

# SUCCESS OF STORYTELLING IN BRAND BUILDING: LOOKING THROUGH THE LENS OF NEUROSCIENCE

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**Abstract--** Neuroscience has grown in bounds in the recent decade, but it is yet to spread fast into the realm of marketing mainly because of dearth of trained researchers in cognitive neuroscience. Understanding the cognitive processes of the human brain will allow the business to obtain accurate information about customers' decision-making process, which will help organizations to formulate STP and to develop various marketing engagement strategies for long-term sustainability of a business. In neuro marketing, customer experience allows the marketer to connect with customers innovatively beyond tangible touch points, beyond brick mortar stores, through smartphones or through tablet apps. The general understanding or overview of consumer decision-making process is not possible to get via conventional marketing research methods (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, focus groups). This thought is mainly supported by the logic that consumer or customer cannot (or do not want to) fully explain their liking and disliking process when explicitly asked (Calvert & Brammer, 2012).

**Keywords—**Story, Lens, Neuroscience.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Neuroscience has grown in bounds in the recent decade, but it is yet to spread fast into the realm of marketing mainly because of dearth of trained researchers in cognitive neuroscience. Understanding the cognitive processes of the human brain will allow the business to obtain accurate information about customers' decision-making process, which will help organizations to formulate STP and to develop various marketing engagement strategies for long-term sustainability of a business. In neuromarketing, customer experience allows the marketer to connect with customers innovatively beyond tangible touch points, beyond brick mortar stores, through smartphones or through tablet apps. The general understanding or overview of consumer decision-making process is not possible to get via conventional marketing research methods (e.g., interviews, questionnaires, focus groups). This thought is mainly supported by the logic that consumer or customer cannot (or do not want to) fully explain their liking and disliking process when explicitly asked (Calvert & Brammer, 2012).

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Currently, brand building approaches engage the process of storytelling. Storytelling for brand building has been found to be very effective strategy. The modern brand desires to be much more than visual consistency, it needs to be social and have more human touch. The effect and magnitude of effectiveness of various marketing engagement strategies may be evaluated by analyzing customers' brain activity resulting from different factors of advertisement, product and service attributes. By accessing the brain's reactions mainly via ECG and fMRI researchers are able to better understand emotions that are felt during the consumers' buying process. With this background, the present study makes an attempt to probe into the business strategy of digital entrepreneurs through neuromarketing and how the human brain responds to digital media strategies.

Emotional engagement is very important in marketing research. With respect to emotional engagement, *emotional valence* (how pleasant or unpleasant the emotion is) and *emotional arousal* (how calming or exciting the emotion is; Bradley, Greenwald, Petry, & Lang, 1992; Russel, 1980) are the two most important determiners of action. Generally, emotions are expressed at three different stages: individual's *subjective experience, his expressive behavior, and through his physiological changes* (Ekman, 1992). So, in order to understand brain engagement in marketing, it is indispensable to study emotional responses to marketing stimuli and therefore record the neurophysiological responses (i.e. brain activity) associated with the subjective emotional response, (Ekman, 1992). Human emotions are strong mediators with respect to a consumer's processing of the incumbent messages, interpreting and exhibiting cognitive responses to selling messages. When exposed to some stimuli, and the individual is getting ready for some response, it implies that there is a physiological pattern for each emotion.

The aim of brand positioning is not only to let the target audience know how a brand is unique from their competitors, at the same time they also try to explain how the brand needs to make them be perceived it in a specific way. The art of storytelling can immensely help marketers to achieve that objective. Designing the narrative, the story, the plot, and characters of an established brand story, prompts an emotional response from the audience and helps them to associate with the product. The emotion that is targeted among audience depends on the character of the brand. The story might trigger some positive emotions like joy, interest, amusement, freedom or passion; or some negative emotions like tension, concern, nervousness, jealousy, or irritation to which the brand provides places itself as a solution provider. There are also cases where complex set of emotions are targeted. Brand stories can generate associations between the consumer and the brand, sending transmedia brand stories may reinforce the bond, leading to positive attitudes about the brand. Of late, brand story has appeared as a momentous marketing construct (Woodside, 2010; Digles, 2011). According to Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) brand narratives comprises of plots, characters and relevant outcomes. Consumers are now extending their limits, displaying higher interactivity and generating their own 'branded' content (Goh et al, 2013).

