

StoryBrand Narrative Marketing:  
An Examination of the Influence of Narrative Marketing on Organizations

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Doctor of Philosophy  
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by

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## **Abstract**

This study employs a survey of StoryBrand workshop customers to examine the influence of implementing the StoryBrand narrative framework into marketing collateral. The interpretation of the quantitative data is used to determine if the framework has positive influence on company success and which variables contribute to company success. Data for this research were then analyzed using statistical methods. The data analysis determined that the degree to which an organization implemented the StoryBrand methodology had significant influence on an organization's profitability, confidence of employees, and the time and money saved on marketing collateral creation. No other tested variable had significant influence, including company size, non-profit or for-profit, size of company, or audience focus. The knowledge gained in this study will add to the previous studies on narrative branding as well as expand understanding of the application of coherency and fidelity in Walter Fisher's narrative theory.

*Keywords:* narrative, marketing, StoryBrand, branding, Walter Fisher, transportation theory

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## Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Donald "Don" Miller started his career as a Christian memoirist. He primarily shared personal essays and reflections about faith, God, and personal growth. He is most famous for his *New York Times* bestselling book, *Blue Like Jazz*, but also wrote six other memoirs before writing *Storyline: Finding Your Subplot in God's Story* in 2012 and his first business book, *Building a StoryBrand*, in 2017. When Donald Miller began holding conferences, he believed he would be able to fill up the rooms without any problems. He had sold millions of books and maintained a loyal following through social media, so filling an auditorium should not have been a problem. With the help and encouragement of his assistant, he decided to launch a conference designed to help people live a good story with their lives. He created StoryLine, a conference to assist people in figuring out their life plan by helping them plot out and follow a story.

After over 20 years of studying story through his writing and creating a movie based on *Blue Like Jazz*, he recognized the power story had in people's lives. He saw that stories were inspiring and when told correctly, could move people to action. He wanted to help people live a better story.

The first conference he held had 350 attendees, which seemed like a good start, but the room was only half full. Glowing surveys came back from attendees so the company believed future conferences would sell out quickly. The next few did not grow as anticipated.

Frustrated by the lack of growth, Miller retreated to a cabin in the mountains of North Carolina to try to figure out how to fix the marketing problem for the conferences. The cabin was devoid of internet or connection to the outside world, but was filled with a VHS player and tapes of movies. Each night, after working on the marketing, he would sit

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down and watch a movie or two. He began to notice that all the movies had similarities and a few points began to stick out.

By watching these movies over and over, Miller theorized that *Tommy Boy* was the same story as *Star Wars*. *Hunger Games* was the same story as *Bridget Jones Diary*. They followed the same formula. He theorized that the reason these stories were all written this way was because this format was clear and made sense. The movies he could not engage with were ones that did not follow this clear path. Confusion came when the hero wanted too many things or encountered too many random problems. He was less interested if they were able to solve their problems on their own or the internal struggle was missing from the plot. He tuned out if there was not a clear understanding of how the hero could win the day.

As Miller thought more about story, he was influenced in his thinking by two books, *The Seven Basic Plots*, by Christopher Booker (Booker, 2004) and *Save the Cat* by Blake Snyder (Snyder, 2005). Both authors show in their writing that story is formulaic. All stories are the same. Booker argues that there are only seven basic plots that have ever been told. The seven basic plots are: overcoming the monster; rags to riches; the quest; voyage and return; comedy; tragedy; and rebirth. He shows how these plots are evident in stories in the bible and Greek mythology and continue through today's Hollywood blockbusters. Snyder broke down the three-act story structure into a "beat sheet": 15 key story "beats." Each beat is an important moment that must happen in a well-structured story. These are even given page numbers so a writer knows exactly where they should go in the story. Because each page of a screenplay is approximately a minute of film, this makes Snyder's formula a minute-by-minute movie formula.

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These two books showed Miller that story could be formulaic. He understood that good stories follow a structure and that structure can be replicated over and over. He began to carefully review the movies and pull out the most basic plot points contained in every movie. For simplicity, he settled on seven points for every good story.

First, every story was focused around one primary hero. While some were centered around a group of protagonists, even that group acted as one character with a clear goal. From the very beginning the audience should be able to articulate what the hero wants. In the best and most clear stories, the hero is focused on achieving or discovering one thing. That thing is clear. Jason Bourne in *Bourne Identity* wanted to find out his past to discover who he is. Katniss in *Hunger Games* wants to survive the Hunger Games. Stories where the hero wants multiple things or where the audience is confused about what the hero wants are less appealing. While Jason Bourne may have wanted to start a bakery, train for a marathon or adopt a cat, the story cannot be about all those things. It has to be about one clear want and desire that is obvious to the audience.

Next, the hero encounters a problem early in the story that sets the course for the story itself. The rest of the story is about overcoming the problem. This problem could be physical, like a monster or villain, but the crux of the story is about how this external problem manifests in an internal struggle. For an audience to identify with the story there has to be an internal problem that is manifested by the external problem. If the story only revolves around an external problem, the audience cannot relate. Most movie audiences have never disabled a bomb. However, they can relate to a hero in a movie who is disabling a bomb if it is clear that the reason the hero is having trouble disabling a bomb is because

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they have self-doubt or fear failure. A soccer mom can relate to an FBI agent on a bomb squad if she can relate to an internal problem.

Miller also discovered that the stories with even more power set these external and internal problems in the back drop of some philosophical problem being played out, like good versus evil or tyranny versus democracy. When the audience see themselves on the side of the hero philosophically, they are more engaged in the story. In the best stories a hero overcomes an external, internal and philosophical problem in one climactic scene.

The third common point in each of the movies is that the hero must meet a guide. Intuitively, the audience knows that the hero cannot solve the problems on his own. In each movie he watched, a hero would meet a guide who had both empathy for the hero's struggle, because they had been in the same position before, but had also overcome that problem and now has the authority to help the hero do the same. These were the only two things needed to position the guide in the hero's life as the person who can help them overcome the problems. The only backstory the audience knows about the guide are the parts that relate to the hero's problems. The guide's purpose is to help the hero transform. The guide cannot transform with the hero. They have to remain steady through the film. In the best stories, the guide does not change. This goes back to the original point about the hero. The audience has to be able to follow one primary hero accomplishing one thing. If a guide transforms, then they become another hero in the story.

