Chapter 4

Lessons from the Storytellers

Crafting a Backstory People Care About

Did you know that every banana has an untold story? It is not that anyone tries to keep it a secret, but as most bananas make their journey from the farm where they were grown to the local store near you, the story behind how they arrived there is usually lost. Most fruits are like this, making their way anonymously from around the world to your local market. Fruit is faceless.

If you are like most people, you probably just pick up your bananas, make sure they are not overripe or dented, and then buy them. Bananas are commodity products. You don't have a deep emotional attachment to bananas, you are just buying something you need. This is the problem with commodity products: they are low involvement. When you have a product like this, how can you differentiate yourself from your competitors, who make almost exactly the same thing? You might argue that taste or quality is the way to stand out, but who can really taste the difference between two of the same variety of bananas? Remember, we're talking about a low-involvement product here.

There *is* one interesting fact about bananas, though, that makes them different from many other fruits. People have some brand associations with bananas, which means they are not as completely faceless as other fruits may be. Chiquita, Dole, and Del Monte are all household names of brands that sell bananas. Why do bananas have these brand associations while most other fruits don't? Chiquita deserves much of the credit for this, as they were the first to start branding bananas back in the 1940s with an iconic brand character called Miss Chiquita, a catchy jingle, and recognizable stickers on all its bananas. At a time when most fruit was sold anonymously, these stickers were a big deal. They attached a brand to a commodity product and made people aware that they were buying a *Chiquita* banana.

For decades, Miss Chiquita kept Chiquita at the top of the banana category, but then in the 1970s Chiquita's market share started to slip for a variety of reasons, including the EU Banana Regime of 1993.[1] Nearly a decade later, another series of events and small controversies led to Chiquita filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and opened the door further for competitors to gain even more ground. Today, Miss Chiquita is still the face of the brand, but the company is fighting several legal battles, facing a fading brand relevancy, and suffering a loss of its market share to Dole, the company's biggest competitor.

What allowed Chiquita to rule the banana market for decades was not just its ability to produce bananas people liked (most producers can do that), but its ability to put the recognizable face of Miss Chiquita on them. The reason for the slippage, as we might have expected with this icon based on what we learned in Chapter 2, is that with a character spokesperson there are some real limitations in a world where con-

[1]This is a really interesting story, but not really relevant to marketing. To see the full story, search Google for "EU Banana Regime."

sumers are demanding more authenticity. Miss Chiquita is no longer enough. But could any other brand really do better than her to create an emotional bond between a consumer and something as perishable as a banana?

Bringing Bananas to Life

Dole has found an innovative answer to this question by connecting their customers to a very unlikely place, a farm called Don Pedro located deep in the arid plains of La Guajira in northern Colombia. This farm, like hundreds of others like it, is part of Dole's Certified Organic Banana Program. There are real farmers working on this farm, living real lives that are affected by the way that they interact with Dole and grow the bananas that the company ships around the world. In itself, this arrangement is not unique; however, what usually happens is that the human story behind the growing, picking, packaging, and shipping of fruit is lost as the fruit travels from a real farm somewhere in the world to a two-level display unit in a grocery store in suburbia.

Dole has found a way to humanize this scenario. Each banana produced as part of Dole's program has a three-digit "farm code" printed on it that allows anyone to go online and see details about the farm that grew the banana. As Frans Wielemaker, director of sourcing for Dole describes it, the program was built to "increase transparency and thus consumer confidence." The Certified Organic Banana Program brought the story behind Dole's bananas to life in a much more powerful way than any fictional character wearing bananas on her head ever did.

Proof of the results of the program came in a small way in June 2007, when Dole published the following excerpted letter to the employees of Don Pedro Farm (and their response) on the companion blog to the program.

05/24/2007 12:58 PM
From: Amanda Shepard
Country: USA

Comments: Thank you for what you are doing. Thank you for giving consumers the opportunity to provide aid and hope with our choices. Thank you also for this site that allows us to get a glimpse of the lives of those growing the bananas and the beautiful land on which the bananas are grown. I will think of the people and the beautiful landscape at Don Pedro Farm every time I eat a Dole organic banana. Be so proud of what you are doing!

To: Amanda Shepard
With all our appreciation: Finca Don Pedro, Colombia
Ms. Shepard:

Today, at 6:05 AM, I personally read your e-mail to all our employees in Don Pedro Farm in La Guajira Colombia. They are very happy and very proud about your words. It was a different way to start their working day, somebody from a foreign country, thousands of miles north of their home town sending a beautiful and inspiring message to them, was reason enough to consider today as their better day at work ever.

Luis Monge, Organic Program, DFFI

The rest of this blog post features real responses from more than a dozen workers at Don Pedro Farm, including photos of each worker and

a personal note of thanks. It is a powerful testimonial to Dole's authenticity and its decision to show the consumer there are real people who are affected by the purchase decisions we all make. The farm codes and these stories humanize the bananas from Dole, and provide a reason for customers to care about the brand sticker on their bananas. Buying a Dole banana now means that you are helping to support these real people in Colombia who grow them. It is now an emotional choice as much as a practical one. This is the power of creating a compelling *backstory;* it can give your customers a reason to believe in your brand beyond the products or services themselves.