The present conceptual paper attempts to understand the role of storytelling in brand building; it tries to establish the relationship between neuroscience of storytelling, it explores why brand storytelling is growing, what kind of stories consumers like to hear, and finally addresses what are the various kinds of stories available to a storyteller?

## II. BRAIN AND BRANDING: NEUROSCIENCE OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling has slowly become the ultimate tactic in advertising for many brands and marketers. It has been seen that brain studies have revealed some very impressive effects of branding. A lot of it has to do with the fact that marketers have been telling a good story, using an exciting yet accessible brand persona that people easily relate to. Storytelling has been engaging listeners and readers for millennia, and Coke figured out how to make that work to their advantage. Researchers have shown that storytelling reinforces the associations consumers have to brands. Marketers apply storytelling to branding.

Nonetheless, we know that for most people, in general, the right side of the brain is central for processing the emotional content of language, for things like rhythm and intonation in language, and for understanding the context of speech. The left side of the brain is central for processing the literal sense of language, and also for processing grammar and vocabulary. What is especially important here is that regardless of whether a function is more closely associated with the right hemisphere or the left, the articulation of the result is a left-hemisphere activity for most people. In this way, the left hemisphere acts as the brain's "spokesperson."

It has been found that consumer storytelling theory can be constructed from memory systems research as well (Bettman, 1979; Tulving, 1985). From reviews of the theoretical and empirical literature, Tulving (1985) provides a ternary classification scheme that consists of procedural, semantic, and episodic memory monohierarchical subsystems. Tulving (1985) calls attention to the fact that episodic memory links with self-knowing consciousness. "Tulving's assessment fits well with Weick's (1995) assessment that people make sense of events, outcomes, as well as about self by telling themselves and others stories about what they have experienced. According to Weick (1995), all sense making is retrospective and based on storytelling to self and others by the storyteller. Different studies have shown that reading or listening to a story can alter beliefs, even if the characters and occurrences described in the narrative are fictitious (Appel et al. 2010; Appel et al. 2007; Green et al. 2000). However, the more the story is actualized the higher the effect of changing audience's beliefs is (Green et al. 2000). Following Mazzocco et al. (2010), highly transportable stories have a higher impact on audience's emotional beliefs than can be achieved by logical arguments. Emotional aspects and feelings can be changed by identification with certain characters of the story, wishful identification, similarity, and liking (Moyer-Gusé 2008). Furthermore, an experiment conducted by Gonzáles (2006) provides evidence that reading olfaction-related words yields significant brain activations. Prior Knowledge, Need for Closure and Self-Referencing

The empirical study indicates that the more prior knowledge or experience relevant to the themes of the story an individual has, the better the transportation into the story is (Green 2004). As Bartlett notes, people review and construe new situations by getting back to their prior knowledge. As Roets et al. (2011) validate in their empirical study, the five main items that measure the need for closure are: order, predictability, decisiveness, ambiguity and closed-mindedness. In the context of crowd funding, surprising stories have been found to have the best effect on individuals with a high need for closure. Two experiments by Escales (2007) confirm that self-referencing in the narrative context leads to a high persuasion of the story, inducing positive feelings and fewer counterarguments.