Next, the guide gives the hero a plan to follow that is clear. The audience has to see that no matter how big the problem, there is a plan to help them overcome this problem. The plan helps the hero overcome all three levels of problems: external, internal and

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philosophical. The plan has to be clear and easy to follow, both for the hero and the audience watching.

There is always a moment where the hero is called or forced into action. There is a call to action moment that is clear and compelling. Typically, the hero is reluctant to act. Even after the plan and preparation, there is hesitation and doubt. Something has to call the hero to action in order for him/her to move.

Finally, in all the best stories the stakes of the story are clear. The audience knows what success looks like and what failure will look like if the hero does not succeed. These are the last two important parts of a good story. There is a clear vision of what the future looks like. In many of the movies, the stakes are ramped up in a climactic scene. The hero's actions in this moment resolve the external, internal, and philosophical problems in one swing of the bat, one wire cut on the bomb, one karate move. In that moment all of the stakes are fully realized. The future is good and the threat of failure is over.

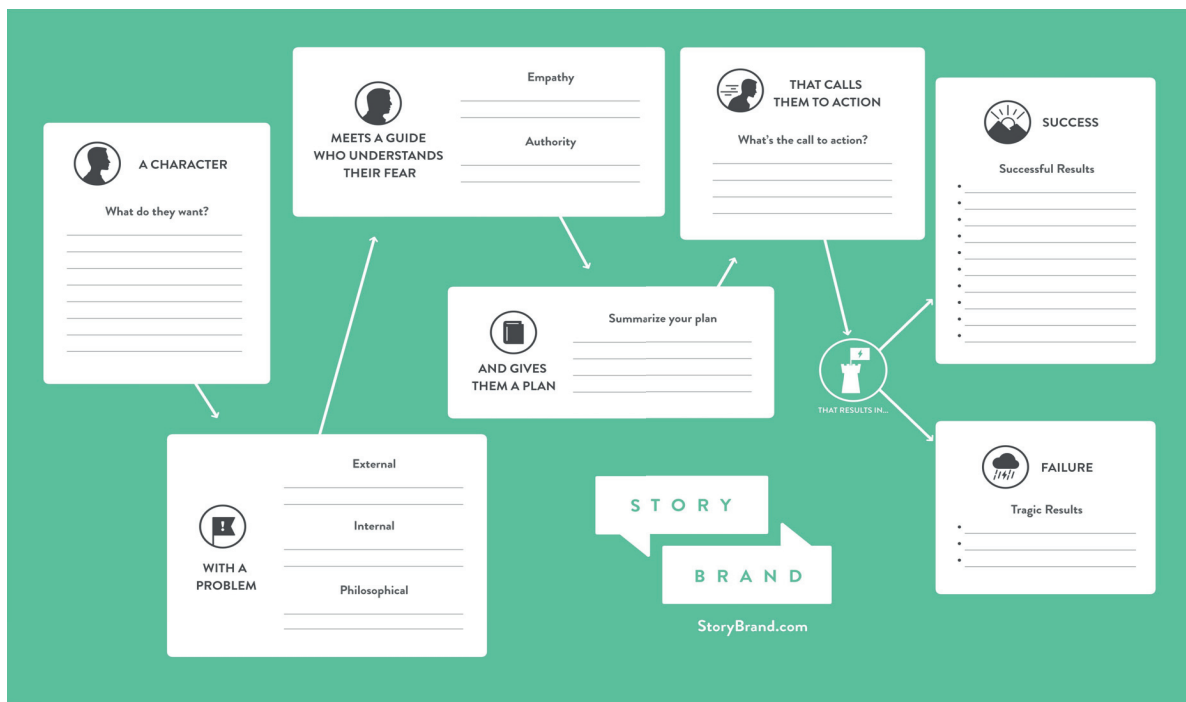
After charting out the plots of a number of movies and developing the formula to map the points of each film, Miller began to wonder if understanding how story works could help his own marketing. He would take this story formula from movies and apply it to his conference company. The big paradigm shift for him was that his company was not the hero of the story; rather, the hero of the story was the customer and his company would play the role of guide.

Every human intuitively understands a good story and is working at living her own story. If a company could understand the story their customers were living in relationship to their brand, they could stop selling products and services and instead invite customers into a story. By positioning the company as the guide in the customer story, they could

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more easily speak to customer needs. No longer would companies be in opposition to the customer, living out two separate stories, but they could be in the same story.

He simplified the plot points down to a simple phrase for each point: A Character, With a Problem, Meets a Guide Who Understands Their Fear, And Gives Them a Plan, That Calls Them To Action, Success, Failure. He then put these in linear order to show how they work together to form one cohesive story. Each point on the plot would need to have clear messaging associated with it. He decided to call this a Brandscript, as show in Figure 1.



*Figure 1: Working Brandscript*

He decided all messaging for any marketing needed to come out of these seven plot points and they needed to follow this order. By doing this, he created a simple framework through which to filter all brand messaging. He theorized that if he could stay disciplined and only speak from these points, a potential customer could more easily enter

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into a company story. The messaging could be used in all types of marketing, from a website and sales pitches to email campaigns and keynote addresses. The way the story was told could be creative, but the story being told needed to be disciplined and filtered through this story framework.

Without spending any money on direct marketing, but simply changing the language in emails and on the StoryLine website, the conference went from 350 to sold out rooms of over 2200 in just a few years. All the conferences started selling out without Miller spending any money on paid marketing. The company simply clarified the messaging with a story framework and made the story about the customer, not the company.

The StoryLine team convinced Miller there was something special about this new perspective on marketing and they decided to try to help other companies clarify their messaging with the same formula. To start, Miller created a new company called StoryBrand and changed his Twitter bio to say, “Donald Miller is the founder of StoryLine and StoryBrand. He helps companies clarify their messaging.” He was hoping to help a local business with their marketing, but the first company that contacted him was Proctor and Gamble. They ended up asking for help with the Queen Latifa, Diva with a Heart Campaign. After that, Ford called to get help rebranding the Lincoln division. Then the Obama White House called and asked for help with their My Brother’s Keeper campaign.