The Real Power of the Backstory

A backstory is the history behind an organization and how it became what it is today. It is not a timeline of accomplishments or the boilerplate history that can often be found on company Web sites. The backstory is something more meaningful. It has real characters and a believable tale of how these characters had to evolve and overcome challenges in order to make their business successful. In Dole's case, this backstory is the real story of the many people who work together to grow, package, and ship their bananas around the world. Forget the old ideas of publishing a company history or even an "about us" page on a Web site. This chapter will offer you a new way to think about how you describe where your company comes from.

Using stories to bring brands or products to life is not a new idea. There are many models describing how marketing can be influenced by storytelling principles. Books like *Made to Stick, All Marketers Are Liars,* and *The Elements of Persuasion* are all, to some degree, about storytelling. Each offers a smart point of view about the elements of a story, how to craft one that works, and the triggers that make stories memorable. So what's different about a backstory?

Stories help marketers to put product benefits or values into emotional terms, which is a key ingredient in a backstory. What is different about a backstory is that its only goal is to create a foundation of credibility. It is not about putting product virtues into human terms or telling a story that may persuade someone to purchase something. Though a credible story may influence purchase, the best way to think about the backstory is this: If telling stories about your product or service is the main dish in your marketing meal, then creating a backstory is the appetizer.

The backstory is the foundation from which you can build your business. In Chapter 3, we learned about the model for understanding the personality by using the UAT Filter. Recall that the first principle of personality we discussed is to have a human voice. To use that voice for crafting your backstory, the first step is to master the rhythm of dialogue (the one thing many marketers forget to do).

Your Marketing Is Not the *Titanic* (We Hope)

To understand dialogue, screenwriting is a good place to start. Not that every movie has mastered the art of realistic human dialogue (we'll see a tragic example of where it goes wrong a bit later), but screenwriting and the related art of playwriting are forms that are meant to capture the distinctive rhythm of human dialogue. Lines in a screenplay or play are written to be spoken out loud, not read silently.

As an exercise to show how your marketing writing is unlike natural human dialogue, I want you to try a simple experiment. Take the first few lines of your company's "about us" description from your Web site or any other printed materials and force yourself to read it out loud. By the way, make sure you are alone because most likely you are about to sound like a fool. Can you imagine anyone ever saying those lines in

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a real conversation? Is that how you describe your company to strangers? If it wasn't before, it is probably now painfully obvious to you that the way in which companies describe themselves and their history is often indecipherable. You need to lose the buzzwords.

No one knows this better than Brian Fugere. Brian is a consultant with Deloitte Consulting and a self-described "jargonaholic." In 2003, Deloitte offered a tool to clients called the "Bullfighter," which plugged into Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. It measures the number of jargon words and generates a score called the "Bull Composite Index." The Bullfighter was a viral success, and the tool and philosophy behind it even inspired a book called *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots*. In the book, Brian and his coauthors describe this change:

> There is a gigantic disconnect between these real, authentic conversations and the artificial voice of business executives and managers at every level. Their messages lack humanity in a world that craves more of it. Between meetings, memos, and managers, we've lost the art of conversation. Bull has become the language of business.

Even screenwriters lapse into their share of "bull"; however, for a screenwriter it is usually called a cliché. A good example of losing the rhythm of dialogue comes from a string of pain-inducing clichés from the aptly named movie, *Titanic*.

1. "A woman's heart is a deep ocean of secrets."
2. "Our love was endless like the ocean."
3. "He saved me in every way that a person can be saved."
4. "He exists now, only in my memory."

Okay, I made up one of these four lines—but I bet you can't tell which one.[2] The movie was filled with lines like this and as a result the dialogue suffered. It wasn't real. But it did win lots of awards and make hundreds of millions of dollars. So if it did so well, how can I use it as an example of something that doesn't work? Simple—because my point is about being real and authentic.

When you go to see a movie like *Titanic,* what you are buying is melodrama and special effects in the form of entertainment. You know this before you walk into the theater, so the movie would have been a failure if it didn't deliver on both. Clearly, it did, and ended up thanking the Academy a record 11 times for the awards the film took home in 1997. The lesson in this is unless your business is selling melodrama, do not let your marketing sound like the dialogue in *Titanic*.

Backstories and the Dharma Initiative

Lost is a television show that features a group of survivors of a plane crash trapped on an island and battling for their survival while trying to solve the many mysteries they are confronted with. One of those mysteries is the secretive Dharma Initiative, which was once a settlement on the island. Of course, finding characters in overly dramatic situations that they must fight their way out of is nothing new in television, right? Yet as any fan of the show will tell you, it is the unique narrative model focused on the backstory through flashbacks (and "flashforwards") that J.J. Abrams created for the series that has as much as anything else been a large part of the show's success and loyal following. The show attracts more than 16 million viewers per episode and a survey of 20 countries by Informa Telecoms and Media in 2006 concluded that *Lost* was the second most viewed TV show in the world (after *CSI: Miami*).

[2]The second one is made up. Several recent scientific studies have uncovered that the ocean isn't actually endless.

The power of *Lost* is that it took this standard on-screen convention in television and movies, and expanded it with a new idea: focusing an entire episode on one character's backstory. Each subsequent episode of the show focused on another character. The resulting format offered a fast-paced forward and backward look at each character in the show, one per week. The format allowed viewers to more deeply bond with each character, and decide whether or not they liked her or him, because the viewer spent an entire hour (minus commercials) watching a story about a character's past intertwined with the present action, which gave each character depth.

Lessons from **Lost**—*Why a Backstory Works*

- Provides more reasons to care about each character.
- Offers context for characters' current actions.
- Creates mystery by allowing audience to know details that characters themselves do not.

