Until you understand your prospect's (hero) goal - you don't have a story, you have a series of anecdotes, and that won't help your team achieve their KPIs.

You need a challenge.

If transformation were simple - your prospect wouldn't need you.

It's the obstacles that keep stories fascinating. The core of your captivating story is the space between where your hero is now and where he wants to go.

External barriers to your customer's final victory are common, but the most interesting ones are almost always internal. What is preventing your customer-hero from achieving his objective? What external factors are obstructing his progress? More importantly - what is the psychological barriers that are stopping your hero from achieving their goals? Is it fear? Anxiety?

What are the limitations that they need to overcome before they can morph into their final form?

You need a moral.

When sharing a marketing narrative, it's usually a good idea to state the moral of the story upfront.

Yes, tell stories of people who are similar to your customer-hero overcoming hurdles and achieving their goals. Demonstrate how your company can help customers become better versions of themselves by mentoring and guiding them. Illustrate how customers can overcome external and internal barriers to get what they want. Then - circle back - and explain the transformation. Don't be afraid to tell your prospect what to do next either! Direct them into your funnel with a clear CTA - they won't take an action unless you tell them to.

The most subtle (and sophisticated) stories leave it to the audience to figure out the moral of the story. But the audience for those stories isn't consuming them in the sea of diversion tactics that is the open web.

Remember: Clarity is golden!

You need the truth.

There is one more tool that your story needs - and it's one that often gets overlooked. It's the truth.

You can achieve incredible gains simply by telling the truth in this age of unprecedented digital transparency.

The more honest you can be about your company, the people you serve, and the problems you address, the more loyal your customers will be.

Every narrative necessitates the presence of a 'memory element', in order for it to be remembered and retold.

And, in today's society, candour can be one of the most compelling story parts of all.

So, how is it done?

Aka - what is the process?

Marketers are storytellers by nature. We revel in the joy of creation, and we live to give word to the inexplicable! Now, every great creator has their process. From JK Rowling's traditional pen and paper techniques to Picasso's "close your eyes and sing" approach - these processes allow for uniformity, and organisation in an otherwise chaotic (creative) world.

The same can be said for storytelling... especially when it comes to businesses.

What is the significance of this procedure? Because, as a company or a brand, you probably have a lot of information, data, and messages to convey in a single story. What do you do if you don't know where to start? So, let's begin with the first step. After that, you'll know where to go (and how to get there).

- 1 - Know your audience
- 2 - Identify, and define your core message
- 3 - Decide what kind of story you're telling
- 4 - Choose your CTA (wisely)
- 5 - Identify your channel

Whether you do this while in the bathtub, or perched in your kids' treehouse is irrelevant - your execution is what matters!

Storytelling is a kind of expression. It's also an important process to master for both your company and your consumers. Stories bring people together and motivate them to take action. Furthermore, today's consumer makes purchasing decisions based on why you're selling something - rather than what you're selling.

Storytelling allows you to express your "why" in a creative and engaging manner. Isn't it also more enjoyable to tell a story?



How do we redefine the traditional marketing funnel to be more inclusive?

Selling your programmes or courses while showcasing featured data has a different impact than engaging viewers with a well-crafted narrative that does more than just sell your goods. It allows your company to stand out from the competition.

Researchers from Princeton University set out to investigate the brain activity of speakers and listeners during a conversation in 2010. They discovered that effective communication resulted in the speakers' and listeners' brains connecting and mirroring activity. This means that effective communication, such as telling a compelling story, literally connects our thought processes together. Furthermore, we may use conversion storytelling to utilise this tendency in advertising tactics.

How can conversion storytelling be aligned with each stage of the customer, or student journey?

One of the main goals of a good story is to affect the user's motivation and behaviour. This is accomplished by conveying tension (pain point), solution (offer), and resolution in a successful micro-story (a good ending). Now we show you how to tell a conversion story at each stage of the customer journey: awareness, consideration, conversion, and retention.

It's critical to have a thorough understanding of your target audience, unique value proposition (UVP), and buyer journey before you begin writing your story. After you've done your study, you can utilise conversion storytelling to motivate users to take action based on where they are in their customer journey.

The most important thing to remember is that the story never actually ends. Effective storytelling leaves room for an encore. Simply put - just because your prospect turned into a student, or customer doesn't mean that the story is over. They've just become a part of it.