Donald Miller began to formalize the process of teaching companies the framework in 2014. The framework consisted of understanding the seven basic plot points in a good story and creating messaging for each of those points. Companies learned to identify their customer as the character and clearly state what it is that the customer is



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looking for. They then identify what problems they solve for the customer with their product or service. They position themselves as the guide to the customer by establishing empathy and authority. Then they create a clear plan for the character to follow to either purchase or use their product or service. They must establish a clear call to action that consists of some form of “buy now.” Finally, they must clearly show through language and imagery what success and failure look like for the customer if they do or do not purchase from the company.

After the messaging for each of these plot points is created, the company is taught how to apply this language to messaging and marketing. They develop a one-liner to introduce the company, create language for a web page, write sales and nurture emails, create sales pitches, lead generating PDF’s, and more. The language can be applied to anything that is used to promote or sell the company’s products or services.

The public presentation started with a few private consultations before becoming a live two-day workshop in 2014, held in Nashville, TN. These workshops typically had between 30-40 companies represented and were done quarterly. Miller would help companies understand how story worked and then help them create their story. A year later, StoryBrand produced an online version so individuals could take the course at their own pace at home. Currently, StoryBrand offers four different ways for a company to go through the workshop: online, live in Nashville, with a private facilitator, or through a corporate license that allows companies to teach the framework internally.

The StoryBrand formula has been presented to presidential candidates, Chick-fil-A, Whirlpool, Hilton Group, International Justice Mission, and thousands of other small and large companies. The company has grown every year by no less than 40% and is being

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invited to have a voice in national economic policy while also expanding internationally. Employees from more than 4000 companies have gone through a StoryBrand Workshop to clarify their messaging, and many have seen significant increase in yearly revenue. StoryBrand is impacting world-wide brands and presidential elections.

Even while StoryBrand has continued to grow as a company and increase its influence on marketing worldwide, there has been no formal study to discover if the implementation of the StoryBrand framework results in company growth or increased profits. However, there is positive anecdotal evidence from email, social media and a post workshop survey that allows participants to give feedback on their experience. This evidence indicates that the framework has the ability to have a positive influence on revenue growth as well as ease of marketing collateral creation.

Kyle Shultz creates online courses to help parents take better pictures of their children with Schultz Photo School. He completed the Storybrand online course in one day and spent the night before launching his new course rewriting his website and emails using the StoryBrand methodology. He said, "I rebuilt my sales page to incorporate just the bare bones of the StoryBrand Framework. I then merely pasted some of the rebuilt copy into my launch email sequence. The result? Just over \$103,000 in one weekend. My previous record: \$25,000." Whitney English, creator of Day Designer, said, "I applied the simple StoryBrand process to the entire Day Designer brand, and in 6 months, sales quadrupled." Amy Lacey, Founder of Cali'flour Foods said, "Our company has gone from -\$250k to \$6 million dollars in a year with a huge credit to StoryBrand for helping us with our messaging." Maria Zivkovic from Marketing Architects said, "Before this workshop, everyone wanted to say so many amazing things and I didn't know what to put in our

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marketing materials to satisfy all of my leaders. I almost shed a tear at the workshop because our marketing makes a lot more sense. Our elevator pitch and our website will be clear and having everyone on the same page has made my job SO much easier."

Miller would say there is no foundational or theoretical research upon which the Framework is founded. However, he says that it was heavily influenced by the screenwriting techniques. With the *Building a StoryBrand* book released in the fall of 2017, the influence of StoryBrand is continuing to grow, but without any formal studies on its effectiveness or even why the principles might be effective.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the overall effectiveness of the StoryBrand marketing approach to increase an organization's ability to become profitable, have a positive influence on internal team confidence, and increase efficiency in creating marketing collateral, such as website copy, emails, elevator pitches, etc. Using a survey research approach that will be presented in Chapter 3, the study will examine the perceptions of the effectiveness of the StoryBrand marketing approach among professionals in organizations that have employed the strategy. Further, the study was designed to determine if variables, such as degree of implementation, company size or type of company contribute to the increased positive impact when using the StoryBrand process.

### **Rational of Study**

Donald Miller seems to have tapped into a tradition of narrative branding. Brands that create and communicate a strong narrative tend to become very successful (Collantes & Oliva, 2015, p. 95). Studies show that companies that tap into a story help customers to connect to the brand by helping them find meaning and even redefine taste. Brand

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narratives provide a simpler approach for understanding companies and complement the technical understanding of how brands function by adding value. (Karjalainen, Nikitas, & Rahe, 2013, pp. 1-2).

Narrative branding is not new, but scholarly studies and theories that directly address it are limited (Kramer, 2016, p. 24; Barker & Gower, 2010, p. 296). Narrative research itself, however, is widely-encompassing and effective for capturing complex human experiences (McMullen & Braithwaite, 2013, p. 94). It can contribute to the knowledge of understanding of what brands exist for and also help the customer understand how a brand contributes to a customer's story. Studying narrative branding opens up opportunities for examining specific brands for their narratives and impact on customer engagement.

While there has been limited study on narrative branding, there has been no published study to date on the influence of the StoryBrand Framework on organizations. With the increase in consumer exposure to advertising and brands in the current converged digital media environment, organizations engaged in marketing and advertising and professionals in these industries are in further need of communication strategies that provide a clear message that will both connect their customers with their organization, its products, services or brand and enable them to engage with costumers. If the StoryBrand Framework can help companies more clearly connect with and engage customers, then it is important to understand what factors contribute to its effectiveness. And StoryBrand, because of its growth and success, may be worthy of scholarly research in itself.

In order to study the impact of the StoryBrand Framework on company growth, a survey was sent to the 3150 StoryBrand alumni who have been through a workshop online,

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live, or in a private setting over the past 18 months. Data were gathered and analyzed to see if there is correlation between implementing the StoryBrand Framework and positive influence on an organization.

### **Theoretical Framework**

While Donald Miller did not intentionally ground his teaching in communication theory, it seems he was able to build upon much of Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm. Walter Fisher developed the narrative theory to explain the foundation and process of human communication (Fisher, 1984, p.265). Fisher believed that "all forms of human communication need to be fundamentally seen as stories-symbolic interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character" (Fisher, 1987, p.xiii). Quoting scripture, he says that in the beginning was the Word. At the time, "word" actually meant both logos (logic or words) and mythos (story). They did not become separate until Aristotle and Plato (Fisher, 1987, p.xiii). When story is understood in this context, it is seen as a way of acquiring both meaning and knowledge. Fisher argues that it is the most powerful way to find both. He explains:

No matter how strictly a case is argued- scientifically, philosophically, or legally- it will always be a story, an interpretation of some aspects of the world that is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by human personality. Even the most well-argued case will be informed by other individuated forms besides argument, especially by metaphor. (Fisher, 1987, p.49)

This is in direct alignment with what Donald Miller (2017) argues, which is that the companies with the best products in the marketplace do not always win. The companies

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that can tell the best story and communicate clearly with the best story will often win out in the marketplace (p. 5).