The challenge with any story is to create empathy, and *Lost* has met this challenge by its use of the backstory. Empathy means that the audience relates somehow to the main character and cares what happens to him or her. This is not about liking a character. It is possible to like someone but not care about what happens to her or him and to care deeply about a flawed character who is not necessarily likeable. Creating empathy is about building an emotional investment in a character, so that viewers will care about what happens to this character regardless of whether or not they like the character. Getting an audience to go from complete unfamiliarity to empathy means you need to establish hooks in a character's story very early. Here is a quick fictional example.

A single dad who is also working is shown in an early scene singing to his daughter over the phone to put her to sleep as he is stuck at a shift job at a desk late at night. You see on his face that it pains him that he's not there—while around him you see mounds of papers stacked up that he clearly still needs to go through before he can leave.

The premise established in less than 10 seconds: he's a good but overworked father. Now as a viewer you're emotionally invested in him. You want him to succeed, even though you don't know anything about him or the situation he will soon face. That's how rapid character development works. Now let's focus on how this applies to your business.

Thinking Like a Screenwriter

The lesson in the success of *Lost* is that the backstory works as a tool to build an emotional connection. This is why crafting a backstory is the important first element in demonstrating the personality of your brand. Of course, the format I describe above works great for television and movies, but how does it apply to marketing and promoting your business?

This is not about telling a visual message on screen. It is important, however, to tell your story *visually*. To understand this point, let's consider a few of the things that good screenwriters must do.

1. Establish characters and stories quickly.
2. Create scenes and moments rather than prose and descriptions.
3. Always write with natural human language.
4. Foster an emotional connection with no basis of knowledge.
5. Weave these elements into a compelling story with a beginning, middle, and end.

Sound familiar? The challenges are no different than those you face in telling your backstory. The mediums are different, as your end goal is not necessarily to create something watchable on a screen, but you must establish your characters and story to foster an emotional connection. You need to think like a screenwriter.

The BArc Model

The *story arc* is a common phrase used to describe the changes that happen to a main character from the beginning to the end of any story (not just a screenplay). It goes from low points to high points, while introducing conflict to raise the stakes of the story. When it comes to applying these conventions of storytelling to your backstory, the best way to approach it is to use something called the Backstory Arc (BArc).

The BArc is the progression that your backstory must take in order to build an emotional investment. There are five key elements in the BArc Model.

- **Characters—**Who are the people in the story that your customers must associate with?
- **Challenge—**What is the key question or need they are trying to answer?
- **Vision—**What was the unique idea or premise that they embarked upon?
- **Conflict—**Who or what stands in the way of their success?
- **Triumph—**How are they (or will they) overcome this conflict?

To create a successful backstory for your brand, you must always *address* these five elements (though you don't always need to have an answer for each).

In researching the many types of backstories that are presented by companies, it became clear that several specific types of backstories are repeated over and over again. When I first discovered this, I went looking for a model for these stories in one of the hundreds of marketing or business books on my office shelf, and found none. I did, however, find a similar insight about story patterns in a brilliant book about screenwriting, by screenwriter Blake Snyder, called *Save the Cat!*

Snyder breaks down just about every Hollywood film into 12 distinct story types and maps out for the aspiring screenwriter how to create a story in each type. The pattern that emerged from my research into many company backstories can be summed up in five key models that you should consider as you start to craft your own backstory. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to taking you through these five types of stories, showing you examples of who uses each type, and helping you to determine which may be right one for your organization.

How to Use the Backstory Model Picker

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To help you get started, there is a tool called the Backstory Model Picker in Part Two that can help you choose among these five models. As you will see as you read through the picker, most backstories actually draw upon elements from multiple models. For this reason, the tool is meant to help you choose a primary story model. As you delve more deeply into your particular organization, you may find that the other models offer supporting evidence or other story elements worth using as well.

Alternatively, you might find that a single story model is ideal without any support from another model. Either way, the chart below should help you to compare and contrast the different story models, and focus on the one that makes the most sense for your business.

Backstory Type	What's the Story?	Who Uses It?
The Passionate Enthusiast	A driven individual takes a personal passion and builds it into a successful business.	• MOO.com (this chapter) • Storyville Coffee (this chapter) • Moleskine (Chapter 2)
The Inspired Inventor	A tireless inventor creates something new and different by not giving up on his/her vision.	• Dyson Vacuums (this chapter) • Molecular Gastronomy (this chapter) • Apple (Chapter 1)
The Smart Listener	A new company is created as a result of listening to customers, partners, or others.	• Google (this chapter) • Stacy's Chips (this chapter) • Dell (Chapter 5)
The Likeable Hero	A dedicated individual overcomes all odds to make his/her idea work.	• Kiva.org (this chapter) • Mission Bay Community Church (this chapter) • Innocent Drinks (Chapter 6)

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Backstory Type	What's the Story?	Who Uses It?
The Little Guy vs. the Big Guy	An underdog company takes on a seemingly unbeatable, established adversary.	• Under Armour (this chapter) • Bugaboo Strollers (this chapter) • Oil Can Henry's (Chapter 3)

To better understand the five types of backstories and which may make sense in relation to your company's situation, and how it can help you build a foundation of credibility for your brand, let's explore some examples of each type of backstory and some brands that are using them. For each type, there is an associated guide in Part Two that shows how you can use the BArc Model to craft that particular type of story for your business.