Intrigue them during the awareness stage.

As this is the beginning of the experience, tell a story that seeks to connect with the interests and values of your customers. Make an effort to connect with them by talking about similar difficulties and experiences—create a tale that capitalises on your audiences' predisposition to sympathise.

Educate them during the consideration stage.

At this point in the user experience, you can go deeper into the brand's perspective and narrative. Explain why you created your institution and what you're doing to help the prospect solve their problem or reach their objective.

Disseminate facts and information that will help users comprehend why your offering is better than the competitors.

Influence enrollment during the conversion stage.

When prospects decide whether or not to convert, this is where the rubber meets the road. It's critical to state how your brand aids in the resolution of users' major challenges and pain points at this stage. Customer success stories are particularly effective in this situation since they serve to develop confidence and credibility while also providing the final push to convert. However, in addition to client testimonials and snippets, it's critical to back up your story with concrete facts and figures at this point. Yes, include a client testimonial, but do so with case studies that explain why you're better than the competition and the best option for the user to solve their problem.

5 ways storytelling can fuel your digital marketing

Know what storytelling is

Storytelling is the idea of creating an emotional connection with your customer first, then using that to drive sales

Focus on the hero you deserve

Don't tell your customers why you're great, show them how your product or services makes them great

Dig into data

Introducing storytelling elements into your marketing doesn't mean sacrificing data. It can be used to drive your digital selling - just make sure it's relevant

Know what storytelling is

Communicating your company's story isn't a solo task. It takes everyone on the team to make your brand easily accessible

Assess your current culture, connections and commitments

Study the way your company works, and what it stands for. This lets you put forward an authentic, relatable voice, no matter your industry

Using Storytelling to Boost Enrollment

"Good stories surprise us. They make us think and feel. They stick in our minds and help us remember ideas and concepts in a way that a PowerPoint crammed with bar graphs never can." - Joe Lazauskas and Shane Snow, *The Storytelling Edge*

Student stories sell. We are characters in a story. We connect with stories. We enjoy hearing stories. We can also recognise ourselves in a story.

When you think about the commercials you remember for a long time, the ones that remain with you, nine times out of ten they will have a story element to them, rather than just straight entertainment. It's because we connect with stories as human beings, and since we connect with them, we remember them.

So how do you as an education marketer leverage this golden thread?

Students want to know how they will fit into a university setting. They want to know how the campus's beliefs align with their own and how the campus's ethos matches what they're looking for. After all, this is a critical decision. Storytelling marketing is intrinsically personal, allowing people to empathise with a business in a way that no other form of marketing can. Using a narrative to represent your institution's identity will help prospective students understand how they will adjust to their new surroundings.

Think video - a virtual campus tour, making use of a relatable voiceover. This not only demonstrates what your campus has to offer but also provides a voice for your prospects to identify with - making them feel at home before they even arrive. Here you have given your campus a voice, a face - and identity.

Institutions can also use storytelling marketing to establish a brand identity. Stories are human and social, and they tend to evoke a sense of honesty and integrity. With university competitiveness at an all-time high, developing a brand identity is a great approach to set yourself apart from the competitors. Storytelling is a useful tool in this regard; people value a good story just as much as they value what's on offer - as any talent show will demonstrate.

Storytelling is the basis of your marketing strategy that leads to success and growth.

The most important thing for you to do is set up a system for gathering and sharing your stories. The issue isn't a lack of stories, but rather a lack of coordination in telling your story. To collect and disseminate stories, you'll need a system. A good narrative might also encourage people to tell others about it. This is why your website and social media channels need to convey a story. It's crucial that you present scenarios in which prospective parents or students can see themselves in the characters you're describing.

Here's a quick test.

Have a look at your schools' website and its social media channels. How many stories do you see? How many parents, teachers, alumni, or student stories are there? How are these stories told?

If you can't accurately identify the narrative, then you're telling the story in the wrong way.

A website and a social media channel have a somewhat symbiotic relationship - basically, your website should be the home (where your stories live), and your social channels the vehicle (how your stories are distributed).

If you're struggling to identify your story, have a look in the mirror (yes, literally). You are your school's story. So are the students, parents, alumni and faculty. These are what makes your school different from the rest. It's this that makes a student choose you over your competitors. This is why your marketing strategy needs to be fuelled by your story!

