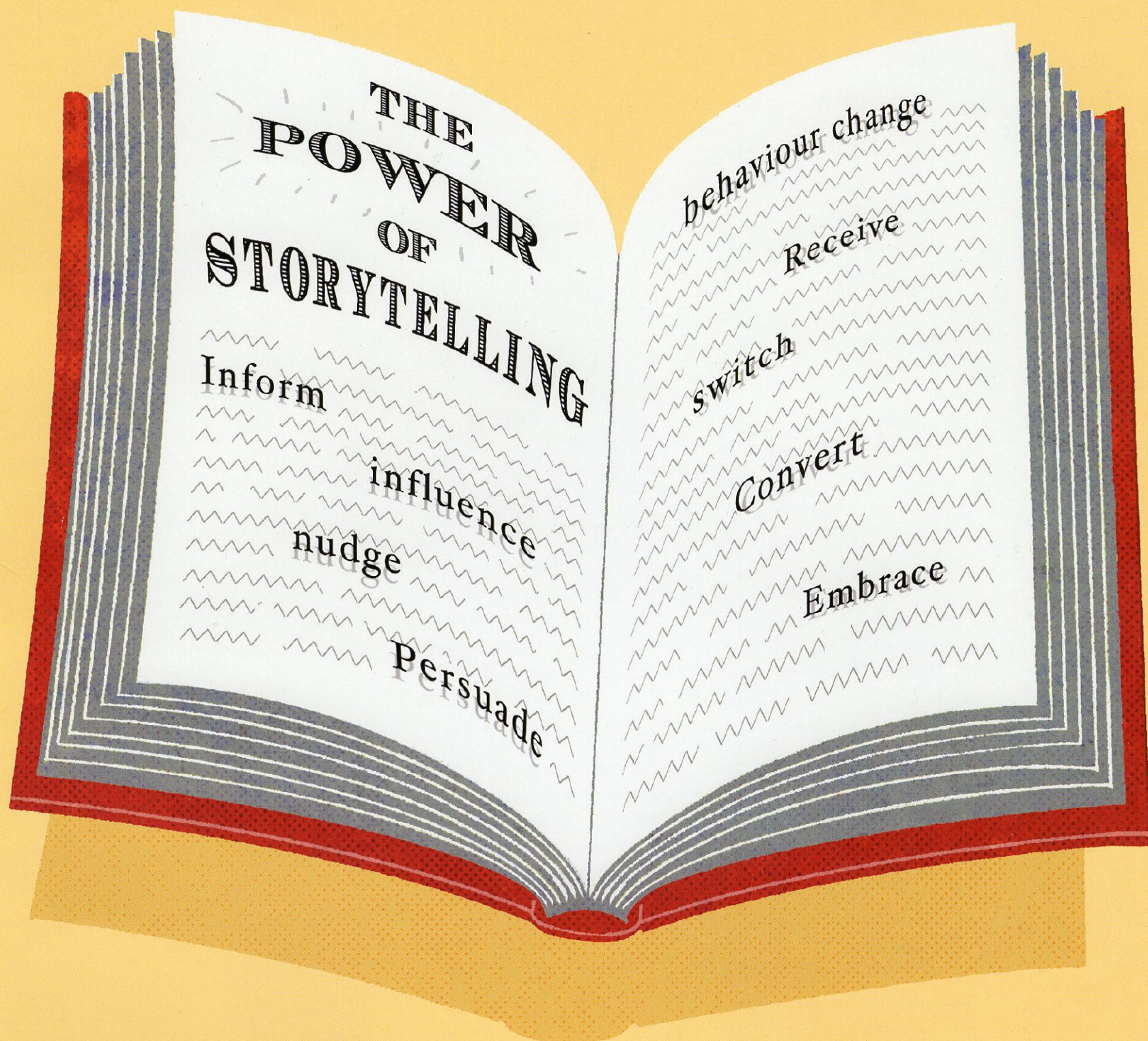


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Brand journalism

Planners must influence the conversation through brand stories that are honest, transparent and built around unexpected truths; journalism not advertising

By Graham Phillips, JWT

You have two choices. You can continue to lock yourself behind facile corporate words and happy-talk brochures. Or you can join the conversation."

