What is your brand’s compelling story?

When Tim Cook emerged onto the stage of the Flint Center for Performing Arts in Cupertino on Tuesday 9 September this year, he was about to tell not one, but two stories. The first was overtly in support the day’s launches: the iPhone 6, iWatch and Apple Pay. The other, woven between the lines of the first, was the continuation of Apple’s story, a narrative started by Steve Jobs and running ever since.

Nothing short of epic, that tale of innovation, perseverance and adversity, with heroes and villains, twists and turns, has grabbed the imagination, and captured the wallets, of millions of people worldwide. Importantly, Apple’s story has also delivered extraordinary value to its shareholders.

More and more marketers are turning to storytelling. Through our research and practical experience working with B2B marketers around the world, we have found evidence of this technique being increasingly used in sales and marketing. Why is storytelling such a powerful technique? There are three very good reasons.

First, storytelling is as old as we are. Language enabled humans to share experience and build communities around common stories, thus setting us apart from other species and planting the seeds of civilisation. Writing, when it finally came on the scene around 3,000 BC, made the sharing of stories easier and more widespread. Over the years, new media have amplified a verbal story through image, music and sometimes even smell and touch.

The second reason for storytelling’s appeal is that stories reach three distinct parts of the human brain. First the brain stem, which is the seat of instincts such as survival. Will Little Red Riding Hood survive what her grandmother did not? Might we survive a hungry wolf, whether in drag or not? A story will also touch our limbic brain – where our emotions come from, which is why we tend to empathise with Batman and to despise the Joker. Finally, a story also addresses our neo-cortex, where we organise our higher-order, rational thinking. That iPhone, packed with useful apps and music tracks, and now a seamless payment tool, will make my life easier. Over thousands of years of evolution, our brains have been wired to communicate in this way: stories turn us on.

The third, well before marketers become interested, storytelling was already established in our lives. Aristotle, in 350 BC, suggested a definition for what a story should be made up of: “A description and intrigue with a logic and time dimension.” Storytelling is the trade of authors and actors, whether in the theatre or on screen. Politicians were next to grasp the potential that the tool offered. Ronald Reagan is acknowledged as the first user of storytelling in a political context – inevitable, perhaps, if acting was your first career.

From there, it was only natural for corporations to be next in appreciating the effectiveness of storytelling in engaging their target audience. Consumers were first: as Mad Men’s Don Draper might have said, what is an ad if not a story? Over the past few years, the B2B sector has embraced storytelling too. Why? According to Georges Lewi, a French mythologist and brand expert, B2B and services brands “need even more storytelling, more tangible image than FMCG”. Because of the immateriality, and often the complexity, of their offerings, these organisations have real benefit to gain from storytelling – a tool that connects them with their customers at visceral and emotional levels.

No wonder, then, that in ITSMA’s 2014 research of essential skills for the future marketing organisation, 53% of senior B2B marketing executives surveyed put storytelling at the top of the list, ahead of both leadership skills (51%) and data analytics (36%). A war for the attention of buyers is being waged. This struggle has become ferocious, with an avalanche of content hitting all of us relentlessly. (Every minute of every day we create 204 million email messages, 684,000 hits of content shared on Facebook, 100,000 tweets, and 48 hours of new YouTube videos.) In addition, the emergence of omni-channel marketing requires consistency across all formats and platforms. It sometimes feels as if all of the marketing team’s energy and focus have gone on managing that complexity, rather than coming up with engaging content that talks to us as people.