Focus on the candidate experience, emphasize student and alumni success stories, and look for ways to demonstrate your basic beliefs. Also, don't underestimate the value of personal relationships. Facilitate classroom visits and talks with current students and alumni whenever possible. Those encounters are priceless, and they're a fantastic opportunity to tell your brand's narrative. To reach and engage with your target audience, you might want to explore using live streaming features like Facebook Live, TikTok, or Snapchat.

Storytelling should be the focal point of your marketing strategy - because, without it - all you have is a few spreadsheets populated with arbitrary content. To really differentiate yourself from your competitors, you need to empower students, staff, faculty and co. to share their stories! These are the stories that define your institution, that demonstrate its value and culture. Once you can start capturing (and distributing) your story, your strategy will come to fruition.

What does this mean for education marketers?

Whether you're marketing for a higher education institution, a high school, or an online college - it's important to remember that each of these is fundamentally different from the other, and each will require a unique approach. This extends to your narrative and the way that you tell your story. What works for you - might not work for your peers within the industry, and that's okay. Marketing is fundamentally a trial and error approach. It's about testing, and optimising until we find our groove!

The digital era has given rise to multiple new education companies, universities and online schools. Competition is rife, and with that comes opportunity. This also means that applicants are spoiled for choice and that in itself can be overwhelming. Let's get into their heads for a second. Making the wrong decision when it comes to pursuing education will have lifelong consequences - it's a decision that shouldn't be taken lightly, and it's one that should be thoroughly researched. Picture yourself as the student for a moment, imagine the anxiety that comes along with making this decision, considering its potential repercussions, the financial impact - and the effect that it will have on the rest of your life. It's in no way an easy position to be in.

That's where you come in. Yes, you're a marketer - but, you're also the guide, you're the storyteller, and you're the one that shows an applicant why they're making the right choice when choosing your institution. That's not a job to be taken lightly.

With so many options to choose from - brand differentiation is more important than ever. Standing out from the crowd, embracing your own nuance, and creating (and living) your brand story is crucial to your enrollment funnel. The first step to standing out is to truly understand your audience, your niche. We mean really get into their head. What inspires them? What scares them? What is the root cause of their anxiety? And then - identify how you can address these exigencies. You address this through your programme - of course, but also through your story.

The importance of storytelling marketing in the human experience cannot be overstated. Storytelling, in its most basic form, was a way for people to make sense of the world around them and then pass that meaning down through the generations. The power of the story has not waned over the decades. It has evolved into a vital part of our humanity, a method for us to connect with one another, and a way to commemorate our shared life experiences.

Good stories tap into something deep within us. They depict a web of links between the storyteller, the audience, and the rest of the world. Using storytelling to promote your institution, company or school allows marketers to engage on an emotional level with their target audience.

A good story triggers an emotional response. It ignites a memory. It builds association. Storytelling is the most powerful tool that you have in your marketing arsenal.

Remember - the story never ends. It's the cornerstone of your marketing strategy, and it can quite easily become the difference between your success - and failure.

Here's what good storytelling does.

- Increases online (and offline) engagement
- Boosts the profile of the institution
- Creates a sense of familiarity with your institution

Understanding your audience.

Students from GenZ have grown up with advertising that tells a story. As a result, they have a skill that is unique to their generation: the ability to completely digest a narrative, eliciting sympathetic curiosity for both the content marketer and the story's topic. To put it another way, they look at things from every viewpoint. They've also grown up with an advantage over us - that is, hand-in-hand with social media. In fact, marketing to GenZ relies heavily on electronic word of mouth - aka - social proof. Their ubiquitous use of social media is one of the best ways for education marketers to leverage free advertising, especially if their higher ed marketing strategies include well-crafted narratives.

There's no shortage of stories at your institution.

Universities have a variety of information to share with the public, ranging from academic research and student projects to alumni triumphs and historical data.

Many of the world's top institutions are adopting immersive, visually rich storytelling as a new way of delivering stories on the web. Longer engagement times, fewer bounces, and higher CTRs are all positive outcomes for them. Imperial College London's digital articles, for example, generate 142 % more unique page views and 50 % more time on page than similar stories from other universities.

Storytelling is an experience - and you, the ed marketer - are the host!

