Business needs storytellers

Advertising explains facts. It turns features, which are facts about a product, into benefits, which are reasons for someone to try the product. It does this by telling a story.

Converting facts into a story has two parts: strategy and execution. Strategy includes knowing the facts about your product; simplifying the facts – which to leave out and which to emphasize – and positioning against competitor products, typically prepared by others in a creative brief; and determining the Unique Selling Proposition, the statement that separates your product from all others.

Developing an execution is the realm of the creative department. We translate the message so it makes people identify with the product, recognize its status, and desire it. We also give every client an identifiable look.

Section 1 also discusses verbal and visual thinking, the Four Levels of Advertising, and how to be seen in an environment of noisiness.
“Advertising is a game of tactics and strategy, not chance. When you bid for public response, be sure to play the trump card of effective design.” —Westvaco Inspiration for Printers, Number 194, 1953

“Promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement.” —Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

Chapter 1 Strategy vs Execution

Hank Seiden, the author of Advertising Pure and Simple, wrote, “A good practitioner of advertising can convince a logical prospect for a product or service to try it one time.” Let’s break this definition down. Convincing means a rational appeal to another person’s intelligence. Logical prospect means a person who is at the moment looking for such a product, has a need for it, and can afford to buy it. Try means a single use. Buy, on the other hand, indicates regular use: after having tried a product or service once, the product will be evaluated on its own merits.

Seiden concludes, “Advertising doesn’t make customers. Only products make customers.”

What we have here is a definition of advertising that limits its power. That makes the practice realistic and a lot more approachable.

Consumer, institutional, and business-to-business Advertising problems fall into three categories. Each has its own purpose and each is equally valuable to the business owner. Consumer advertising speaks to the end user of a product; institutional advertising speaks to investors, employees, and society in a public relations-style soft sell promoting good feelings about the sponsoring company; and business-to-business advertising promotes products from one business to another.

Information vs persuasion Advertising creatives convert information provided by the research and account management teams into persuasive arguments. We add value to a raw message by making it connect with an audience, by making it stand out, and by making it memorable. If we haven’t added the element of persuasion, we haven’t done our jobs. This is a simple yardstick to measure creative efficacy.

1. Headline as label: every rule has its exceptions. How do you say, “this business has many products”? This business card shows them all, making it interesting because of its lengthy text.
2. Headline as image: every rule has its exceptions. Self promotion for an ad agency shows, with elegant simplicity, the value they (and other agencies) add to achieve results.

3. Headline as concept: every rule has its exceptions. Apple’s presentation of the iPhone. This iPhone ad is not meant to drive it, drink it, etc. (see it at a store, visit its Web site, call its 800 number, test drive it, drink it, etc.).
4. Headline as concept: every rule has its exceptions. Business-to-business ads (or trade ads) induce sales to retailers or other businesses who use the product.

1. Strategy: Apple presented their product, computers with a different operating system, by showing pictures of people who saw or thought differently. This is Ansel Adams, who died in 1984, just as personal computers became available.
2. His ability to see and record nature more acutely than others is demonstrated in his photo (top) and another showing the same scene years later.

1. There are three main areas of advertising. Consumer ads induce a likely prospect to “try” it (see it at a store, visit its Web site, call its 800 number, test drive it, drink it, etc.).
2. Institutional advertising promotes the company rather than a particular product. The purpose of corporate advertising is to make the public think better of the company.
3. Business-to-business ads (or trade ads) induce sales to retailers or other businesses who use the product.

4. Logical thinking is linear (top). Creative thinking is non-linear and occurs in starts and stops in a circuitous route (above). Creative thought transcends the expected, so a wholly different result — represented by a perfect circle — can be realized.

On Strategy Original Ownable/Branded Compelling Quick Campaignable Memorable


Grey Healthcare Group's statement of goals posted in the reception area of their Manhattan headquarters.

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Make a single point per ad Marty Neumeier, editor of the excellent and defunct Critique magazine wrote, "The Modernists, in their attempt to sweep away all irrelevancies, turned clarity to simplicity. Artist Hans Hoffman felt that to achieve clarity we must 'eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak...'. Albert Einstein's formula for clarity was that 'everything should be made as simple as possible,' adding 'but no simpler...'."