Jonathan Crossfield in his article (2019) said that being human we automatically respond to stories or are 'programmed' for it. Effective story telling increases the neural activity of our brain. 'Emotional marketing' is a key

factor here, as it involves both amygdala and hippocampus of the brain which controls the memory and emotion of human being (Foster, 2019). Rodriguez, G. (2017, July) reported that interplay of cortisol, dopamine and oxytocin creates an effect on brain by maintaining the level of attention, arousal and generate philanthropic behaviour in consumers. Story telling involves 'neural coupling' which activates parts of brain thereby helps in the identification process or 'mirroring' between the stimulus and the subject. Broca's area of the frontal lobe which controls motor speech, Wernicke's area of temporal and parietal lobe of the brain which controls sensory speech is activated while processing the information as portrayed in the story (Schroeder, 2018). According to Arbib (2012) two main neural systems have been cited to understand an individual's activity in processing a story. The mirror neurons situated in sensory motor system helps to do that. Yuan et al. (2018) in their investigation reported that humans use various meaningful techniques to express descriptive thoughts regarding their past experiences. Speech, imitation and drawing are most common modes among them. Through functional magnetic resonance they identified the particular brain areas which are responsible to mediate these three sensory motor processes in narrative communication of a story. Each of these types of techniques activates the 'mentalizing network' including the temporoparietal junction (TPJ), posterior superior temporal sulcus (STS) and posterior cingulate cortex. They conducted conjunction analysis which reported these three areas of brain are cross-modal 'narrative hub' that exceeds the method of transmission. The participation of these areas in chronicle presentation proposes that human beings embrace 'intrinsically mentalistic and character-oriented' outlook while concentrating on storytelling regardless of the modes (speech, imitation and drawing).

### **III. NEUROSCIENCE OF MARKETING: BUILDING TRUST ONLINE**

Neuroscience marketing is a concept of stimulating and involving brain of the prospective consumer in their decision making process regarding the purchase of a particular product or a service. Couchman H. (2017) in an online article reported that 90% of our purchasing resolutions are determined by our subconscious mind. Ciprian et al. (2009) depicted that the urge for better and effective marketing strategy gave birth to the 'neuromarketing' concept combining both 'neurology and marketing' (Hammouet al., 2013). Mayer et al. (1995) described trust as an inclination of an individual or a group to be receptive to the steps of another side irrespective of situations. Trust is an important factor for internet based shopping as risk taking is inevitable (Köksal and Penez, 2015; Utz et al., 2013). Mahapatra and Sreekumar (2012) in their investigation reported that factors like 'trust, testing product quality or feature before purchase, exposure, easy reference/assistance in making purchase, product variety hard to find elsewhere, immediate need gratification, ease of navigation, shopping experience' etc regulates our online purchasing behaviour. Interplay between neuroscience of consumer behavior and consumer psychology have been proved to be beneficial for the leading organizations like Google, Amazon, Procter & Gamble, Glaxo etc. (Feuer, S., 2019). Saini and Khandelwal (2019) in their research reported that 'trust' is an important predictor of online consumer behavior. They also mentioned that 'e-loyalty' plays an important role and organizations must try more professionally to handle that. Various researches have been done to identify the key strategies for building trust online. Uses of 'trustmarks' of particular brand on website (Thompson et al., 2019), 'portal association' and 'satisfied customer endorsement' (Lim et al., 2006), rich contents, consumer engagement through effective both

way communications, ‘live videos’ of the products, consistency, customer feedback, reliable links to the websites, accountability for the brand, more intensive research on the market demand and target consumers can inculcate better result for building online trust and increase customer loyalty (McGrath, 2018). Bowen and Bowen (2019) in their research emphasized on ‘trust-commitment relationship’ with the customers which includes better website blueprint, maintenance of customer privacy and security, more emphasis on effective communication and interaction creates behavioural changes among consumers and make them more loyal towards the brand.

#### **IV. STORYTELLING AND BRANDING: WHY BRAND STORYTELLING IS GROWING**

Story is undoubtedly a powerful tool in human communication, and brands, especially iconic brands, have been using stories as a great way to convey brands’ value and what the companies stand for (Fog, et al., 2004). Whether real or fictional, those stories provide meaning to brands and reflect brand’s core value. Brands use their stories as a platform to perform a special kind of story – a myth (Holt, 2003), and what people want to believe in are myths and stories (Kelly T, 2006). For the brand to have a great impact, it should be built based on clear values that are embedded within the core of the company. The more stories told about the company that supports its values, the more they will nurture the company’s core story. Brand core story helps ensure the consistency of company communications and messages, thus differentiating it from competitors (Fog, et al., 2004). Stories have positive influence on both internal and external brand perceptions (Guber, 2007)