Passionate Enthusiast Story: The Cure for Printing Paralysis

Do you suffer from *printing paralysis*? This is a brilliantly descriptive term that I first encountered during a brainstorming session at which someone described increasingly common trend of people no longer printing their digital photos (in effect, "trapping" them on the computer). The rise of digital photography has all but displaced film, and many of the children born in the last five years will never even know a time when cameras used film. The downside of this move to everything digital is that more and more people are just sharing images online and never printing them

out. The satisfaction of holding a printed photo in your hands, or creating a physical photo album or scrapbook is slowly becoming a rare thing.

Yet these physical interactions with the images of our lives still have a certain magic associated with them. When you hold a print in your hands or share it with someone else in a physical way, it makes it more real. There is a corresponding pleasure in seeing your image that you created printed onto a product, or a card, or a T-shirt, or just about anything else you can imagine. MOO.com is a company that was originally created to help you have more of those magic moments.

The first time I heard of MOO was at a conference where a colleague handed me what he called his MOOCard. It was a half-sized business card printed on a beautiful coated card stock and had a full-color image taken by my colleague on one side of it. Clearly this was done by someone who knew printing. I later learned that someone turned out to be Richard Moross, an entrepreneur based in London who saw a worldwide market for a new type of business card with personality. As his team describes it on their site:

> Our first product, MiniCards, came about when we realized that sometimes, we wanted to hand out details of our personal sites, and we just didn't have a nice way to do it. A business card was too cheesy, too serious, or too. . .businessy, and didn't represent us the way we really are. A hastily scribbled piece of paper is more personal, but who ever has paper or a pen when you want it? We needed something else.

The MiniCards were born and became a sensation among fast movers and new media mavens. The cards were profiled in top blogs like Boing Boing, Cool Hunting, GigaOm, and in a *BusinessWeek* article. They were even described as the "unbusiness card of choice at many new media

unconferences."[3] By using smart linking with existing social media sites like Flickr and Facebook to let people upload their images, Moo has created a series of tools that make printing fun and necessary again. The passion they have for printing has awakened the same passion among many of their customers.

The partnership with Flickr is perhaps the one place where the passion of Moo customers (or the MOOvment as they are collectively known) is most visibly on display. Some customers collect cards, while others create wall-sized posters out of them. There are photos of one user who sewed a "MOOPocket," which she now sells to keep your cards in, and another user (a teacher) demonstrates how she uses the cards as index cards to teach her class. There are even groups of people who have started collecting and trading MOOCards with one another. MOO may have started as a labor of love from printing enthusiasts, but it has quickly grown to create a community based on people who have similar passions.

Passionate Enthusiast Story: Saving the World—One Cup at a Time

Storyville Coffee is another company founded by passionate enthusiasts, and describes its mission as "saving the world, one cup at a time." Storyville's method of saving the world has to do with first saving all of us from bad coffee, which they only half jokingly refer to as "acid rain." For Storyville, its backstory comes down to first changing people's perceptions of coffee by sharing two facts.

1. Coffee expires because it has natural oils.
2. Most coffee is burned to get rid of oils and help it last longer.

[3] "A Business Card for Your Avatar" http://www.businessweek.com/smallbiz/content/jul2007/sb2007076_772566_page_2.htm

Storyville's coffee, unlike many others, has an expiration date. The company also offers only two varieties (regular and decaf), which means you will still have to get your caramel mint pumpkin spiced skim decaf no-foam latte from somewhere else.

The Storyville experience strips coffee down to its essence: ground beans and water. Yet its coffee is more than just great quality coffee beans. There is a ritual associated with making the perfect cup that includes every small detail. You can see it in the tutorial videos offered on the Storyville site, as well as the story of the company's custom-designed coffee mug, which it commissioned after an unsatisfying search for the perfect coffee mug led them to design it themselves. What Storyville Coffee is really selling is what it calls the ultimate coffee experience.

What do Storyville Coffee and Moo.com have in common? They both have built their brands on the passion of their founders and employees for what they are selling. In the process, they have each created a unique backstory their customers can believe in.

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Inspired Inventor Story: Innovation That Really Sucks

When David Oreck, founder of the $100 million Oreck Corporation, was asked about his decision to name his vacuum cleaner business after himself, he responded by saying, "I felt there was a facelessness and namelessness to this business, and I felt that I would have an advantage if people knew who they were doing business with."[4] Ironically, today the vacuum cleaner brand best known for succeeding based on the personality of the founder is not Oreck, but a company founded much later than Oreck by a man who spent the early 1970s selling crazy inventions like the "sea truck" (a cross between a pickup truck and a whaler) and the

[4] www.industryweek.com/ReadArticle.aspx?ArticleID=10058

"ballbarrow" (a wheelbarrow that used an easy to maneuver ball instead of a wheel).

That inventor's name is James Dyson and in the late 1980s he found his true calling by setting out to create the perfect vacuum cleaner that would not lose suction. The process took more than five years and more than 5,000 prototypes, but in 1986, in Japan, Dyson released his very first bagless suction vacuum cleaner, called the "G Force." It cost $2,000 and became an instant status symbol in Japan.

Dyson's original intention was to sell the technology to an existing manufacturer, but no one was willing to cannibalize their revenue from replacement bags with Dyson's bagless concept. So after his hit in Japan, he used the funds from that success to finance the development of a model for the United States. He patented as his "Root Cyclone" technology and defended it vigorously (he sued Hoover in a UK court for copying his design, and won).