The mind resists that which is confusing and embraces that which is clear. Clarity is achieved through predigestion of material. Predigestion implies a thorough going-over of material in order to extract the nutritional, beneficial attributes for others. If this sounds like hard work, it is.

The speed with which we have to get a message through is increasing to almost impossible measures. As Ernie Schenck wrote in CA magazine, "Nothing is fast enough any more. Nothing is short enough. Everything is too long... We've got maybe three seconds to get our hooks into somebody's very resistant and not exactly advertising-friendly brain... A brilliant concept, if it's anything, is a fast concept. In a heartbeat, a fast concept drives its hook into your cerebellum and that's that. The problem now is that the heartbeat has become something closer to that of a hummingbird on amphetamines than a person... It's almost impossible to describe how fast an idea has to be now."

With the speed necessary in today's environment, there simply isn't time for more than one idea per ad. But having a single idea itself isn't enough without a design that stops the reader. Having a single focal point is essential to breaking through readers' barriers. The focal point is most frequently an image with the headline and subhead acting as secondary elements.

Good design is not about addition, but subtraction.
If you want to catch a trout, don’t fish in a herring barrel.”

On research:
“As usual, your information stinks.” Frank Sinatra in a telegram to Time magazine

On knowing your audience:
“If you want to catch a trout, don’t fish in a herring barrel.” Ann Landers on singles bars

On focus groups:
“If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.” Henry Ford

Research + communication = knowing your client and audience
Being given research is not nearly as valuable as doing your own research. You will see things others have missed. Your creativity will pick out an anomaly and be able to work it into an idea that no one else would have noticed.

A few thoughts on clients: Make the product the star. Get to know your client. Learn his language, answer his questions, and make his message your own. Can you tell the client she owns the idea? If not, get another idea. Turn a product similarity into a unique point. Can you tell the client she owns the idea? If not, get another idea. Turn a product disadvantage into an advantage. A few thoughts on audiences: People don’t buy if they feel they are being sold to. Direct mail is called “junk mail,” e-mail pitches are called “spam,” guerrilla ads are called “graffiti.” Ads don’t work if they chase, harangue, or interrupt people. Advertising should seduce, it should attract. Be controversial. Your ads are like free samples of the product or service: entice! If you make them care first, people will read body copy. Be dramatic: people are in rush to see the news/Ferrari/naked lady/sports.

A few thoughts on satisfying both clients and audiences: It is your job to interpret: take the product, digest it, and spew out its good points. If you don’t add creativity and freshness, it won’t get added by anyone else. Be outrageous in the face of sameness. A creative trick is not a trick if it is more than a thought idea too soon. A creative trick is not a trick if it is more than a thought from left field, if it has something strongly to do with the product. If a part of an ad isn’t fun, replace it – it’s a sign of difficulty.

Bob Beleson is an advertising and liquor branding consultant. His rules for effective advertising:

- Have a specific marketing objective in mind.
- Segment the market and identify new user groups that your brand can own.
- Consider the competition. What are they saying?
- Have a relevant message and drive everybody else nuts to get the best possible results.
- Segment the market and identify new user groups that your brand can own.
- Consider the competition. What are they saying?
- Have a relevant message and drive everybody else nuts to get the best possible results.
The creative brief: problem as strategy

Creatives are usually given a creative brief, one or two pages of very specific information that the marketing and account people have prepared. A typical brief has one-sentence descriptions of audience, situation, opportunity, key customer insight, key customer benefit (positioning), promise, reasons to believe, brand character, core brand insight, and mandates like colors, naming requirements, and the deadline for creative development. The brief takes weeks for the account people to prepare. But the creative process often takes unexpected twists and turns – and minds are changed as studies begin to appear. We should consider a creative brief as a somewhat fluid document while “delivering the goodies” that it calls for. Your work will be evaluated by how well you have addressed the particulars in the brief. Having produced ads that respond to the brief’s specifics, persuasive arguments can be made for additional, alternative directions.