This narrative world paradigm that regards all humans as essentially storytellers and that they find meaning from story is in contrast to rational-world paradigm, which says that humans are rational beings and have a logical understanding of the world. In a rational-world paradigm, decisions are made through knowledge and argumentation. With regard to branding, this would mean that the product that can communicate superiority, mastery, or scientific data to prove supremacy would win out in the market, whereas a narrative world-view would argue that the brand that can tell the best story would win out in the market.

The narrative theory has come to be widely known as the theory of storytelling. Stories are believed to be central to the process of meaning-making, serving to enhance the purposefulness of life for all (Scheytt & Soin, 2006, p. 56). The narrative theory points out that all communication occurs in the form of narratives, with a beginning, middle, and end. The key components of the narrative (i.e., actions – including deeds and words) happen in some form of sequence, providing meaning to the settings of the narrative (Fisher, 1984, p.265). Like Miller asserted that in order for stories to make sense, they need to follow a sequential order. According to the StoryBrand framework, the guide must be introduced after the problem, the plan must come from the guide, and the audience cannot see success achieved before the end of the story.

Narratives take many forms, some being long while others short, some being directed at an external audience while others are directed at oneself (self-narration). Narratives are literary elements, and in literature, they are categorized as discourse narratives, speech narratives, or cognitive schema (Hyvärinen, 2005, p.34). Either way, a

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narrative is some form of story. With this understanding, a website could tell as story, an email could tell a story, and a sales pitch could tell a story.

The StoryBrand framework is designed to help companies tell stories in a way that consumers find meaning and connect with brands by finding their own meaning in connection to a brand, but can also contribute to an organization's internal culture. This is done through a framework that helps a company or leader within a company tell a story with a clear beginning, middle and end that can be repeated. It must be sequential and must help the audience, whether they are a consumer or employee, connect with the story and see the company or leader as the guide. This study will be in the context of this research and will look at the influence of the StoryBrand framework to help companies tell better stories.

### **Conclusion**

Because there has been little research on the impact of narrative branding on organizations, this will not only expand the breadth of study, but specifically look at a framework that is being adapted by both national and international brands at a rapid rate. This will be the foundational study on the influence of the StoryBrand framework on organizations and also will examine what specific variables may contribute to the success of organizations.

This chapter has provided an introduction to the StoryBrand framework and why it merits further study. Next, this study will examine the academic literature and then present the relevant research questions and hypotheses to be examined.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, a review of the relevant literature that informs this study will be provided. There will be a review of literature on StoryBrand, narrative theory, transportation theory and the application to marketing communication and brands as, well as a discussion on the use of story to influence thought through indirect communication and myth. While there has been limited study on narrative and marketing, there is evidence that using story in branding impacts internal stakeholder engagement, helps connect customers to a brand, helps customers find meaning in a brand, and increases engagement.

The review begins with a short history of branding before exploring narrative theory and its application to branding and marketing. It will conclude with a discussion of *Building a StoryBrand*, by Donald Miller, and its connection to other communication theories. The section will discuss the core components of the framework and its usefulness to explain and contextualize communication.

While social media and television have created a whole new world for the way a company brands and markets itself, branding is actually an ancient practice. It's formalization as a theoretical practice and application to modern businesses only began in the last century (Stern, 2006, p. 216). For a long time, craftsmen and traders used symbols of their choice to show ownership and to differentiate their items from those of other traders (Khan & Mufti, 2007, p. 74). The beginning of real market application of branding in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century came with the need for manufacturers to respond to consumers developing preferences for growing products being brought to market (Moore & Reid 2008, p.6; 24). Since then, branding has become key to managing and marketing a business. A "brand" is defined in terms of the symbol, sign, term, or design that can be



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exhibited by it and understood to be representing the products of a given seller or company (Maurya & Xavier, 2012, p. 123). These individual symbols, signs, terms and designs that represent the brand are conveyed through marketing materials. Marketing reinforces and communicates brand information and identity. While they can be communicated through images and symbols, they can also be represented as narratives. Walter Fisher's theory of narrative provides a way of studying marketing through the understanding of story.

### **Narrative Theory**

Narration is a central component of Fisher's narrative theory. It has been adopted by various disciplines (including psychology and information technology). For instance, Woodside, Miller and Sood (2008, p. 97) apply storytelling to consumer brand narratives, examining them at the psychological level. Narrative discourse has also been used in business leadership to help promote, communicate and sustain values in organizations (Driscoll & McKee, 2007, p. 205).

Walter Fisher's narrative theory can be applied to human communication by looking at two different parts: the story and the discourse (Prince, 2003, p. 60). The story is made up of the explicit elements that have to be present in order for stories to be told. They include the characters, setting, plot, and time (Patron, 2006, p. 120). The discourse refers to how the process of narration is understood, such as discussing or deliberating over specific narratives to examine their context and structures of meaning.

When using narrative theory to examine discourse, the texts have to start with being composed of good reasons that function as arguments for believing or acting in agreement with the message of the text. These reasons can look like argument, metaphors, myths, gestures, and other means of creating communicative relationships. Whatever the

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discourse, the narrative theory allows the audience to view the text as rhetoric (Fisher, 1987, p. 143). The question must be asked: *What argument is this story making?*

Narratives have a meaningful chronological structure that supports the process of storytelling (Woodside, Miller & Sood, 2008, p.102; 135). Fisher (1984, p. 64) considered storytelling to be a natural and inescapable part of human existence. People tell stories that they can relate to, and in a way that occurs on a sequential chronological timeline. Fisher argued that humans have always looked to have grand representations of their lives in narratives, and in doing so, they create stories for themselves and others. They share these stories both in abstract and physical forms, tell them in both narrower and wider contexts, and share them provide to meaning (Fisher, 1987, pp. 117-118). In factual narratives, people are able to position themselves in history and reflect upon events in relation to history. These events involve objects, people, and ideas that are only highlighted for their relevance to the narrative. They also serve to legitimize the story that is told through their connection with other events and human knowledge.