The bagless vacuum itself was a powerful idea, but it did not find a truly passionate following until Dyson released a series of television and print ads featuring himself talking honestly about how hard he had worked to create the perfect vacuum cleaner and pledged that "nothing gets clogged, ever." He was believable, likeable, and offered an authentic story that consumers responded to. He was the ultimate inspired inventor.

Today, customers rave about their Dyson vacuums online (just take a look at any of the hundreds of positive reviews on Amazon.com) and credit Dyson himself with forging a bond with his customers. Some women thanked him for creating a product that made the men in their lives want to clean. Others talked about the pride they take in their vacuums and how they cannot help talking to others about the vacuum cleaner. The brand itself stands for innovation, even going so far as to offer advice on their corporate Website for aspiring inventors about how

to patent their inventions and sell them. Dyson himself published his own autobiography in 2003, about innovation, invention, and the secrets behind the Dyson patented model. He called it *Against the Odds.*

Inspired Inventor Story: The Secret of the Best Restaurant in the World

When we talk about invention, we are usually referring to a new product or technology, as in Dyson's case. Invention can come in different forms, though, especially when it comes from mixing two disciplines that usually have little to do with one another. One of the most interesting examples of this is a type of cuisine inspired by physics and chemistry that takes center stage at what *Restaurant* magazine has rated the Best Restaurant in the World for the past two years running.

The restaurant is El Bulli, an uncommon destination located off a winding mountain road in Roses on the Costa Brava about two hours north of Barcelona. The head chef, Ferran Adrià, began his career as a dishwasher and now travels six months out of the year (during which time the restaurant is closed) developing his trademark 30-course tasting menu. He was recently named by *Time* magazine as one of the most innovative thinkers of the twenty-first century.

What makes El Bulli—despite its being closed six months out of the year to allow the chefs to travel and redefine the menu—the best in the world? The answer is a technique pioneered by Adrià called *molecular gastronomy,* which helps him and his team of top chefs create food that seems inspired by science fiction to those who sample it. Adrià dislikes the term molecular gastronomy, instead referring to his creations as "deconstructionist" for how they break down flavors independently. His techniques include creating something called "culinary foam," which is described as taking natural flavors, mixing them with a gelling agent such

as agar, and putting them through a whipped cream canister equipped with N_2O cartridges. If it sounds complicated, it should. Only a handful of restaurants in the world use this method.

One of them belongs to José Andrés, a former disciple in Adrià's kitchen, and now a winner of the prestigious James Beard Foundation Award and owner of a range of restaurants in Washington, D.C. One of his restaurants is the iconic "minibar," often spoken of by locals (including me) as the most unique dining experience in D.C. The restaurant offers its own 30-course molecular gastronomy tasting menu in a small bar that seats just eight tucked upstairs at the back of Café Atlantico restaurant in downtown Washington. The entire experience of being presented with each dish as the team of four chefs behind the counter prepare it and describe it for you is one of a kind. You simply cannot dine at minibar without telling people about it.

Chef Wylie Dufresne's WD-50 restaurant on the Lower East Side in Manhattan offers a similarly talkable experience. Chef Wylie was even a finalist on the popular television show *Iron Chef* in 2006. At WD-50, guests with a party 14 can schedule a private dining session in the kitchen with Wylie himself as your guide through the meal. In May 2006, *Fast Company* magazine also ran a cover story on this new science of cuisine, featuring a chef named Homaru Cantu and calling him "Edison of the Edible." Cantu's Moto restaurant in Chicago is regularly on the list of hottest up and coming restaurants and his mission, as he described it in the *Fast Company* piece, is to "change the way humans perceive food."[5]

Clearly the idea of molecular gastronomy captures the imagination of foodies and travelers everywhere. It may be the most innovative new trend in cuisine of the past 50 years. Just about every restaurant ever

[5] http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/105/open_food-cantu.html

opened is the result of someone somewhere who is passionate about food. What each of these inspired chefs have managed to do is tell a story of invention that makes their restaurants more than just places to eat. They are now destinations.

Similarly, Dyson has made his story central to how he sells his product. What all of these scientific chefs and James Dyson were able to do was think differently about their business or industry and use their inspiration and enthusiasm to create something new. Regardless of the culture, people respond to inventors and innovations. They create wonderful things, and we can't help sharing their stories with others.

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Smart Listener Story: Google's Art of Failing Wisely

Smart listening is not about focus groups, pilot programs, or other formalized ways to test ideas. Those all have their place, but the idea of smart listening is something more fundamental. Insight may come from these scripted efforts, but listening is not the same as product or prototype testing. The stories of smart listeners are the ones about organizations that are listening to their customers in order to understand their needs and the *gaps* that they can fill with a product or service. The companies that fit the story model for smart listeners are the ones that create their business or products based on listening to what people want.

Google does this extremely well. Perhaps more than any other company, Google has embraced a policy of listening to people, putting an idea out there and letting individuals play with it, and then using the early feedback to improve it. In October 2007, Matt Glotzbach, product management director for Google Enterprise gave a keynote speech at the Interop IT Conference and Exposition in New York. During the speech, he shared that a core part of Google's strategy when launching new products was to

"fail wisely" and that the practice of sitting on a new product for years while testing was outdated.