On getting ideas (Dom Marino and Deana Cohen, influential teachers at SVA): Love the product. Be sensible. Be trustworthy. Discover a fact and tell the public. Discovering a fact is not an ad. You must dramatize, interpret, and illustrate the fact to make it an ad. To test an idea, ask “Could an account executive have done this ad?”

Brainstorming judgment phrases that should never be used: That’s a terrible idea. Be reasonable. We tested that. The client isn’t ready for that. That’s too risky. We’ll never get it approved. We’ll never get it right. Be crazy: go too far and be brought back by someone else. We tried that. We don’t know that. The boss doesn’t like it. The public will laugh at us. You’ve got to be kidding. You can’t really do that.

We transform the problem defined in the brief into words and pictures that will resonate with consumers. One of the best ways to generate ideas is by brainstorming, a technique in which the goal is to discover as many solutions as possible. There are distinct rules to this process, which was invented by Alex Osborn of BBDO. Charles H. Clark, a creativity consultant in Kent, Ohio, codified the process as follows: 1 Select the problem and state it as an action, “How can we…,” “How to…” 2 Set a target number of solutions, with a minimum of 35, and a time limit, typically five minutes. 3 Suspend judgment or criticism of any kind during the brainstorming session. Judgment is negative and kills creativity. There will be time later to sift through the ideas and rank them. 4 Encourage and build off each others’ more unusual, peculiar ideas. Join two ideas together to make a new one. 5 Quality grows from quantity. Be an idea-generating machine.

Roger Von Oech, a creativity consultant, suggests:

1. Never state a problem the same way it was given to you. 2. Anything that is surprising is useful. 3. Play in your work: it will show in your results. 4. Be sure you have recognized the obvious. 5. Inspiration comes from regularly scheduled work sessions. 6. New ideas are resisted because no one likes change. Expect that resistance and be prepared for it.

1. How do you say “tattoos last forever”? The black and white images on the left fade away after a rain or a few weeks in the sun. The red type remains.

2. This is the initial document one New York ad agency uses in its creative department. It covers all the essential starting points for a new assignment.

3. No words necessary to show bright whiteness underfoot. Right Marlboros were positioned as a woman’s cigarette in the early 1950s.

4. Studio client really ask for this treatment? What is that in German? You can bet the creative brief did not mention cartoon panels or goofy comic book visual sound effects. This is the creative department’s contribution as it added its storytelling skills.

5. How do you show the importance of sound effects in print? Did the German recording add its storytelling skills?
Clearly identify the basic function of the product.

Identify other possible functions: cost, value, design size, softness, smell, USP, intangibles, quality, consumers’ product awareness.

Develop a good line of thinking in one or more directions and execute each clearly and persuasively. Draw from your own experience at all times. From what you know and have experienced. Make it believable.

When you get down to it, nobody knows what will work, so follow your own experience honestly.

Features and benefits

One of the fundamental communication assumptions behind successful advertising states that the “features” of a product or service can be expressed as “benefits.”

Features are the following description of features and benefits in his classes: “What is a feature? A feature is an attribute, usually physical, of a product or service. e.g. ‘contains retsin,’ or ‘overnight delivery.’

You create the benefit for any given feature by expressing—either verbally or visually or both—how or why that feature fulfills a need basic to the roles of the audience you’re addressing.

Sound simple? It is, assuming you approach the project having fully familiarized yourself with the product, and with a clear definition of who your audience is. A well-informed creative person with limited talent can produce acceptable advertising. To be truly successful, you must select the features of your product or service which offer the strongest benefits to your target audience.

“When you are lucky, the features of your product or service will be unique and offer benefits that are compelling and relevant. But more often you must cope with a ‘parity product’—one with essentially the same features as the others in its category. You must then seek out ‘advantages,’ and state those advantages uniquely and memorably.

Charles Whittier, longtime Creative Director at J. Walter Thompson/Chicago, suggested that there are ten basic questions you can ask to uncover the benefits suggested by the features for a product or service (see above right). Each of these questions directly or indirectly addresses one of our basic needs: food, shelter, health, love, and acceptance. But notice how dull advertising is when these questions are translated directly into advertising benefits, merely saying, ‘You will be happy when you use this!’