This is an extract from the *Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual*.

I describe my own personal brand of planning as 'storytelling built around unexpected truths'. It has been my belief that the best advertising campaigns expose basic, yet hidden, enduring truths that yield lasting brand/product relevance. However, it strikes me, as I'm sure it does many planners, that in this age of social media, not much endures beyond the knowledge that the conversation moves on. The story of the day is just that – daily, at best.

With an increased ability to feedback on, advocate for, and even complain about the brands we use, the audience's ability to participate in and change the conversation with a brand has evolved. If it is the case that brands today are at the whim of the conversation, then perhaps the only brand truth that can truly endure today is the non-fiction, raw conversation itself? If so, then how do the agencies of the world embrace this honest, unpolished dialogue? How do we build on this new enduring truth? Brand journalism may be the answer.

What is brand journalism? It is a method

of engaging our audience in discussions about the brand by creating compelling content and by incorporating the audience's own viewpoints. It is teaching brands to mimic publishers and journalists in how they produce content, and to get into the conversation by enriching the conversation.

Brand journalism is editorial content about the brand, crafting a narrative using journalistic techniques. And in the process, maintaining a non-fiction, honest voice within the brand-consumer dynamic.

Now, unlike other believers in the power of more conversational communications, I am not suggesting that every campaign should employ this approach to communication. Nor am I positing that the 30-second spot is dead. There will always be a role for traditional communications; no matter how often they need refreshing or scrapping, anthems will always have a place in a brand's arsenal.

When you get down to it, there are two main criteria for a successful Brand Journalism campaign: the company has to have something interesting to say; and they have to be willing to say it. These are high hurdles to clear. In order for a brand narrative to be interesting and resonate with an audience, it has to be bold, even surprising in its honesty – and saying bold, surprisingly honest things is not something brand communicators are necessarily trained to do.



The fact is, when you stop acting like a brand communicator and start acting like a journalist, you flex different muscles. Even the suggestion of a new workout routine may conjure up images of severe fatigue and soreness for many of your clients. To be fair, they aren't wrong to be cautious. There are real differences between brand journalism and advertising.

First, advertising traditionally leverages a positioning that can evolve over time based on what the consumers' current needs are. It is somewhat safe in the sense that it either holds up a mirror to the consumer, telling them what they are thinking, or it tries to insert itself within their current need-state – brand journalism challenges the brand to take a position and defend it, while allowing the audience to form its own opinions.

The second big difference is that advertising typically disseminates messaging developed around very specific points of



view that the brand can develop within the confines of their positioning, ahead of time. Brand Journalism develops a broader set of themes associated with the category role they hope to play. This breadth offers marketers more opportunity to engage the audience and competitors across a spectrum of topics related to their core position. But, it also creates a more exposed surface area for the brand and requires more wargame-like planning reminiscent of the world of politics.

Let's look at an example from the automotive industry. Brand A believes that they are the leaders of the future. However, in order to support that assumptive leadership position, they will need to engage in conversations with industry analysts, consumers and their competitors across a spectrum of topics, including safety, reliability, green innovations, fuel efficiency, gas prices and the state of the economy.

Each conversation will have a number

of different points of debate. And in many instances, once Brand A is in that debate they may not always have the answer everyone will like.

This is where it becomes most important to become the non-fiction voice: the type people may not always want to hear from, but a voice that is respected for its honesty. Transparency is a mandate. After all, in a debate, it is always easy to spot the bullshit answer, no?

Brand journalism uses 'radical transparency' or 'uncomfortable truths' to

create moments of cognitive dissonance, because those are the moments when we can actually disrupt and then shift perceptions. For many big brands, the public has established, deep-seated perceptions that have built up over decades. If we're going to change perceptions, we need to act in a way that shocks people into thinking of those brands differently.