Undoubtedly, this Martini world of “anything, anywhere, anytime” makes the task of marketers much more arduous. Because storytelling engages audiences, it can help win this battle for attention. Easy to say, but harder to execute: while marketers spend 60-80% of their day writing, they aren’t always good at telling stories. Which is why companies like global software and services company Amdocs are investing in these skills. “Storytelling is really the art of simplifying the complex,” says Chris Williams, head of global marketing at Amdocs. “It’s a way of communicating to people who you are and the value you bring so that they’ll understand and remember. But that gets harder to do the bigger and more complex a company becomes. It’s all too easy to get lost behind industry three-letter acronyms and technical features, and even more challenging if what you are offering is software and services, which isn’t something you

ITSMA members believe that storytelling is key to their future success. When thinking about the skills in their marketing team, it’s the number one priority for development. By Bev Burgess and Vincent Rousselet
can touch and feel. That’s why we’re launching a new company-wide programme that puts the art of storytelling at the centre of our marketing strategy and culture. We see employee training on effective storytelling – simple stories that will evoke an emotional connection and ultimately translate into a positive action – as a necessity.”

From Oracle to HP, from Telefónica to Orange Business Services, from Hitachi to Amdocs, our observation is that an increasing number of organisations, having learned from B2C success, now deploy storytelling in B2B markets. Their goal is to engage buyers at an emotional level. To do so with maximum impact, marketers need to know what makes a good story, and where and how to use storytelling.

Simply put, stories have three components:

■ **A plot or storyline:** This is the essence of the story and, according to experts, can be articulated in as few as six words, such as in the title of a news article. “Apple revolutionises music market with iTunes” might be one way Steve Jobs would summarise the renaissance of the company in the 2000s. “Grief-stricken girl drowns devious wolf” …you know who we mean.

■ **A story – or narrative – arc:** Starting with an opening scene, following various crises, including a point of no return, reaching a climax and finishing with the dénouement, the arc is the journey you are taking the audience on. From Don Giovanni to Midnight’s Children, from The Iliad to Terminator, from Harry Potter to the Bible, all stories and myths are organised along a variant of this arc. This approach has been replicated in the business world, where classic examples include Steve Jobs’ 2005 commencement speech in Stanford and Stéphane Richard’s Hello shows, where Orange presents its innovations and strategy.

■ **A cast of characters, with predetermined roles:** A hero and a villain is a good start (think James Bond versus Le Chiffre in Casino Royale). When they are joined by other archetypes, the story becomes richer and more engaging. Add the princess character, for whom the quest is started; the false hero, who tries to claim credit; the helper, a person or object that aids the hero. In a corporate context, the hero might be the brand (or a product), the villain the competition. But this can be personalised too. As part of its Rock Stars campaign, Intel put forward Ajay Bhatt, one of its senior vice presidents and the co-inventor of the USB, as one of its heroes.

However, just as with a cooking recipe, ingredients on their own are not usually enough. How you mix them together matters hugely. In our experience, three dimensions matter to get the ‘special sauce’ of storytelling to set. First, there must be coherence between the business and the story. Second, the story itself should be credible, authentic and ambitious. Finally, the audience needs to identify with the story and be thrilled by it.

It is up to marketers to let their imagination loose. Because storytelling allows (arguably demands) the use of humour, surprise or suspense, it is an outlet for marketers to exercise their creative skills. That is something we have heard is getting difficult to do in other marketing disciplines, as data and analytics come to the fore. We have also found that organisations progress on a maturity curve in their practice of storytelling, such as that in Figure 1.

A TV commercial is perhaps the obvious tactical starting point. In 30 or 60 seconds, a whole narrative arc is presented to the audience. Multiple ads, across various formats and media, can continue the same story, as if they were the continuing chapters of a book. This serialisation is an opportunity to engage customers in the story, and enable co-creation too, as Orange did with its Alt-Minds campaign in France in 2012-13.

Further along the maturity continuum, the organisation may turn storytelling into its main communication tool, across the breadth of its marketing and sales channels. In this more strategic mode, the stories chosen have a very clear link to the values of the company and amplify them. Also, the company will train its people (for example in sales and pre-sales, marketing and service delivery) in storytelling, as is happening today in Oracle, Xerox, CSC and IBM.

Apple may for now remain the best storyteller around, but it is clear many B2B marketers are catching up on the act.

**FIGURE 1: Marketing maturity in storytelling**

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