The idea must be big enough to campaign. Be prepared and able to defend the ad’s idea. The ad should reveal its creator as an exciting person. The idea must be big enough to campaign. What’s the second ad? What’s the twenty-fifth? Be prepared and able to defend the ad’s idea. Don’t make your ad sound important: that’s advertising-ese. Make ads that are personal, human, and accessible. Feel guilty if you’re not having fun. Make a decision and stick to it. Don’t compromise. Keep it pure.

Questions to uncover relevant features

Try to describe the product as if no one had ever used it.

What is it made of?

How well is it made?

What does it do?

How can it be identified?

What does it not work about it?

What movements are necessary to use it?

What does it cost?

How does it compare with the competition?

Radioactive words that should never be used. This is an incomplete list:

Hey (your city here)...

For people who...

Americas favorite...

NEW Finally... Introducing...

How to... Improved...

1. Seeing accurately is part of the process of defining features. Have childlike eyes and see freshly. Nothing is insignificant and nothing should be overlooked.

2. Converting and reinterpretting features into benefits takes both intellectual and emotional sensitivity. You need to understand their demographic and have your project yourself into the target users’ lives to feel their needs and wants.
Parity products  
Parity 1) Equality, as in amount, status, or value. 2) Equivalence, or resemblance. Parity products are products that have no real, substantive differences. For example, Tide powder detergent is identical to Cheer and half a dozen other brands. In order to make a particular brand stand out—for it to have a USP (see page 22)—the advertising agency often suggests changes in the product. Adding blue speckles and calling them “ZX2” is one. Packaging in a new spouted box is another. Even claiming that “this is the detergent for cold water” will work. What is important is recognizing that there are no inherent differences in your product, researching what your competitors are saying, and carving out a niche by developing something you can claim makes your product desirable. Say, by positioning it as the detergent for really old clothes, or for 100% cotton fabric, or for toddler’s clothes, or for loving spouses, or for a particular ethnic group, or for...

Positioning  
Positioning is the creation of a distinct identity in the marketplace so a product appeals to a defined segment of the public. No one is “everybody”: ads for everybody tend to be ignored for that very reason. So pick a segment of “everybody” and sell to them. Each of us is looking for a reflection of ourselves in ads, so the better you reveal your selected part of “everybody,” the better you show me to myself, the better I will respond.

The product: timeshares of a private jet. The image: a man resting on a remote beach. The positioning: a service to get the hardworking away faster so they can slow down sooner. The headline says: “It's not just a card. It's a choice. A choice to speed up your life. A choice to slow it down.”

A few thoughts on positioning:  
1. Research and define enemies: Who is our competition? What are they doing? 2. Use positioning to eliminate as much of the competition as you can. 3. Select a position only you can own. 4. Try on different roles. Be a mirror.
The Unique Selling Proposition (USP) A product or service will probably have several features worth talking about. But its advertising must select a single one that will separate it from its competitors in the minds of prospective buyers. This is known as the Unique Selling Proposition, a term that Rosser Reeves, of Ted Bates & Company, coined. The USP creates the brand image, brand personality, position, or promise. It is used repeatedly to make the one point: this brand is different (and beneficial). It is essential to understand that the benefit does not need to actually be unique, just that it is the only brand to be claiming the benefit from all others. Repetition is key: back in the day, callers to Reeves’ agency were greeted with, “Good morning. Ted Bates, Ted Bates, Ted Bates.”

It is essential to understand that the benefit does not need to actually be unique, just that it is the only brand to be claiming the benefit in its advertising. It must be the only one talking about that benefit.

It is up to the creative team and the marketing planners to decide which of the advantages a product offers should be given priority. It may be a color, an ingredient, or a social standing. Everything in the ad, in the campaign, and in every branding effort should promote that single objective.