Fog et al. (2004) present the model which outlines the relationship between brand, brand stories, and the target group when brand storytelling is used to communicate within the company (internally) and between the company and consumers (externally). In this model, Fog et al. emphasize the importance of the emotional bond created between brand, stories, and target group. The brand creates an emotional connection with consumers, the stories touch consumers (target group) emotion and the target group emphasizes with the company (Fog, et al., 2004, p. 22). The target group for brand stories telling could be internal, in which the stories are used to communicate brand’s core stories with employees; or external for communicating with consumers. For this thesis, the researcher will only study the external brand storytelling between brand and consumers.

The research work conducted by several other scholars in consumer behavior (e.g., Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Hirschman, 1986; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Padgett & Allen, 1997) and in associated fields of human inquiry (Bruner, 1990; Mitroff & Kilman, 1976; Orr 1990; Schank & Ableson, 1977; Zukier, 1986) maintains the view that “. . . people think narratively rather than argumentatively or paradigmatically”(cf. Weick 1995; Wells, 1989). Stories and storytelling are central to achieving a deep understanding of consumer psychology (cf. Escalas & Stern, 2003; Holt, 2004). Holt (2003) interprets storytelling in television commercials as manifestations of primary forms, that is, archetypes.

It should be noted that research on storytelling (e.g., see Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Fournier, 1998; McKee, 2003; Schank, 1990; Zaltman, 2003) is valuable because it helps shed light on and intensify the knowledge of how

people resolve contradictions elicited in their minds by unbalanced states (ranging from a vague conscious feeling of unease to awareness of a problem or opportunity arising from an inciting incident).

## V. METHOD

Our research method is a structured literature review. The study endeavours to develop insights, critical reflections, future study suggestions and answer few research questions. As literature reviews are regarded as one of the most useful tool in most scientific disciplines, and also as a relevant information tool in conceptual paper development. We conduct a search on ProQuest, google scholar, EBSCO and other journal aggregators for the terms "storytelling," "brand building," "neuroscience of storytelling," and related terms to identify published research on these issues. We read and analyze these articles and classify them based on their definitions of the mentioned terms. We club the literature for various research papers to reach answers to our research questions. Methodically, we organize the findings and create the flow of the paper.

With this background the present paper aims at addressing the following research questions.

1. How does story telling work for brand positioning?
2. What is the neuroscience behind storytelling?
3. What kind of stories consumers like to hear?
4. What are the various kinds of stories available to a storyteller?

## VI. FINDINGS

### ***RQ 1: How does story telling work for brand positioning?***

With a structure that keeps it together and engages with listeners (Lundqvist, et al., 2012), brand storytelling brings about lots of valuable benefits for brand communication.

Firstly, storytelling catches consumers' interest and attention (Escalas, 2004) and builds their memories. Stories are crafted strategically around a plot, communicating one clearly focused message (Fog, et al., 2004) that is valued, either positively or negatively, by the audience. With its tactical nature (Katz, 2016), stories help audience see, hear, taste, smell and feel brands' messages; and build their memory. As stories are stored in memory in various ways: factually, visually and emotionally, consumers will highly more likely to remember them (Mossberg & Johansen, 2006).

Secondly, storytelling is a natural motivator, generating positive feelings in consumers, both in general and in term of the brand image. A study conducted by Escalas (2004) has shown that advertisements with story content raise more positive emotions, such as upbeat or warm feeling. Comparing to other regular types of advertisement, stories are often less critically analyzed and raise less negative thoughts in the target audience (Escalas, 2004) For the brand itself, storytelling connects brands with consumers on a more personal level and builds relationships. It creates customers' expectation and influence customers' evaluation of the brand and its product or service (Lundqvist, et al., 2012). By integrating storytelling in advertisements, positive features of the brand's products or services could be conveyed to audience without being perceived as commercials. Studies also show that by sharing a

story, people are more likely to be persuaded than data, facts or figures (Aaker, 2014). On the other hand, stories add unique associations to a brand, which makes them a value-adding asset and increase customer brand equity (Aaker, 1991). Moreover, the episodic nature of a story will enhance the likelihood of its being passed along from consumers to consumers (Fog, et al., 2004). Brand is more interesting to talk about when there are some stories presented, and in this case, consumers are more likely to become the ambassadors of the brand they like (Guber, 2007)

