

By Randall Ringer and Michael Thibodeau



The Narrative Branding Company

A Breakthrough Approach to Brand Creation

New research confirms Narrative Branding® is more effective than traditional brand positioning



A new approach for creating brands has been proven more effective than brand positioning.

This new approach is based on the power of storytelling. Some marketers, most notably McDonald's, have recognized the need for a storytelling approach. Until now the effectiveness of this approach had not been validated.

Verse Group is at the forefront of ground-breaking empirical research that demonstrates the superiority of brand stories. Our efforts include actively contributing to an extensive 3-year study conducted by The Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) titled, "On the Road to a New Effectiveness Model."

Verse Group has built upon the findings of this research and the principles of storytelling to create a breakthrough approach to branding.

We call this approach Narrative Branding®.



The Search for a Better Alternative

There is a growing chorus of marketers questioning the effectiveness of positioning and seeking breakthrough methods to replace it. Positioning was a true innovation when it was developed 30+ years ago. That was the age of :30-second tv spots, in a world of limited media choices and mass audiences. Marketing was a one-way street from companies to consumers.

That world is no longer.

But without empirical evidence, marketers have had no viable alternative to positioning.

Their search is now over. Convincing new research from The ARF and others demonstrates that brand stories, with strong metaphors, are more effective than brand positioning.

An alternative with strong ROI

Brand stories do more than just make advertising more effective. One global corporation reports that a brand story approach was instrumental in driving double-digit revenue growth while cutting marketing expenses by 20%. A major franchisor reports that brand stories led to unprecedented levels of franchisee participation, resulting in higher revenues. And McDonald's credits their turn-around to abandoning positioning and embracing a new storytelling approach.

A true breakthrough

Now there are highly effective brand story approaches available to corporations and their agencies. Isn't it time to leave out-of-date positioning behind?

It is easy to underestimate the impact of this breakthrough approach. A brand story is not a slightly dressed-up, slightly altered form of positioning. It is about creating a whole new process and practical tools for tapping into the awesome power of narrative.

Marketers can gain billions of dollars of efficiencies each year by moving away from outdated brand positioning.



We are entering an age of competing stories.

Positioning emphasizes finding one key differentiating point – “99 44/100 % Pure” – and then repeating it over and over again. Research shows that differentiation is relatively unimportant and far from sustainable. The repetition of positioning leads to greater boredom, not greater engagement.

Today we are in an age of greater media diversity and proliferation. The new media – websites, video podcasts, consumer generated content – are long-form media. To take full advantage of new media, marketers need to design compelling brand stories with richness and depth.

It's not about who has the best point of differentiation or the best set of facts. It's who can tell the most engaging narrative with the strongest metaphors.

New tools for a new age of marketing

Every great brand has a great story to tell. The story needs to be told in a way that appeals to all senses, in images and actions, in sounds as well as words. It's that simple. And that complex.

The process of creating a brand story is not a reductive process – it is not about distilling your brand down to a single idea or a single word. It is about putting together a rich and robust language of engaging metaphors that will be useful in both very limited media, such as a tv spot, and in deeper and more fluid media such as the internet, retail environments, sponsored events or tradeshows.

Without a structured process and the right tools, brand stories would be a fascinating marketing theory, – but nothing more. For brand stories to be widely adopted, it is necessary to provide an underlying framework that can be replicated across many categories and companies. Following is one strategic framework that has proven effective in the marketplace for companies and organizations such as Marriott International, LexisNexis, The American Management Association and Coldwell Banker.

We call this strategic framework Narrative Branding®.

“Memories have a deep association with storytelling...
Companies can use storytelling to shape the
memories which consumers record and recall.”

– The ARF

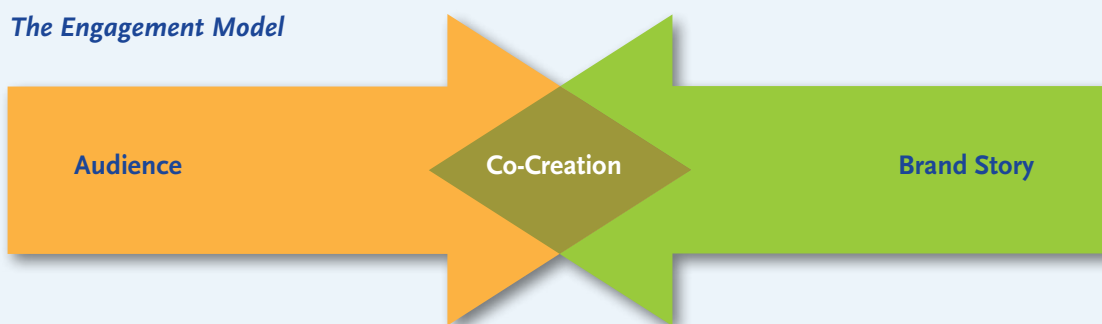
What is Narrative Branding?

