

Rediscovering the art of storytelling in the connected age

By [Tom Manners](#)

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How do you create a powerful brand narrative in the age of the smartphone? Nowadays, it takes more than a great creative idea and a decent budget to get a person's attention. Reaching the right audience on the right platform requires a reimagining of the way we approach storytelling. Here's what the content chroniclers and marketing mavens need to know if they want to rediscover great storytelling.



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Influencer marketing grows up

It wasn't too long ago that the influencer marketing landscape resembled the 1886 gold rush: a frenzy of brands fighting each other to claim their stake of the influencer market, all for the cost of a few freebies. But the promise of easy riches quickly turned out to be fool's gold, as these content prospectors learned some hard lessons about inflated follower counts and hasty partnerships.

The boom may be over, but influencer marketing certainly isn't. Brands have finally started treating it as a serious ongoing investment rather than a get-awareness-quick scheme. The challenge is going to be building lasting relationships that demonstrate ROI. Just as recruitment agencies have become an essential part of matching talent to business, influencer-centric companies such as Webfluential are set to play a major role in connecting the right influencers to the right brands.

Less is more

With just about everyone getting into the content creation game, there's more out there to read, watch and engage with than ever before. But consumer engagement isn't increasing alongside it – just 5% of branded content generates 90% of engagement. Brands are quickly waking up to the fact that they may be creating too much content for nothing to show for it.

In light of this, we're starting to see a shift towards more outcomes-based models that emphasise fewer impactful stories over quantity. Consider Netflix's success in strategically creating highly-engaging, short-form series based on their audience metrics, for example. In the coming year, we should see more focus on this kind of cornerstone content – well-researched, insights-driven, and cognisant of the value it delivers to the audience.

Stop, collaborate and listen

In any story-telling medium, a fundamental piece of advice is to write for your audience. In 2017, this comes with a caveat; write with your audience.

Every year, users are creating and sharing more and more content, thanks to apps such as Snapchat and Instagram. Some of the best brand stories will inevitably come from these amateur content creators.

For consumer-facing brands, this is going to mean turning over much of the ownership of their content creation to their audiences. We should see brands move towards more curation, encouraging audiences to share content that feeds into their overall brand strategy.

Data-driven storytelling

Measuring marketing ROI has always been an exercise in extrapolation and interpretation. But as brands gain greater access to more accurate analytical tools, there's no hiding poor-performing content behind awards or fuzzy number-crunching.

For agencies, there's nowhere to hide. As a result, we're going to be seeing a lot more agencies embrace analytic tools and automation technologies – to the relief of community managers and digital strategists everywhere.

Analytics are also changing how we create, present, and distribute content as we understand the behaviour of audiences better. It's up to agencies to use this information to craft a more authentic narrative that speaks to their audience's challenges.

Integration, collaboration and experimentation

If the lines between above- and below-the-line were blurry before, the rise of content-sharing apps, VOD, and VR have well and truly destroyed these divisions. To survive 2017, you'd best be a full-service, integrated agency, or have in place strong partnerships with companies that can cover your capability gaps.

The good news is that a shift in focus to outcomes rather than output is going to open up a lot of room for experimentation in an effort to meet these outcomes. As a result, we'll see more agencies borrow successful disciplines and processes from elsewhere, such as inbound buyer journeys, persona development or agile methodologies.

Make it visual

Remember when analysts predicted 2015 and 2016 as the year of the video? Well, guess what: 2017 is more of the same. The video arms race is in full swing. As Snapchat and Instagram continue to gain users by the selfie-snapping boatload, Twitter and Facebook are pushing their own native video sharing apps. That's good news for brands looking to diversify their social media content to include more visual storytelling.

We're also likely to see agencies dip their toes into more immersive kinds of visual storytelling, such as AR, VR and 360 video. The South African market is still a ways away from virtual reality going mainstream, but expect to see some of the bigger brands incorporate it into their campaigns.

Let's tell some amazing stories

Merely understanding these trends isn't going to be the magic bullet that enables content marketers to deliver amazing connected stories in 2017, but it's a start. What's going to separate the leaders from the trend-chasers is going to be how much of a strategic approach they adopt. Today's most powerful brand narratives are borne of planning, audience insights and continuous self-improvement. Are your strategic capabilities up to scratch?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Manners is Managing Director of Clockwork Media. After spending several years as a journalist within the technology and entertainment fields, Tom Manners recognised that order for agencies to remain relevant within the ever evolving communications industry, they needed to be more integrated. As a way to start steering agencies out of their specialised silo mentality, he founded Clockwork Media, a content and communications agency, in February 2011 and soon began consulting to and creating content on behalf of organisations such as Nando's, Nike, and Heineken.

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