Fisher (1984, p. 276) views narratives as universal modes of discourse that account for different frames of inference which can be contextualized in order to more easily understand and give meaning. Humans live universal truths or universal stories. Stories bind us together in these truths and offer direction, advice, meaning and connection. The need for meanings to flow in the process of narration warrants the existence of such truths in the event of an emergent narrative – it establishes the requirement for rationality (Fisher, 1984, pp. 273-274). Without it, the story will not be heard, imagined, or sustained and in its place, another story can emerge.

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This idea, that humans live universal truths or stories reinforces the StoryBrand idea that everyone is living a story that can be understood and therefore retold. By understanding these truths, that everyone is looking for something and encounters problems that get in the way of that, brands can begin speaking stories in a universal way that will connect with customers. Understanding that everyone is looking to narratives to find representation of their own experiences, brands can tap into the stories customers are already living. Miller argues that organizations should not tell their own story, but invite customers into a story, the story they are already living. Organizations just need to reflect this story back to customers through language in marketing collateral.

In a good story, the audience is connected to the truth of the story through the setting of the narrative (Fisher, 1984, p.265; Rados, 2015, p.7). Audiences will become absorbed or even see themselves in the narrative, which helps them connect meaning in the story to the meaning in their specific lives (Kim et al., 2015, p.2). They can be fictional or factual, but narratives that follow more closely to the facts and settings of real-life have a high level of legitimacy.

Fisher's view of narrative as a theory of communication is not just about fairy tales or whimsical anecdotes, but actually connects narrative with conventional rules of logic and reason. These rules are guided by the existent value system, and as Fisher (1987, p. 114) argues, values operate only for their context of place, time, culture, and topic. Fisher connects the idea of story with a connection to a society's value system. So then the rhetoric in a story is not just a whim, but is actually a rational system that can drive values and change people's actions.

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Values play a major role in branding, but have to be adjusted for different cultures and subgroups. By understanding who the customer is and what they want, brands can speak to the subgroup values through story and imagery. Brands that are able to relay a strong narrative across different subgroups often stand out as powerful and iconic. Fisher recognizes the need for narratives to relay meanings that can be absorbed and accepted in order for them to influence and change the behavior of an audience. This also is reflected in his position with regard to how good reason and logic operate to shape narratives (Fisher, 1987, p. 106).

Fisher argued that a strong approach to narration comes through narrative fidelity and coherency (Gilder, 2006, p.4). In order for an audience to stay connected to the narrative, there has to be good reason. Legitimate narratives are only sustainable if they are applicable to the individuals in various contexts. Fishers' theory is founded on four important principles: (1) Humans are natural storytellers who seek good reasons in communication (and these reasons vary from one context and culture to another), (2) The variation in good reasons is tied to dynamic value systems that may be a part of cultures and sub groups, (3) Human beings gain rational ability through their capacity to determine narrative probability (the likelihood that a narrative would emerge in a given legitimate coherent form) and to ascertain narrative fidelity (the narrative's credibility), and (4) All humanity rests on the continued selection of stories (Fisher, 1987, p.106; 108; 118; 1984 271; 272). Beliefs that emerge from good reasons within narratives help audiences live a more meaningful existence.

### **Transportation Theory**

Narrative transportation is used to explain the success of compelling narratives in changing people's attitudes towards meanings and values (Kim et al. 2015, p.2). Narrative transportation argues that the people who become absorbed into narratives change their attitudes in order to reflect the story that is told. Wang and Calder (2006, p.160) recognize the theory's application in media and advertising. Persuasive narratives are widely used in advertising and in other areas of marketing because they trigger the process of narrative transportation. This process leads the audience into a world that is designed by the storyteller, and in so doing engages them in the value systems and meaning structures that have been established in the narrative (Green & Donahue, 2008, p. 242). Narrative transportation increases the value of marketing communication and also enhances the story itself. The audience can become absorbed in the story, agreeing with the values of the storyteller. Brands that tell good stories begin to shape not only the thinking, but also the values, of the audience. This leads to a change in action of the hearer.

Green & Brock (2000) developed a way to measure transportation with a 15-item self-report scale. The transportation scale looks at cognitive, emotional, and imagery processes. These three work together to create the transportation experience and have the ability to show how powerful a narrative can impact an audience (Green 2006, S164). Research shows that when an audience is transported into a narrative world they are likely to change their "real-world beliefs" in response to information, claims, or events in a story (Green 2006, S165).

Green (2006) argues that narratives can have an increased influence through transportation in at least three possible ways: creating connections with characters,

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reducing counter arguing, and making narrative events seem more like real experience. Characters need to be more sympathetic or “like” the audience. The more they see the characters as friends, the more transportation occurs because the audience cares about the character. This provides a role-model for the audience and can influence behavior or shift normative belief (S167-S168). From a counterargument perspective, narratives that are not presented as overtly persuasive can actually be a subtle form of persuasion. Also, part of the power of narratives is their ability to give concrete form to abstract ideas (S169). This is done through giving concrete examples and creating mental imagery. All of these increase the effects of narrative transportation and therefore have a greater influence on attitudes, beliefs and behavior.

Brown (2015) takes this a step further and says that transportation now encompasses all forms of media in which narrative worlds are created, including social media and other forms of promotion (p. 259). Meaning, transportation does occur in a story or movie, but can also occur when an audience follows social media of a personality or even potentially a company. While only a small percentage of media consumers who are exposed to personas or brands actually experience transportation through social media, it still has the potential to influence behavior (p. 276).

### **Narrative Theory and Internal Business Communication**

While the application of story is often seen as effective in external marketing, narrative theory can also be applied to internal communication as well. This idea is called strategic narration (Skerlep, 2002, p.176). Organizations are finding it necessary to formulate and tell their own story internally. Strategic narratives are effectively used in various areas of organizational management. In this context, strategic narration is a

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company telling its story to communicate the organization's mission, vision, values, and goals (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p.14). The different departments of the company contribute to the narrative. The management and leadership of the organization coordinate the overall story in order to tell a desired unified narrative. A master narrative is created. The story behind it could be represented in the form of value hierarchies – such as in prioritizing performance, efficiency, inclusiveness, quality and much more (Rossolatos, 2012, p. 4). The strategic narrative serves to communicate the story in situational contexts, which could include communication with clients but also other internal stakeholders. Strategic narratives provide the stakeholders of an organization with an identity and an understanding of their relationship with the organization.