Anyone who has followed Google's approach to launching new products knows that the way the company approaches this is very focused on user feedback, but not in a closed way. Open beta versions of new products are launched almost every week. Those ideas that work are further revised, and those that don't are quickly abandoned. If smart listening involves fast response to what customers are saying, then Google has one of the best models in the world to capture relevant feedback and act on it. This approach is a key part of their backstory and what makes their brand one that people routinely rate as one of the most innovative in the world.

Smart Listener Story: Stacy's Sidewalk Pita Cart

Another smart listener who used customer feedback to launch her own successful business in a slightly different way was Stacy Madison. When Stacy first decided to leave her career in social work and follow her dream of entering the food business, she did it by buying a sidewalk cart serving all-natural pita sandwiches on the street in downtown Boston with her business partner, Mark Andrus. The idea of a social worker reinventing her life to try something new is a character story most people can relate to.

At the original Stacy's D'lites cart, the sandwiches were so popular that she soon had lines around the block. To keep the customers happily waiting, she decided to bake pita chips and hand them out to people as they waited in line. After some time spent watching her customers and listening to their pleas for her to start selling these chips, she starting doing exactly that and Stacy's Pita Chips was born.

As with many regional products like this, people loved the product but it was only likely to travel so far. In early 2007, the company decided to focus on creating a buzz through word of mouth by taking its back-

story and retelling it to a new audience across America. The idea was to send boxes of pita chips to more than 100,000 people named "Stacy" so they could build a group of enthusiasts and introduce new people to the product based on the uniting factor that they all had the same first name. The campaign worked, generating a huge buzz online: photos were posted on blogs from Stacys who received the mailing; hundreds of e-mails with positive feedback turned up in Stacy's inbox, and the brand attracted many new customers.

Although Google and Stacy's Pita Chips have taken slightly different approaches to how they listen to their customers, each has the concept of "smart listening" at the heart of the growth of its business.

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Likeable Hero Story: Microlending to Change Lives

Premal Shah is a good example of a likeable hero; he is the soft-spoken president of Kiva.org—a Web site that is changing the world through its pioneering approach to microfinance. Meeting him is like meeting a brilliant but obsessed inventor who is always considering new ways to improve his inventions. For Premal, the obsession is finding more ways to make Kiva.org more efficient in its mission of lending money in "microloan" amounts to entrepreneurs in third world countries.

Microfinance and microlending are the Nobel Prize–winning concepts from Muhammad Yunus that introduced the idea of offering small "micro" loans of tens or hundreds of dollars to empower third world entrepreneurs. Kiva.org, along with Yunus's own Grameen Bank, are two leading organizations in this field, offering up millions of dollars in loans each year. The real power of Kiva.org, however, is that it is a platform for you as an individual to loan a certain amount of money directly to an entrepreneur. This was never before possible.

The old model of aid where large international organizations throw billions of dollars toward large projects while corrupt governments siphon off large percentages of the aid no longer works. That model has come under considerable criticism recently through talks by leading thinkers at influential events like the Technology Entertainment Design (TED) conference and World Economic Forum, books like *Globalization and Its Discontents* by Joseph E. Stiglitz (another Nobel Prize winner). Fighting corruption is a major priority now at some of the top international banking institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Asian Development Bank, and World Bank.[6]

Smarter solutions that empower people are needed. Kiva.org is one of the sites that offers solutions like this—and is based on a powerful insight. When you loan money to Kiva, the first thing you realize is that it is a loan and not a donation. The power of this idea is vast. You are not offering charity to someone; you are giving them a chance to make an idea they have into a reality. The most interesting thing about this model is the importance of repayment.

The reason this is so significant is that it allows recipients of help to keep the one thing that is so often taken away from them: pride. When someone is able to pay you back for funds that you helped them with, their pride is intact. Accepting charity means swallowing your pride and doing what you need to do because you have no alternative. Offering people pride leads to empowerment and empowerment leads to real change. The story of Kiva.org is one of offering empowerment and what the site realizes is that this is the one thing that people in developing countries need above all else.

[6] My father, a longtime leader at the World Bank, even wrote a book on this called *Challenging Corruption in Asia*.

The site itself is a collection of backstories from people who are in need of funds to make their ideas happen. Browsing these real stories is a humbling experience, as you learn firsthand just how much someone halfway across the world could do with just a few hundred dollars. It is enough to make you consider returning your brand-new Dyson vacuum cleaner in favor of putting the money toward a more noble use.

The power of the Kiva.org story is not just in the idea or the technology, but in the story of the founding and the team members, from Premal to others, who decided to do something to change the world. Everyone who lends money through Kiva.org knows this backstory, and it is a key part of why they choose to support the site.

Likeable Hero Story: A Pastor with Personality

In case you haven't noticed, religion has a pretty severe branding problem. From Jehovah's Witnesses knocking on doors trying to convert people, to the violence across the world inflicted by people of one faith on those of another in the name of religion—most religions come with some sort of bias from those who believe, or those who refute it. Yet all these polarized opinions when it comes to religion are often the result of ignorance or a lack of personal interaction with individuals who could bring those religions to life.

Religion is as much about faith as it is about the people that you associate with, whether they are the leaders of a religion or your fellow believers. It may sound crass to look at it in this sense, but faith needs personality just as much as any business does.

One blogger who knows this well is a San Francisco native named Bruce Reyes-Chow. His blog is an exploration of spirituality and faith and could fit well into any list of religiously oriented blogs (of which there are thousands). Bruce, however, is also an ordained Presbyterian minister

and leads a congregation at the Mission Bay Community Church (MBCC). His blog is all about his weekly sermons, and his self-described life as a "pastor, geek, dad, and follower of Christ." Blogging may seem like an odd thing for a pastor to do religiously (pun intended), but what is even more unique about Bruce's blog is just how openly he shares his thoughts and ideas.