For example, if the world believes a brand to be slow and clumsy, we need to make them shockingly fast and nimble. If they think a brand is guarded and hates competition, we'll 'open the kimono' and talk openly about industry topics, and even encourage dissent. This also explains why brand journalism isn't always appropriate. Not all brands need to spur this kind of radical perception shift.

And finally, perhaps the most significant difference between advertising and brand journalism is about what each 'makes.' Advertising may leverage ad-like content as part of comprehensive communications architectures – brand journalism is all about making and leveraging content and value-based advertising. This requires a different set of skills and agility on both the client side and within the agency. This means there are new roles to be filled and processes to be broken and rethought, neither of which are easy tasks in either camp.

After all that, you may be thinking, "hmmm that almost sounds like PR," and right you are. In fact, brand journalism is a form of PR. When you think about what 'public relations' actually means, it has occurred to the brains behind brand journalism that businesses by and large don't do a very good job of relating to their public. Press releases are perhaps the least 'relatable', most one-way and often most spun forms of communication. We are way overdue for a redefinition of what public relations really entails, and brand journalism is just one aspect of the answer to that need.

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Enough of the theory, you say? Okay, here is how it works (Figure 1)

Monitor conversations happening right now on the web, in the media, on Twitter, etc. using conversation monitoring tools available today.

Assess any spikes in conversation across your pre-selected themes with regards to their potential impact on the brand.

Engage in dialogue with your key constituents to determine any potential desired actions on a near-real time basis and work with your stakeholders to shape the conversation.

Respond to both threats and marketing opportunities to redirect or amplify the conversation.

Lead conversation proactively when we have good news, reviews, etc. to share.

Publish content that will be relevant to the consumer to ensure our point-of-view is accurately represented.

To bring the process to life, allow me to tell you a story from my own experience with the method. Microsoft's enterprise business-to-business target, 'information technology decision-makers' or ITDMs, are tasked with making multimillion-dollar decisions that affect the productivity and efficiency of every company employee.

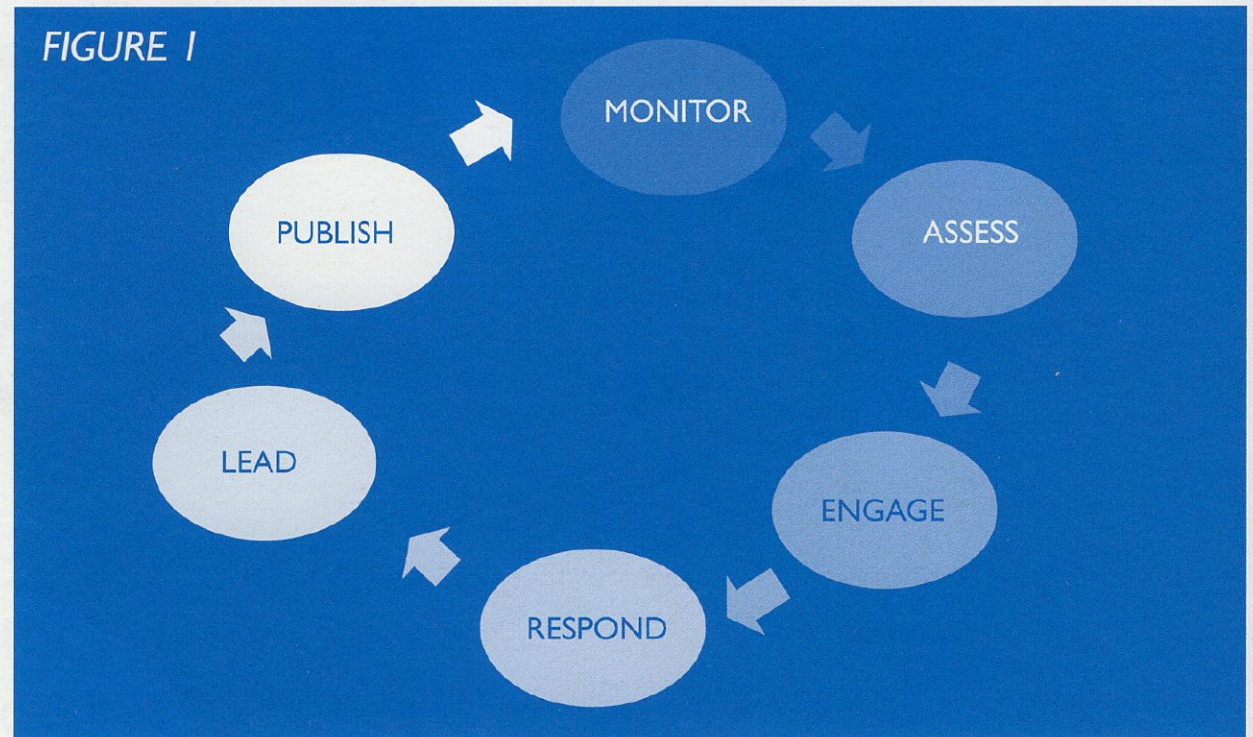
Taking cues from advertising alone is risky, to say the least. It is for this reason that ITDMs only listen to other people who actually develop, buy, or use technology. In order to be trusted, the brand couldn't just talk to, or follow them. They had to get inside their world and stay there.