Stories are more memorable; they teach and are more efficient than policy manuals (Peters & Austin, 1985, p. 278). Studies show that companies that tell good stories internally help build a strong company with the ability to have sustained growth. Stories dictate philosophy more than facts, goals and manuals. Stories are more effective in convincing workers of the importance of policies and reasons behind company decisions (Peters, 1987, p. 506).

Browning and Daily (2014) studied the effect of the function of narrative repetition in organizations and found that strong stories that are repeated within organizations can have a significant positive impact. Narrative repetition is defined as the recurrence of story (p. 24). Repetitive narratives have the ability to help companies maintain control as a way of instructing members how to “live their lives” (p. 26), to promote resistance (p. 28), create differentiation for the organization and individuals (p. 30), integrate and unite by

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providing an organizational bond (p. 31), provide stability through consistency over time (p. 32), and effectively disseminate change (p. 34).

Storytelling can be used in organizations to effectively explore project issues and help with complicated ideas and behaviours that are outside the organizational norms (Williams, 2008). Stories can be used to promote problem solving by using them in project reviews to teach lessons learned (Desouza et al., 2005; Goffin & Koners, 2011; Milton 2010). They provide a strong way of communicating company norms, core beliefs, values and culture of an organization (Desouza et al., 2005; Perry & Hansen, 2007). New leaders can acclimate to their roles better by hearing and learning stories from their organization (Linde, 2001; Peet, 2012). Organizational leaders who demonstrate storytelling skills not only develop more effective relationships with those they lead, but help provide an aspirational culture by showing a pathway to leadership (Harris & Barnes, 2006).

However, scholarship also points to the idea that it is not simply good enough to tell stories; the stories must be compelling. There are some limitations that have to be overcome in order for a narrative to have a positive influence. Swap et al. (2001, p. 103) define organizational story as “a detailed narrative of past management actions, employee interactions or other intro- or extra organizational events that are communicated informally within the organization.” Well-told stories should convey knowledge, information and emotion, and communicate complex ideas in an influential way (Snowden, 2000). They must be believable, authentic and compelling to add value to the organization (Dalkir, 2013). Duffield and Whitty (2016) argue that storytellers must not only be skilled, but that organizations must provide the proper space, training and systems to disseminate stories in order for them to be effective. Milton (2010) argues that every story needs to have a clear



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conclusion so others can learn from the story. Poorly told stories without believability, authenticity or purpose will not be remembered and will not influence company culture or stakeholder behavior.

The research shows that storytelling can have a significant influence on organizations that create, tell and repeat strong stories. They are more unified, provide a sense of community and purpose, and help stakeholders connect with the mission of the organization. Giving employees a clear story to live and to tell can increase confidence and help them do their jobs better. However, companies must know how to tell a good story in order for the stories to have a positive influence.

### **Narrative Theory and External Business Communication**

When discussing narrative advertising, what first comes to mind are commercials. Narrative advertising appears in 24.5% of commercials that are shown during prime time in the United States (Chang, 2012a). According to Escalas (1998), a narrative ad is one that tells a story by “depicting one or more episodes consisting of actors engaged in actions to achieve goals” in a “sequence initiated by events and actions result[ing] in outcome(s)” (p. 273). Narrative advertising usually involves product consumption or a plot associated with what people desire, such as romance, achievement, or hopes that can be achieved through the product (Chang, 2012b).

Chang (2013) argues that while a customer evaluates and finds meaning in a product based on its attributes, features or facts shown in advertising, there is also a subjective element of evaluation that happens when a consumer experiences an ad-viewing. The evaluation of a product or brand can be based on the experience a viewer has while watching the ad that has nothing to do with the product or service (p. 54). Human

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judgments not only come from the content of information in an ad, but also from the subjective experience that media consumers feel from processing the information (Schwarz, 2004). The stronger the story, the more connected to the story in the advertising, the stronger the experience and stronger the brand association. Advertisers who can tell good stories that are easily comprehended can create a stronger bond with the audience and create stronger influence on buying potential (Chang, 2013, p.65)

Deighton (1989) says that television commercials take two forms, argument and drama. Drama type ads rely on character and plots to tell stories while argument ads argue for the value or features of the product or service. Drama ads act differently than argument ads in that the audience becomes “flow” in the story and feels empathy and emotional connection with the character in the ads, and therefore the product. The viewers then accept the message of the ad more easily because they are less prone to argue with the ad. They emotionally identify with the characters and content and connect more with the product.

As consumers begin to have increasingly more negative attitudes towards traditional advertising, new ways of engaging consumers are arising. One growing advertising strategy is creating content that both seeks to communicate advertising content while also entertaining (Chen, 2015, p. 21). This has given rise to mini-films. Chen’s research shows that while audiences strongly connect with the films, this does not always directly correlate to a positive attitude towards a brand (p. 25). Positive brand association is contingent on a strong entertainment value placed on the film and whether the film tells a good story or not. “When consumers are absorbed by and appreciate the film, positive branded evaluation will be formed” (p. 26). If the brand is out of place in the film or gets in

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the way of the story, the experience is less entertaining and can even create a negative attitude towards the brand.

Stories that are told well are more powerful even than facts. Building on Fisher's idea that stories convey meaning through both fictional and factual telling of narratives, Rossen (2009) argues that when it comes to building brand identity "Facts alone don't do the trick when it comes to storytelling" (p. 191). There has to be a narrative. Research shows that stories are more persuasive than abstract statements or statistics. They are easier to remember than facts. In the context of business, a story can be used to both engage and persuade. A business can use a story to build a brand by giving stakeholders something they can easily remember and repeat. However, for stories to be repeated, they need both details and credibility (p. 188). Details refers to a story being specific and credibility refers to a story being cohesive and having fidelity. It must follow a path and make sense.

Denning (2005) argues that telling good stories about the creation of the company, or stories that engage with a brand, help to spread word of mouth, information and buzz about the company, which Rosen (2009) argues is the most powerful form of marketing. Companies must give compelling stories for stakeholders and customers to tell. A strong story can help build a brand by giving consumers positive words to spread about the brand.