Once, after a particularly tough Sunday sermon, Bruce called his own sermon a "one way ticket to sucksville" and apologized for confusing his churchgoers and promised to do better the following week. This is not the kind of relationship most people expect to have with a preacher. Bruce is real, engaging, open and honest, and the community responds on his blog with loyalty and words of encouragement for his rare moments of confusion. The blog is a core part of the experience at MBCC. Bruce himself notes that the blog "allows folks to get to know a little bit more about me before taking the risk of coming to church on Sunday. . .and about 75% of the people who visit our church have read my blog before ever setting foot in our church."

To understand how unique this experience is, let's look at a national institution in the Philippines called the "Iglesia Ni Cristo," ironically bearing the acronym INC. The name (loosly translated) means "Church of Christ," translated into Tagalog and across the Philippines you will hardly be able to go to any city without spotting dozens of Iglesia Ni Cristo churches spread out across the city, which are located as strategically as one might find fast food restaurants in America. One look at the ubiquitous yellow-topped chain of churches and you could be forgiven for thinking that these help take religion to a new level of standardization. Bruce's vision for the MBCC is a clear contrast, and offers his congregation a far different experience. Along the way, Bruce offers a backstory that is easy to become engaged with, no matter what your religion.

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Little Guy versus Big Guy Story: Taking on the Biggest Brand in the World

Back in 1996, Kevin Plank was promoting his new brand of athletic sportswear called Under Armour by doing exactly what his biggest competitor did more than 30 years earlier. Driving his Ford Explorer to college football games, he sold his unique brand of apparel to college football athletes, including many of his own former teammates at the University of Maryland. Ironically reminiscent of how Phil Knight once sold sneakers to runners from the trunk of his car to start Nike, Plank realized early that the best endorsement for his products was to get athletes to wear them and tell others about it.

His challenge was huge—to take on the firmly entrenched sports apparel leaders in Nike and Adidas in an industry that many thought would be impenetrable. To do it, he used word-of-mouth marketing and sampling. As a former college athlete, he had many relationships with universities in his local area and started by supplying players at his former team at the University of Maryland with his distinctive undershirts, which he sold under the brand Under Armour.

His vision came from a dual understanding of what he had to sell. The first and most logical product benefit was a brand of underwear that was specifically designed to be worn under football pads, not absorb sweat like cotton did, and dry much faster. The second element was far more important. His line of shirts were tight and bore a distinctive logo on the chest, making the wearers part of a club. This was not the typical Nike swoosh that every athlete knew. Plank had something different and it began to mean something to the athletes who wore it. This was an entirely new category of performance apparel.

The conflict in this story, of course, is that Nike and Adidas and Reebok and all the other sports companies making apparel saw the trend

Under Armour started and moved quickly to take advantage of it. In the years since Under Armour has taken off, each of the big competitors has launched its own line of ultradry, moisture-repelling fabrics designed for exactly the same uses as Under Armour. Under Armour was the little guy taking on all the big guys, but still has managed to win because it has been able to tell a convincing backstory that engages consumers and builds a relationship with loyal customers.

The company's triumph comes not only from having existed for more than 10 years and continued to grow its business, but for its willingness to take on Nike and its other largest competitors head-on. The underlying message in this story is that this is a brand not afraid to fight. In 2006, UA even launched its own brand of footwear, moving beyond apparel. Clearly, people love an underdog.

Little Guy versus Big Guy Story—Bugaboo Strollers and Hip Moms

It may seem like there is an inverse relationship between being a parent and having style. Though becoming a parent may have something to do with it, a more likely culprit is that most products for new parents are just not that fashionable. The leader by all accounts in the baby product industry is one whose Web site describes it as focused on "product safety, quality, reliability and convenience." Style or fashion are not high on the list. Yet this company, called Graco, has been around for more than 60 years making cribs, strollers, car seats, highchairs, swings, bouncers, activity centers, and just about any other baby-related product you can imagine. Along the way, the company developed several product innovations, including the baby swing and the now-common car seat travel system that allows you to take out a car seat with young babies in it while leaving the base in the car.

Taking on the dominance of Graco in the baby products industry seems like it would be an impossible feat, particularly when the company is so singularly focused on the one element that they believe is most important to parents—safety. As it turns out, there is another concern for many urban new parents that had been going unfulfilled. That need was perfectly illustrated by the character Miranda on the popular show *Sex in the City* in 2002. Despite her new status as a parent, her life still revolved around being an urban professional in Manhattan, which meant she was not ready to abandon all fashion and enter the bonds of styleless parenthood. As part of her rebellion, she pushed around the streets of Manhattan a new stroller that few had ever seen before that program aired.

The stroller was called the Frog made by a Dutch company with a funny name: Bugaboo. This Bugaboo stroller looked like a cross between an art piece and a pushcart. It also looked unlike any other stroller on the market, and made an obvious statement for any parent pushing it down the street. The stroller was an instant hit, becoming the ultimate symbol of urban cool for city-dwelling parents in cities around the world. Many parents describe it as the major "splurge" in their baby-related purchases, and it certainly qualifies with most models retailing for more than $500 (and some well over the $1,000 mark).