New technologies, such as innovations in virtual reality (VR)(Kim& Forsythe, 2009; Muzellec, Lynn, & Lambkin, 2012; Shih, 1998) and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) (Cavusgil & Evirgen, 1997), provide inspiring opportunities to enhance customer engagement in an evolving technological environment in which analogue and digital communication modes vie for attention. VR holds the promise to create a truly immersive storytelling experience.

Both online and offline marketing research posits that a story captures a storyteller's account of an event or a sequence of events, leading to a transition from an initial state to a later state or outcome (Bennett & Royle, 2004). Marketing research also explores how stories engage and transform audiences (Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, & Carlson, 2017).

### ***RQ 2: What is the neuroscience behind storytelling?***

It has been observed that over the past decade the application of neuroscience to marketing, and in particular to the consumer psychology of brands, has gained popularity in the academic and the corporate world. Within the field of marketing, storytelling has been used for years by marketers as a means to communicate brand stories to customers. Especially in recent years, when social media and content marketing have grown explosively, brands are incorporating more and more storytelling into their marketing strategies, in various forms such as videos, social media posts, and news articles.

For thousands of years, stories have always been one of the most prevalent parts of human history. Stories shape our perception and understandings of the world (Weick, 1995) and the way we index, store and retrieve information (Woodside, 2010). Coming with many indices that cause implicit and explicit awareness and emotional connection in the minds of viewers or listeners (Woodside, 2010), a compelling story is stated to be the best resource to persuade and engage with audiences (McKee, 2003).

Stories have the power to motivate and to persuade people of ideas and propositions by appealing to their emotions and ability for empathy (Hsu 2008). Numerous studies have shown that storytelling is an effective tool for persuading the audience. For example Fenger et al. (2015) show that consumers who are not open for a new product become more positive when storytelling is applied. Appel et al. (2010) discovered that a person can be better convinced by stories with high emotional content than by stories with low emotional content. DeSteno et al. (2004), conducted a study and found out that persuasion will augment if the emotional frame of the story content is equivalent to the emotional state of the audience. Furthermore, Baesler et al. (1994) demonstrate that evidence described in a statistical and vivid way is more persuasive in the long-term, while evidence described in the form of a story is more persuasive in the short-term. Lundqvist et al. (2012) also conducted a study to discover that dealing

with well-crafted company stories illustrates that people have positive relations with the brand when stories are concerned. Moreover, this study underlines an increase in the audience's willingness to pay once storytelling is used (Lundqvist et al. 2012). Storytelling of such enactments includes conversations between consumers and brands on both unconscious and conscious levels of thinking (Wang et al., 2007; Zaltman, 2003).

It should be noted that for branding, the importance of latest discoveries in neuroscience is that physiological findings are steady with findings in business research and with ordinary experience. A sound empirical foundation for using a strong persona in brand storytelling can be noticed whether we study physical structures, physiological processes, or behavioral outcomes.

