

The art of immersion

Humans comprehend and process information through stories, and, in digital media, control over their authorship rests with the people, asserts **Graham Hodge** of LBi

In a command-and-control world, we know who's telling the story; it's the author. But digital media have created an authorship crisis. Once the audience is free to step out into the fiction and start directing events, the entire edifice of 20th-century mass media begins to crumble."

This is one of the key ideas contained in Frank Rose's book *The Art of Immersion: How The Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, And The Way We Tell Stories*. Rose argues that since tools like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have made publishing our own content as easy as writing a Post-It, storytelling has fundamentally changed.

Once there were two discrete modes of storytelling that Rose calls 'professional' and 'personal'. The first describes the narratives produced and packaged by movie studios, television production companies etc, the second the stories we would tell to our peers on the phone or down the pub. But now these tools 'encourage us to express ourselves in a way that's neither slickly professional nor purely off-the-cuff... where once there was a divide, now there's a blur'.

So what does this mean for brands? The Art Of Immersion praises the likes of Nike (for Nike+) and Burger King (for Subservient Chicken) for adapting their marketing strategies to create space for those brands' customers to tell their own stories. But Rose stops short of offering advice to brands. He recently observed that:

"Stories are to humans as algorithms are to machines – it's through stories that we process and store information. As a rule, we don't respond well to instruction sets, nor are we very good at memorising lists. But we do respond to stories, because they give us handles that enable us to grab on to the facts they report."

These new storytelling paradigms are clearly a great opportunity for brands to connect with their ever more elusive target audiences. But how do we do it, particularly if we don't have the skills and resources of entertainment brands? Here are some thoughts.

1 Stories are social currency
Advertising does a job. If it's executed well, it reaches a lot of people with a clear message. But it's expensive and inefficient – and it's getting more inefficient, because people are spending more of their time out of the reach of advertising's battering-ram.

More importantly, advertising doesn't do the whole job. It misses the point of connection that generates loyalty and love. The way to make people – and don't forget they're people, not just consumers of products – fall in love with a brand is to give them something they want, something they value. And in return, people reward the brand – with cash, with loyalty, by recommending it to their friends, by following. It's a value-exchange.

One thing a brand can give people is stories. Stories can be anything from a 140-character tweet to a 90-minute film, but what all stories have in common when they are done well is that they engage with audiences by giving them something of value over and above a brand message.

And because stories have value, they are welcome, and so infiltrate people's lives in a way that even a multimillion dollar, blanket ad campaign never could. They get downloaded and uploaded; they get emailed, IM'd and Google+ed; they get streamed on mobiles and loaded onto iPods; and they get posted on blogs and newsfed on Facebook. Stories allow brands to generate social currency, to get out there, where people choose to spend their time.

2 Time to get some help?
Most brands don't have entertainment industry-sized budgets, but a little entertainment industry expertise could go a long way. Stories are made up of characters and narrative arcs, drama and conflict. If your brand is to embed its messages into a story, it had better get the story part right – and for this you might need to bring in the experts.

When Bacardi wanted to create a series of online films that would engage mixologists in high-end cocktail bars by celebrating the stories and characters that abound in bartending culture, they brought in Justin Trefgarne. Trefgarne had been a



Danish collaborative artist Mads Hoby (left) uses a Sony Ericsson handset to control a 'camera flash' flame

screenwriter at Working Title Films and had guided such revered stories as Jane Austen's *Pride And Prejudice* along the tricky journey from book to film. Trefgarne led a workshop with a number of leading bartenders and from this session emerged the storylines and five characters that featured in the initial run of films, entitled *True Originals*. The four-part series has since clocked up half-a-million views, but, more importantly, it has been warmly received by the global bartending community, which has repeatedly praised the films for their authenticity. *True Originals* has since evolved into Bacardi's main platform for engaging the bar trade online.

3 Stories about your brand vs. stories around your brand
The oldest cliché about storytelling is that you should write about what you know. But that doesn't necessarily mean you have to write your life-story. Many brands have wonderful stories about the founders of the company or the original recipe for the product – but because they sound like the brand messages pumped out by advertising, it's hard to make people care.

'The Man Who Walked Around The World', a dramatisation of the founding narrative of the Johnnie Walker brand, is a lovely piece.

Robert Carlyle is cracking company, even over a relatively hefty (for YouTube) six minutes. The production values are faultless. And I personally love the bit that explains why Johnnie Walker bottles are square – that's a great story right there. But at the end of the day, it feels like an ad.

One way to tell stories in a way that doesn't make people's anti-brand defences go up is to do so in an area of culture where the brand has resonance, and which can function as a proxy for the brand. Converse is a master of telling stories in a culturally relevant way. The evergreen Chuck Taylor range has been a staple of the jobbing rock-star's wardrobe pretty much since rock-stars were invented, and the brand has mined this great heritage for stories for years. But the most compelling stories have not been of the 'rock star wore Converse' variety, they have been new stories that the brand has woven around music.