Researchers have used the study of story to look at marketing communications, branding, discursive psychology, semiotics, and other areas related to narratives in business (Langett, 2007, p. 8; Nilsson, 2015, p. 51). Researchers have also looked at narratives to explore various aspects of business communication and seen strong results when it comes to application in branding (Woodside, Miller & Sood, 2008, p.102). Ringer and Thibodeau (2009, p.12) view narrative branding as a strategic branding process where stories of the

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brand and strong metaphors are systematically incorporated into marketing, describing this as a breakthrough branding strategy.

In the context of narrative branding, the market is composed of people who apply their psychology and rhetorical competence in interacting with objects, other people, and with the information that is relayed to them (Nilsson, 2015, p. 51; Ringer & Thibodeau, 2009, p.12). Their interactions with the market make up their stories. When they interact with a given brand, a story emerges. The emergence of a story helps a brand enter into a conversation with the customer. It involves an exchange of meanings and values between the customer and specific market elements in the story. Story is then used as a meaning-making processes, and stories are created and used to provide an account of outcomes and expectations associated with a given brand (Kamp, 2015, p. 14). Meaning is attributed to a brand through a consumer's understanding of the story associated with the brand. The brand is speaking to the customer through marketing, but ultimately it becomes a conversation where the customer puts meaning back on the brand.

Narrative theory is applied to contextualize brands as stories that are told within clear context of place and time. This connects the story to the specific individual or group the story is being told to. Bowling (2014, p.15) applies the concept of narrative to a common concept in marketing today – big data – citing the importance of narrative probability and fidelity (Fisher, 1984, p. 274) in collecting and making sense of data. Story is key to articulating the application of big data in marketing communications. Stories take the data and help communicate the meaning of that data to a targeted group who are connected with values. This gives companies the ability to target marketing initiatives at specific groups. Narratives help to establish real-life story models to guide these marketing

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initiatives and help them be more effective. Bowling (2014, p. 30) believes the need to humanize big data analytics is important. Marketing initiatives that use big data in this way also increase the chances of fostering customer knowledge and connection while integrating a more ethical approach to the generation and use of the data.

Narrative theory establishes symbolic space in which values and meanings are created and retrieved by the tellers and interpreters of narratives. The symbolic space allows for the processing of narratives and can serve to reinforce the consumer's understanding of the facts and statistics of brands that are told to the customer and enable the consumer to establish a stronger connection (Escalas, 2007, p. 422; Green & Donahue 2008, p. 242). Iconic brands use the power of stories by using narratives to infuse meaning into symbols that customers will interact with. By building story into a luxury brand, companies like Versace or BMW tell a story simply with their logo. The symbol itself offers value and meaning to the individual associated with the logo. The logo now tells a story about the person wearing or driving it.

Narratives are used to create and maintain a strong brand differentiation that stands out in a competitive market with strong marketing content as well as design. Iconic brands tend to always use a strategic narrative to dominate markets (Kapferer, 2008, p.12). These narratives may be reinforced in the fundamental elements of brand design. Strong and iconic brands use story in symbols. These allow for quick recognition by potential customers, product users and other stakeholders. One remarkable characteristic of these narratives is their potential to be stand-alone points of engagement. (Karjalainen, Nikitas, & Rahe 2013, p.2).

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The level to which narratives are interwoven into the various elements of the brand determine the amount of connection a customer identifies with a given brand. The more a narrative is woven in, the more a customer identifies with the brand. These connections can be shaped by the customer's affiliation to specific groups (Escalas, 2007, p. 379). For instance, car owners easily frame their group belonging in terms of their car brand. They see themselves as a "Ford guy" or "Toyota man." Young and Warell (2008) examine the various aspects of brand design for a superior car's interior, awarding primary focus to perceptual experience and noting that brand semiotics are very important in building effective car brands (p. 499). Such connections can facilitate and foster brand awareness, resonance, superiority, loyalty, among other desirable outcomes of effective branding. In order for these to be achieved, strategic narratives have to be used to achieve an effective level of contextualization for the wide range of meanings that could be derived from the brand (Karjalainen, Nikitas, & Rahe, 2013, p. 2). In order to interact with brands that are created through consistent narratives, customers engage in their own narrative-processing techniques. Brands can tap into this (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 172).

While the research on the influence of narrative branding on consumers is limited, there is enough evidence to show that brands that incorporate strong narratives into their marketing will see positive results. Consumers will identify more with the brand, have positive brand association, connect with the value and meaning of a brand, and help create positive word of mouth marketing.

### **Indirect Communication**

While the review up to this point has focused on the ability of narrative to impact brands and business, there are also arguments by Kierkegaard for using story to address and

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change religious beliefs through indirect communication. He believes that indirect communication, including story, is more effective in making a difference in changing beliefs than direct communication involving argument and facts. This takes the application of theory beyond potentially having influence on a businesses making money and speaks to non-profits and churches being able to effectively use story to influence thought, which ultimately influences behavior. This can lead to an increase in donors, volunteers, or greater activism.

Direct communication focuses on communicating facts and information. It offers clear instruction with no mystery or riddle. It is designed to target the mind, but not the imagination or will. Whereas indirect communication is much less about relaying facts and more about helping individuals discover new truths or challenge truths they might believe. It tends to focus on the imagination and will. It takes the familiar and makes it stranger to provoke thought and reflection so the audience is more engaged in deciding the value of the information and what action to take (Halliday & Fraser, 2014, p. 130-131).

In *Point of View*, Kierkegaard (1962) explains that during his day most people thought they were Christian, but they lived just as sensually as any heathen. (p. 32) They were under the illusion that they were living rightly. In order to combat this, he as an author, must pretend he is not Christian and come at the illusion from an aesthetic perspective. He believed if an author were to try and address the illusion through merely religious means, argument or facts, then the reader will simply take the book and “lay it aside... go around by another street and (does) not hear him” (p. 24). The reader only becomes more solidified in his illusion. Direct communication that addresses religious ideals only makes the person more adamant about their beliefs. Kierkegaard says that “an

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illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed” (p. 24). The communicator must approach things gently and from behind through indirect methods (p. 25). These indirect methods include humor, satire, and story.