Hank Seiden, writing in Advertising Pure and Simple, describes the USP: “Every successful product has got to have a Unique Advantage. Without it, the advertiser is wasting his money (unless he can overwhelm competition simply by outspending everyone, which in itself becomes the product’s Unique Advantage).” But before you can promote the Unique Advantage, you’ve got to isolate and recognize it in your product. Here are several ways to do so: 1 First and easiest is when the Unique Advantage is inherent in the product itself. It’s either visible or otherwise readily identifiable. The advertising must then point out why this unique feature will be to their benefit. 2 The Unique Advantage may be difficult to find, and once found, may not be an advantage at all, or may not even be uni-

Happy marriages, or How to work as a team Have one ad. Two people as a team are one. Work to build an idea together. Both members of the team must be 100% responsible for 100% of the ad. A design-savvy writer is as valuable as a verbally adept art director. Brainstorming is a game in which there are only two rules: 1 criticism is not allowed and 2 don’t be the one who lets an idea stop. For ideas you don’t like from your partner: look at it from a different point of view and “return it over the net.”

Phrases to keep creativity flowing: “what if…,” “let’s let that cook…,” and “these are not the words, but…” Be willing to abandon a toyed-with ad to protect its integrity. It is a question of perspective between being thought of as a prima donna and being a strong defender of your ideas. Recognize unwinnable situations – in clients, products, account executives – and get reassigned.
A Technique for Producing Ideas

Advertising expresses the life of the era from which it stems. “Advertising expresses the life of the era from which it stems.” Westvaco Inspiration for Printers, Number 200, 1955

One must be able to perceive relationships to make combinations. A new company came on the scene with a white tuna – a tremendous advantage for the product by repositioning it… In my experience, there are very few products for which an exclusive claim cannot be made or a new position found. Usually the agency that fails to do this is at fault; it is rarely the fault of the product. There are far more parity agencies than there are parity products.

So it is up to the creatives to play with a product, to feel it, to know it, and to recognize – or invent – what makes it special, which may be either a positive or a negative that is turned into a positive. A friend tells of buying a luxe Briggs umbrella in London. Pointing at a nearly invisible scar on the underside of the beautifully carved burled walnut handle, the salesman said, “I regret this small flaw, sir.” The salesman understood the value of the absence of machine made perfection in a finely-crafted, one-of-a-kind object. His observation and comment assured the sale.

What is the product? Use the mind to: Collect facts Be methodical and comprehensive Define how it feels, looks, and works Determine target user Identify what is good or bad about the product

1 Do you see distinction among matchbooks, or do you see a quaint advertising medium and kitschy art? These matchbook covers were designed by many and used often. Today’s advertising media is different, but it is similarly awaiting in content. How does your advertising stand out?

2 The most inane creative approach possible is to show a product simply as it is. There is no Christmas bonus waiting for the art director who says, “I’ve got a great idea: let’s show a lawnower in our lawnower ad!” Add something: what if a lawnower were a car? It would be adjustable to fit the driver. A feature of this lawnower is its adjustable handle. It is turned into a benefit by comparing it with a car’s adjustable steering wheel.

1 The idea will appear on the afterthought of the sun. Take a brief period, an afternoon, maybe a day, to let your mind digest the material. Set it aside. Adapt it to the practical and specific conditions in which it must exist.

_Method, Step 5_ Refine the young, fragile idea so it is useful and truly satisfies the problem. Adapt it to the practical and specific conditions in which it must exist.

What is the benefit? Use the mind to: Evaluate facts Determine the position How have similar products been positioned?

Can their positions be co-opted? What position envelops theirs? Can an opposite position be taken?
One-shot vs campaign advertising

Coming up with a single ad that has a clear point made memorably is not an easy task. Creating a one-shot ad requires a compelling idea, fresh visualization, and clear, distinctive typography. Challenging as making a great one-shot ad is, clients almost always need an idea that is big enough to be freshly interpreted dozens or even hundreds of times over the course of a multi-year campaign. Such an idea, an idea that is campaignable, is called, naturally enough, a Big Idea. Creatives who can develop the Big Idea are in a minority of advertising professionals. Their skill is an extremely valuable commodity.