In one initiative, now in its fifth iteration, Converse handpicks hip musicians and brings them together in surprising configurations to record new tunes that are distributed free online. New stories circulate in the form of mp3s, perhaps the most contagious social currency of all. More recently, Converse put itself at the heart of the story to save

London's 100 Club by coming to the rescue of the venerable rock venue.

Philips has taken an interesting line with *Nigel & Victoria*, an online sitcom now in its second season across 11 countries. The Nigel of the title is a Philips brand manager, played by Ben Willbond, who is more commonly seen playing notorious monarchs in the BBC's *Horrible Histories* series. Victoria, played by Dutch actress Victoria Koblenko, is supposed to be appearing in ads for Philips lifestyle entertainment products. But Nigel invariably interrupts the shooting of the ads for a mixture of professional and romantic reasons.

The ongoing saga maintains interest because its plot is as old as the hills. "It's boy-meets-girl. It's basically *Notting Hill*," notes James Rawlings of Hoot, the comedy production outfit who makes *Nigel & Victoria*. Yet the Philips products have a legitimate role in these meta-narratives and enjoy prominent placement without sabotaging the story. Early data suggests that 85% of viewers of series two watch through to the end of each episode, up on the first series.

4 Who is telling your brand's story?
For successful storytelling, you need a good story. But you also need a good storyteller. And there might be better

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storytellers out there than your brand. This doesn't necessarily mean Robert Carlyle. A good storyteller can just be someone who understands their audience and talks in a way that they find engaging.

Sony Ericsson has just launched the Xperia Studio, a programme that puts its Xperia smartphones into the hands of some of the most radical creatives of the digital generation. It's a creative hothouse in line with its studio ethos: each collaborator creates new experiences according to a common brief, 'Reality Remade', which are then released to the world.

But Xperia Studio is also a loose collective of storytellers, each with a narrative about how they remade reality and each with an audience eager to hear them. One such is Mads Hoby of Illutron, a 'collaborative interactive art studio' based on a boat moored in Copenhagen harbour. Illutron rigged Sony Ericsson Xperia Play handsets to control a number of interactions, such as a huge flame that functions as a flash for the phone's camera.

These experiments play out both as social stories, told through tweets, pictures and blog-posts, and as beautiful 'making of'

documentaries. In each case, the stories originate from Illutron, not Sony Ericsson, cementing their credibility as stories. If your brand's story originates with a storyteller like Mads, there's a pretty good chance other people will pick up the story and pass it on.

5 Digital storytellers must be fast on their feet

One thing that both brands and the entertainment industry need to be better at if they are to enjoy the benefits of digital storytelling is moving fast. The epic planning and production cycles of blockbuster movies and ad campaigns alike, with bursts of activity punctuating long stretches of silence, are out of step with the kind of responsive, evolving stories that their audiences are becoming accustomed to.

John Willshire, former innovation guru at media agency PHD and now head of Smithery, makes the distinction between advertising's visible but short-lived 'fireworks' and the longer-lasting 'bonfires' made possible by social media. Building bonfires is a constant quest for new fuel. Stories can provide that fuel, but this demands a fresh approach to the creative



process that requires agility, imagination and speed. Stories that continually unfold cannot be months in gestation and cost millions to produce.

A good example of how advertising can be complemented and extended by ongoing narratives is the Old Spice campaign. It was rooted in some top-notch creative of the good old advertising kind, courtesy of Wieden + Kennedy. But having got our attention with some spectacular fireworks, they set about building a bonfire by placing the campaign's lead character at the disposal of the audience's own stories. None was more memorable than that of J. S. Beals, on whose behalf the Old Spice Guy proposed to one Angela A. Hutt-hyphen-Chamberlin, via YouTube.

According to Wieden + Kennedy, 186 YouTube-ready response films featuring the Old Spice Guy were shot in two-and-a-half days. This quick-and-dirty approach allowed Old Spice to maintain a large number of simultaneous dialogues with its audience and extend the life of the campaign.

The brands that successfully harness digital storytelling to build raging bonfires will be those that equip themselves to respond quickly to what their audiences are saying. First, they must craft the major plotlines that will anchor their stories as they play out. Having this overarching narrative in place keeps the story, and the brand messages it contains, coherent.

This also provides a framework that permits the brand to respond in real time, and avoid the baroque approval processes of traditional campaigns.

In execution, brands must learn to value work-in-progress and the lessons learned through failing fast. There is no time to de-risk your communications – your audience are telling stories about you already. And all the while, brands must listen.



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