It is a breakthrough approach to creating brands based on the principles of storytelling. As we know from stories, context is king. That is why Narrative Branding provides the full context a marketer needs. Like a story, it is inclusive: emotional and rational; creative and strategic. It is designed around all senses: sight, sound, taste, touch and smell. Narrative Branding is a model for engaging people through metaphors, co-creation and a compelling narrative arc. It provides a way of managing brand relationships over time and across all media. In short, it is an approach to branding that is designed for today's world.

Following are five principles of Narrative Branding.

Principle 1: Successful brands engage consumers through co-creation

Great brand stories resonate with the associations and memories of the audience. The brand does not live in a vacuum. It does not inject meaning into a person's mind. People bring their past, their cultural reference-points, and their individual experiences when they engage with a brand story. It is at this moment of engagement that meaning is co-created.



Principle 2: Successful brands have four elements

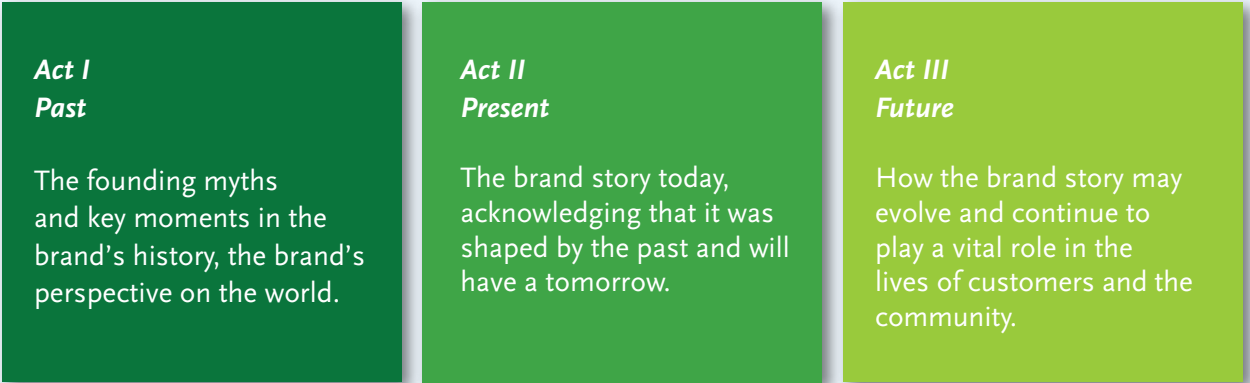
Based on ground-breaking market research, practical experience and insights from over 100 major branding programs, we have identified the following four elements as necessary for a successful brand story:

Brand Story Framework	
Setting:	The time, place and context.
Cast:	The brand as a character, including its role in the life of the audience, its relationships and responsibilities, and its history or creation myth.
Narrative Arc:	How the narrative logic unfolds over time, including actions, desired experiences, defining events, and the moment of epiphany.
Language:	The authenticating voice, metaphors, symbols, themes and leitmotifs of the brand.

Principle 3: Successful brand relationships exist across time

Traditional positioning is static. It stakes out an unwavering position at point of sale, ignoring the past and remaining unchanged in the future.

One of the unique aspects of Narrative Branding is that it does not try to ignore the past. It embraces the past as prologue to the future, to paraphrase William Shakespeare.

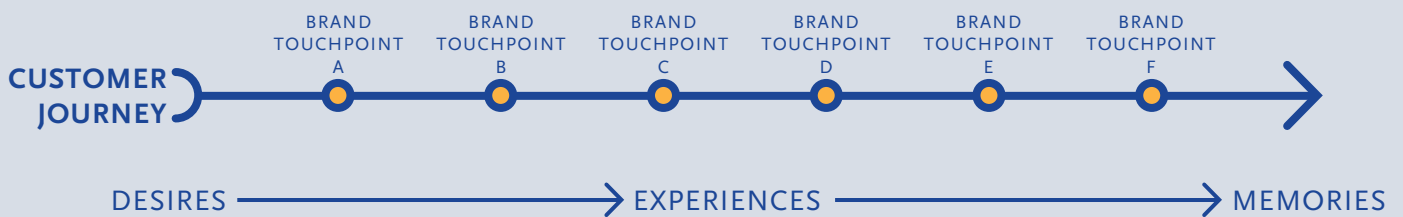


Your company doesn't stand still in today's dynamic marketplace. Neither should your brand.