Despite its superpremium positioning, Bugaboo started as a small challenger brand in Holland, never intending to take on the world's largest baby products maker or become the company behind *the* must-have product for upwardly mobile new parents everywhere. The company began as a partnership between designer Max Barenbrug and his brother-in-law, physician Eduard Zanen. The original goal was to sell the idea of the stroller to one of the big guys. After trying unsuccessfully to find a buyer, Barenbrug decided to commission it himself by "opening the yellow pages for Taipei and looking under stroller manufacturers" as the Bugaboo Web

site describes only partly in jest. As Barenbrug noted in an interview several years after the Bugaboo arrived in the United States, "Most companies are too focused on the products of other companies. . .they focus on a cost rather than a vision."[7]

At Bugaboo, unlike many other small companies, its heritage is not dominated by the founders, but by the many people who work at the company headquarters in Holland and share its passion. The company's corporate philosophy stresses being different, and team members are encouraged to share their opinions and take responsibility for their roles and actions. While most other stroller makers focus their marketing on features, safety ratings, or how washable their covers are, Bugaboo focuses its marketing on the lifestyle and freedom that its strollers can provide for "adventure-seeking parents."

The product marketing has lived up to this positioning, with smart efforts such as a series of 22 commissioned artist-produced downloadable maps with kid-friendly walking tours in cities around the globe called "Bugaboo Daytrips," as well as a wonderfully creative Broadway dance show–style film created by their ad agency, 72andSunny, to introduce the new lightweight Bugaboo Bee stroller. The video and Daytrips sites were both viral hits, getting sent around from parent to parent and both managing to do the one thing that few baby products manage to effectively do—target fathers as well as mothers.

Even their product launch strategy abandons the big chain stores in favor of working with small independent baby stores like Genius Jones in Miami, a store which focuses on carrying baby products that are well-designed. As further example of its status appeal, Bugaboo strollers are now the product of choice for celebrity moms to wheel their tots around

[7] http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/aug2005/id20050831_266835.htm

in, including Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow, Sarah Jessica Parker, and a growing list of other stars.

Seeing the strollers on the street inspires other parents or potential parents to look at those strollers with envy. The backstory Bugaboo managed to tell was one of passionate European designers who set out to add an element of style to the decidedly unstylish life of a parent. This story perfectly matched the ones their customers wanted to tell about themselves. Parents who pushed a Bugaboo stroller around town were still hip and cool, despite being parents. Most important, it gave regular parents the chance to believe they were part of an elite group by having the most luxurious stroller you could buy, just like the celebrities.

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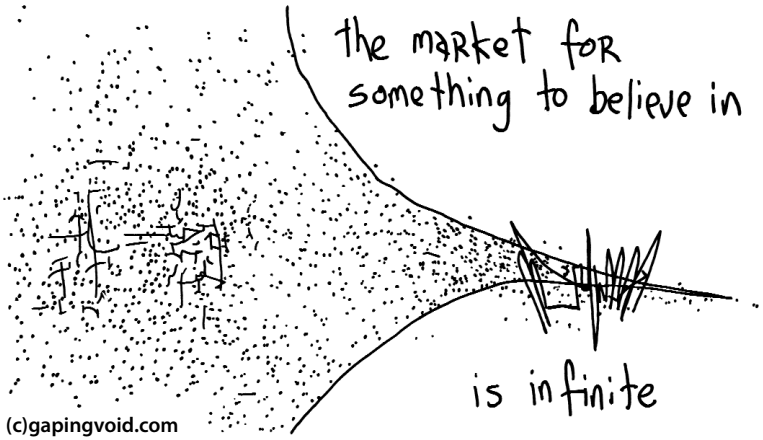
What ties all these stories together? They all follow the BArc Model, but even more important, they offer a reason to believe. Storyville Coffee customers subscribe because they believe that coffee expires and that

A Reason to Believe



a quality cup of coffee is worth some effort. Athletes who wear Under Armour do so because of the feature benefits of the clothing, but also because they believe in the story behind the company that was built by athletes for athletes. A marketing backstory gives your customers a reason to believe in your brand.

One thing you may have noticed about these stories is that they offer many overlaps. Dyson may have been an inspired inventor, but he was also a little guy versus a big buy. Google is a smart listener as well as an inspired inventor. The idea of these models of backstories is not that they must be mutually exclusive. It is always possible for a company's story to take on aspects of any story. The point is that there is one story that offers the best description of what defines your organization. The real trick is to understand which one this is and to develop your backstory from there.

The theme that each of these stories shares is the focus on on the people behind the products or services that are the purpose for the company's existence. Backstories are a way of bringing out the human story behind your brand. This is not a product development story or "company history" in the strictest sense of how a company moves. Think of it less as a company history and more as a family history. Family histories are highly personal and involve people who bring each generation to life.

Creating a backstory requires a different way of thinking about the foundation of your organization, but is not likely to cause any serious resistance within your company. The reason is that you are usually just changing the way that the story behind your company is described. This is the basis of personality, but it is where you go from here that will require the most significant change in your communications. From now on, this is where you will likely find the most roadblocks—I'll focus on how to contend with the roadblocks in Chapter 5. Once we discuss how to navigate

these roadblocks, you'll be ready to really start using your personality for marketing.

The Sellevator Pitch

A backstory offers a reason for your customers to believe in your brand. There are five key models of backstories: the passionate enthusiast, the inspired inventor, the smart listener, the likeable hero, and the little guy versus the big guy.