### ***RQ 3: What kind of stories consumers like to hear?***

Storytelling is an art of emotionally connecting customers to a particular brand through establishing a bond of trust and loyalty. It activates the human brain. Through this process consumer identifies themselves with the characters of the story, hence an emotional identification is born. Dessart (2019) mentioned that it is a major task for the marketing team to develop advertisement which the consumer would find relevant but not irritating as they tend to analyze the description without much focus on its critical approach (Weick, 1995). According to Samantha Owens Pyle (2019, January) the end user appreciates the authentic, emotionally connected, true stories where they can find similarity with their existing world. Identification with the characters of the story is a prime factor that influences the consumer's mind (Van et al., 2013). Maximum consumers like to hear stories related to common people not celebrities (Mortimer, N. 2018). Human tendency is to connect through stories which are associated with their biological and cultural backdrop (Boyed, 2009; Niles, 1999). Wise and proper uses of 'archetypes', audio-visual aids also keeps the consumer attached to a particular brand and understand it. Description of archetypes helps to build a strong emotional association between the brand and its users (Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010; Nelson, 2018). According to Jung (2014) archetypes leads the way 'through the cycle of life' referring to one's 'collective unconscious' (Sanders and Van Krieken, 2018). Consumers also pays attention to the stories which make them feel happy (Woodside, 2010). Stories illustrated through visual narrative art (VNA) are something that consumers and storyteller both find interesting over and above as it incorporates unconscious aspects of pleasurable feelings and desires though an integrated emotional touch (Megehee and Woodside, 2010). In this era of modern marketing process a consumer's mind is bombarded with multiple information on different product ranges at a time, making them more confused in their approach towards a specific brand. Product endorsement which banks on adding values of experience to a brand are more admired by customers (Khan and Rahman, 2015).

### ***RQ 4: What are the various kinds of stories available to a storyteller?***

DeTore (2018) expressed that there are plenty of marketing strategies available to engage and connect customer. Brand marketing can narrate the barriers that it is presently handling with a promise to recreate better experience in future. Foster (2019) Stories representing a brand must be unique in nature that segregates one form other contestants in the same market. Utilitarian stories which vows to make life comfortable and less complicated, psychologically connected authentic stories helps in better acknowledgement of the brand and righteous stories



leads to up gradation of the thought process for bringing in a positive change in the existing world of mere consumerism (Foster, 2019). Godfrey (2019) articulated 7 types of stories that the modern brand uses for marketing. 'The underdog' which narrates the winning stories and are mostly used by nonprofit and newly developed organizations. Stories related to solution of problems and descriptions of the achievements are termed as 'the quest'. Stories associated with facing the odd, sudden and uncertain situations and sailing through it are categorized as 'the journey', here the products or brand do not get to choose the state of affair but has to function according to it. Stories describing the procedure of realizing a brand's optimum capability are termed as 'rags to riches' where the journey from a beginner to a specialist is narrated. In 'comedy' style, stories related to a particular community, associations and relations are portrayed and this is only possible when the brand and its customer identifies well with each other. The 'tragedy' stories serve the purpose of giving caution to the end users. The tales of reincarnation and coming back are described through 'rebirth' stories which may start with a poignant note but ends with happiness and satisfaction. Rao M. (2018) in his article explained the four types of stories classified by management guru Indranil Chakraborty. Indranil defines "A story is a fact wrapped in context and delivered with emotion". In 'connection story' the audiences establish relationship with the speaker through the exchange of information regarding their personality, values, belief system, ups and downs, satisfaction and zeal. A behavioural change in consumers are tried to bring through 'influence stories' where the marketing policy must accept the negative conception they have from their earlier experience. The 'clarity story' involves four pertinent factors like previous circumstances and outcome, difference and its result. 'Success stories' describes how the barriers and problems were resolved through the uses of the particular brand and this can be best done with real life case studies. 'Anecdote circles' can be used to group participation framed to evoke stories from others with the help of expert techniques. 'Story triggering' is another process to bring out stories from the participants. Bryon (2012) in a research on tourism storytelling reported that tour guide engage themselves in various kinds of storytelling techniques. They may narrate more romantic, positive, pleasurable facts of the place, when others may like to be more real life oriented narrating even all the black sides. Consumer's attitude towards a particular brand determines its future growth. In this context Koll et al., (2010) reported that assessment of customer's knowledge and attitude through 'free association', 'collage making' and proper narration of stories are important ways that organizations must adopt which results in holistic progress and development of a brand.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The present conceptual paper attempts to understand the role of storytelling in brand building; it tries to establish the relationship between neuroscience of storytelling, it explores why brand storytelling is growing, what kind of stories consumers like to hear, and finally addresses what are the various kinds of stories available to a storyteller.

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