Principle 4: Successful brands engage at every point of the customer journey

In traditional positioning, a single idea is communicated all places where consumers come into contact with the brand. The same message is repeated everywhere, every time, over and over again. It's like seeing the exact same road sign at the beginning, middle and end of your trip.

The customer journey represents a true departure from the road sign of positioning. Narrative Branding looks at the way people actually experience the brand in their lives, at every step of the way. This makes it possible to unfold the brand's story along the path that consumers actually follow, so it is relevant along their journey. It's like the difference between experiencing a Broadway musical vs. reading a road sign. Mapping the customer journey is the first tool that looks across time, across different media and across locations.

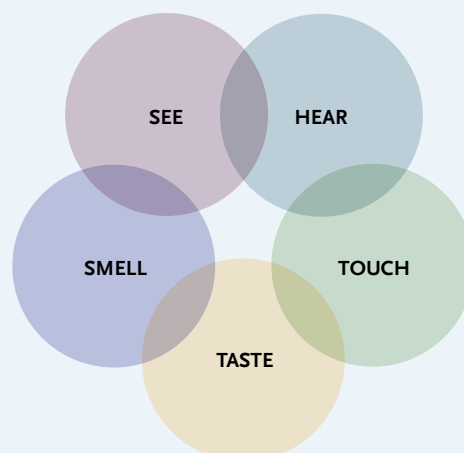


Principle 5: Successful brands engage all senses

Positioning is obsessed with “share of mind.” Narrative Branding starts with the proposition that it must engage all senses. That means sight, sound, taste, touch and smell.

Narrative Branding drops the one-way telling and becomes Living Theater. The “fourth wall” between the brand and the audience dissolves. Audiences participate in the unfolding narrative: they co-create it. Audiences are fully engaged with successful brands – emotionally and intellectually.

Narrative Branding includes the experiential elements from the start. In defining the brand's experience, strategy and creative execution are inseparable. The brand experience can range from the mouth feel of a toothpaste (texture, taste, the amount of foam) to the sophisticated service and environment of The Ritz-Carlton.



Summary

The following chart summarizes the difference between traditional positioning and Narrative Branding®:

Positioning	vs.	Narrative Branding®
a) Either Emotional or Rational		a) Emotional + Rational
b) Either Strategic or Creative		b) Strategic + Creative
c) Share of mind		c) Engaging all senses (sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell)
d) Point of sale		d) Acting on brand relationships across time
e) Differentiators		e) Role of the brand in a customer's life

As marketers begin embracing Narrative Branding they will discover how to unlock the full potential of new media, customer experiences and branded services – and how to achieve greater returns on investment in traditional media.

Old and inefficient constructs such as “positioning” and “share of mind” need to be mothballed. In their place are powerful new constructs that include co-creation, narrative arc, metaphors and customer journey.

It will not be easy. Embracing brand stories means not only adopting a completely new framework but also unlearning the past constructs. But the rewards of more engaging branding will be well worth the effort.

“A man’s mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.”

– Oliver Wendell Holmes



The Narrative Branding Company

For more information:

Randall Ringer has over 25 years of experience in brand strategy and market research for clients such as Samsung, Telefonica, Lenovo, Qwest and Gillette. rringer@versegroup.com

Michael Thibodeau is one of the world’s most acclaimed creative directors, having led creation of the MSN butterfly, UPS, CARE, Amtrak and many other award-winning designs. His most recent book is *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*. mthibodeau@versegroup.com

Verse Group® is the independent brand consultancy that combines practical marketing experience with a storyteller’s creativity. We help companies stage their brands through design, visual identity, strategy and branded experiences. Our multinational clients include: Samsung, Marriott, Coldwell Banker, Dex, Kodak, Days Inn, LexisNexis, GM, Covenant House and NXP Semiconductors.

Phone: 1-212-979-7500 www.versegroup.com

© Copyright 2008, Verse Group LLC. All rights reserved.