A campaign is an extended series of ads that are connected and unified by a common theme or idea. The theme can be expressed by maintaining a consistent attitude through the ad series (“Ugly is only skin deep and we’re proud of being ugly”), or by repeating one headline (or by making only slight alterations to a headline), or by using the same design throughout. A campaign must cross over media, as well. An idea might be wonderful for TV because it requires movement, but it must be translatable into print and be just as potent.

Ads in a campaign are never seen by the public in a cluster, the way they are presented on a critique wall. They are placed in publications or broadcast in intervals, so that repeated viewing makes an accumulated impression. Days or weeks may go by between viewings, so the ads must have a certain repetitiveness to them.

An advertising campaign can be made of scores of ads before it is retired and a new approach is developed in response to a changing business environment. Presenting a campaign usually consists of three print ads and two or three television commercials. These quantities suggest the campaignability of the Big Idea.

“One-shot is one-shot. A startling demonstration of an insect central service is a one-shot ad. The billboard has stickiness in the shape of letters, which, over time, glue passing bugs and make the message visible. But can this be done in, say, a dozen permutations? Or is this installation about the end of the road for the idea – as well as for the bugs?”

1 Though this is a great idea that this toothpaste is natural and refreshing – and the ads are beautifully realized, this campaign is really multiple iterations of the same ad. If you cannot easily imagine what the tenth (or hundreth) version of the ad will be, you are not working with a Big Idea.

“Aeroxon Flycatcher” A startling demonstration of an insect central service is a one-shot ad. The billboard has stickiness in the shape of letters, which, over time, glue passing bugs and make the message visible. But can this be done in, say, a dozen permutations? Or is this installation about the end of the road for the idea – as well as for the bugs?

3 A campaign must have similarities, if not exact identicities, in attitude, purpose, and design. Three ads from a 1959 Olivetti series show the product, a well-designed typewriter, as an evolutionary step forward in the history of writing. The layout changes, but the space, form, colors, and transparency remain constant.

“Big ideas are so hard to recognize, so easy to kill. Don’t forget that, all of you who don’t have them,” said John “Jock” Elliott, Jr., on his retirement as the chairman of Ogilvy & Mather International in 1982. “I was a pretty good copywriter, but not good enough. I could execute campaigns, but never came up with the big ideas, so I went into a less demanding kind of work. I became an account man.”

1 A one-shot ad is an idea that can’t be realised more than once. This combination of tires and telephone cord, promoting the manufacturer’s call center, is wonderful in its simplicity, but it can’t be repeated.

2 The unique attributes of the product and humor are used to make this one-shot ad.

“A startling demonstration of an insect central service is a one-shot ad. The billboard has stickiness in the shape of letters, which, over time, glue passing bugs and make the message visible. But can this be done in, say, a dozen permutations? Or is this installation about the end of the road for the idea – as well as for the bugs?”
An identifiable look for every client

How can you make your advertising stand out from the ordinary, the work that we have all trained ourselves to ignore in all media? Understanding consumers and what they already see is part of the solution. Persuading clients to risk their advertising budget is another. But it starts with us, with our willingness to take risks and develop a look for each client for whom we work. It is a significant part of branding, or creating a consistent visual approach for all a company’s materials that come before the public. A weak visual personality handicaps a branding effort: if a discernable character isn’t recognized, your brand is seriously handicapped. A strong marketing character requires the risk of being different.

Get a message noticed by manipulating elements in an unexpected way. Abstraction of imagery and type produces new design solutions that a client can own without making the core idea unreadable.

Developing a distinctive logo requires abstraction of both the type and imagery. This student’s project develops three variations of a letter and object translation in assigned ways to help see similarities of shape.

1 Neville Brady for Nike, 1988: uses scale contrast of Franklin Gothic, print grows from TV commercial with moving type: young, hip audience.
2 Amtrak’s campaign picks up the look of old railroad posters from the 1940s, which reinforces already existing ideas about scenic rail travel.
3 Torn paper and a loose painting style define this 1964 ad. Opposite: Kurt Schwitters’ 1924 ad for a writing ink manufacturer broke the design rules of the day. Schwitters was an artist associated with the Dadaists and helped found the Circle of New Advertising Designers in 1927.