What does that actually mean? We, as an agency, had to stop trying to get people to come to us, and went about publishing in places where crucial decision-making conversations happen, in real time. So, we transformed ourselves from an advertising agency to an ongoing 'geek information network,' made by geeks for geeks.

A dedicated agency 'newsteam' kept its finger on the pulse of IT-business conversations 24/7, monitoring everything being said about Microsoft Enterprise Software on the Internet. When we noticed a spike, we entered the conversation.

We selected the appropriate contributor in our network – made up of 40-plus product developers, analysts and enthusiasts – to respond on our behalf. Responses were blogged, re-blogged, commented upon, replied to, tweeted, re-tweeted, and sent to blogger sites in the span of a few hours, every day.

FIGURE 1



The network also created its own news. We conducted and recorded interviews with customers, product nerds and pundits (60-plus conversations). We sponsored live chats on publisher sites. We even created interactive online roundtables, with notable industry analysts beamed in from around the world to share their views on a topic – a virtual 'Meet the Press' for geeks, if you will.

All of this 'news' didn't just live on the blog site we created. It was distributed in a rainbow of formats, from rich media banners and branded Twitter-feeds, to audio-casts and downloadable white papers, and all of it popped up in the online communities and forums these guys already frequent. We used media in a way that mirrors how the IT professionals use media, creating a verifiable network of content across a range of sources.

In just seven months, we became a valued resource for news and information in the tight-knit IT community. With more than 300 blog posts published, we became one of the most popular Microsoft blogs, with over 1.4 million total page views – an unprecedented level of sustained audience growth in the publishing world. Our top bloggers averaged over 19,000 page views per post. Our top five bloggers averaged 31,000 views per post. That's comparable to industry leaders like gizmodo.com and techcrunch.com.

Most importantly, the IT audience interacted with the massive amounts of content (live chats, roundtable discussions, white papers, audio-casts, etc)

we distributed throughout the online communities and forums these guys already trust. The network boasted close to nine million user engagements – a huge success.

But I would be remiss to write an article for *Admap* and not offer some perspective regarding how brand journalism will change the role of the planner. First and foremost, with a model like this in place, planning will be able to get much faster reads on what's working, what's not working, what's hot and what's not, every morning and, therefore, will play an even bigger role in steering the ship, navigating away from the shoals and out into open, calmer and opportunistic waters.

Furthermore, planning will suddenly be able to tap into what is akin to a daily online focus group of thousands and grab real consumer insights on the fly. We can then take those insights and have them inform, in real time, other more traditional creative assignments beyond the journalistic opportunities.

We become content-seekers/providers, adding 'publisher' to our job titles. We changed the way we work from the inside out. We blur the line between audience and agency. We become a trusted source, both internally and externally. In addition to being the underlings of the insights – the 'truth' – we become masters of the moment, the reality, the non-fiction.

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