In his discussion on Kierkegaard’s theory of indirect communication, Anderson (1963) points out that, according to Kierkegaard, when it comes to communicating content with ethical or religious considerations, direct forms of discourse are not useful. “The presence of ethico-religious illusions... indicates the need for an indirect method of communication” (Anderson, 1963, p. 6). He says that Kierkegaard insists that when it comes to religious illusions that each person’s experience is subjective and his realities are “more concrete than hard facts” (p. 1). Addressing those illusions directly will only cause a person to dig in deeper to their own beliefs. Therefore, an indirect approach is needed because if the recipient is to learn anything, he must discover it for himself. The communicator must indirectly approach the listener and help him discover truths for himself. The goal of indirect communication, then, is not to clarify an idea, secure acceptance of a proposal, or arouse emotion, but to stimulate the recipient into independent activity” (p. 7). Independent thinking is not as easily achieved through direct communication.

In *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Roger Poole (1993) believes that Kierkegaard is misunderstood because readers often focus too much on *what* he is saying and fail to take a proper account of *how* he says it. The form of the communication can offer more about the meaning and purpose than even the content (Poole, 1993, p. 2). He agrees with Anderson that this form of rhetoric works well for Kierkegaard because the reader comes to conclusions on his own. He explains:



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“The aim of the early indirect communication is to involve the reader... The reader has to be gathered in as a potential ally, seduced and intrigued by the typographical and rhetorical waylayings of the text, and then involved in a kind of detective work... where there is no unadorned instruction or doctrine or objective fact to be had, but only the mutually shared experience of perplexity. (Poole, 1963, p. 9-10)

He says that in Kierkegaard’s writings, “There is a split between the surface signifiers in the text and any possible signified” (p. 9). Each work seems to have a double meaning that was intended and achieved through indirect communication. The suggestion is that Kierkegaard used indirect communication because he thought it was the best way to reach his audience. The intended meaning of each work can be debated, but the idea that Kierkegaard used and valued indirect communication is clear.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard (1992) discusses the differences between subjective and objective thinking and what type of communication is required to engage these types of thinking. This is where he specifically address what he calls religious “illusions” or false thinking that need to be addressed in order to bring the Church to a healthier place, in his mind.

He argues that religious ideas are not objective, they are subjective. He says that by simply understanding the idea of God and contemplating God’s own existence, the religious thinker is already subjective. It requires a different type of communication in order to impact this type of thinker. He says, “Wherever the subjective is of importance in knowledge and appropriation is therefore the main point, communication is a work of art; it

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is doubly reflected, and its first form is the subtlety that the subjective individuals must be held devoutly apart from one another and must not run coagulatingly together in objectivity” (p. 79). He concludes this discussion by stating that “ordinary communication, objective thinking, has no secrets; only doubly reflected subjective thinking has secrets; that is, all its essential content is essentially a secret because it cannot be communicated directly” (p. 79).

Objective thinking invests everything in the result and focuses on copying and reeling off the results and answers, while subjective thinking invests everything in the process of becoming and often omits the results. (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 73). Subjective and objective thinking are characterized by their communication. Objective or “direct communication requires certainty, but certainty is impossible for a person in the process of becoming” (p. 74). “Subjective thinking invests everything in the process of becoming and omits the result” (p.73). Objective thinking is results-based, but according to Kierkegaard, the reflection of inwardness, through indirect communication, leads the subjective thinker to a double reflection (p. 73). One way this can be done is through the use of story. He states, “When a thought has gained its proper expression in the word, which is attained through the first reflection, there comes the second reflection, which bears upon the intrinsic relation of the communication to the communicator and renders the existing communicator’s own relation to the idea” (p. 76). The second reflection is what ultimately causes the change of thinking to stick. Using a story to cause double reflection will ultimately have a stronger influence of change on an individual’s religious or ethical stances.

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Kierkegaard says that objective and subjective thinking require different forms of communication that involve direct and indirect communication. “The difference between subjective and objective thinking must also manifest itself in the form of communication” (p. 73). He explains the difference between immediate and direct communication and indirect communication. “Objective thinking is completely indifferent to subjectivity and thereby to inwardness and appropriation; its communication is therefore direct” (p. 75). Direct communication works to approach objective thinking because it does not require double reflection.

While indirect communication can have a strong influence on religious ideals, Halliday and Fraser (2014) argue that its usefulness extends into business contexts as well. In broad terms, indirect communication can be useful when an audience resists a message or believes it understands something that, in fact, it does not. It is useful in addressing an audience that already has enough information to act wisely, but has not moved. It can also be used to raise awareness around an issue that would otherwise stay in the shadows (Halliday & Fraser, 2014, p.131). Specific examples include engaging with difficult employee reviews, changing a company’s vision/ownership/leadership, delivering bad news, creating commercial advertisements in a crowded market, rebuilding trust after a challenging episode, or repairing a damaged corporate image (p. 132). All of these are more easily accomplished through telling a story than simply communicating facts or directly confronting sensitive issues.

### **Applying Communication Theory and Research to Build a StoryBrand**

In his book, *Building a Story Brand*, Miller (2017) begins by arguing that most companies are wasting enormous amounts of money by telling the wrong story or a

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confusing story. They are attempting to tell their own story, but customers are not interested in the organizational story. They are interested in their own story. Customers want to be the hero of their own story (p. 12). Telling a clear and compelling story will invite customers into a story and win out in the marketplace.

Miller starts with this premise. “There’s a reason most marketing collateral doesn’t work. Their marketing is too complicated. The brain doesn’t know how to process the information. The more simple and predictable the communication, the easier it is for the brain to digest. Story helps because it is a sense-making mechanism. Essentially, story formulas put everything in order so the brain doesn’t have to work to understand what’s going on” (p. 6). This follows Fisher’s idea that humans use story to find meaning and make sense of what is happening in life around them.

Story formula is then positioned as the repeatable “secret weapon “that can help companies overcome customer confusion and promote engagement (p.15). Story is the most powerful device brands have to communicate a message to an audience. This is in line with Fisher’s assertion that

no matter how strictly a case is argued- scientifically, philosophically, or legally- it will always be a story, an interpretation of some aspects of the world that is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by human personality. Even the most well-argued case will be informed by other individuated forms besides argument, especially by metaphor. (1987, p. 49)

This also fits with what Fisher (1987) says about audiences relating better to stories that occur on a sequential chronological timeline.

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Miller summarizes the essential elements of “every story you see or hear” to this simple formula: A CHARACTER who wants something encounters a PROBLEM before they can get it. At the peak of their despair, a GUIDE steps into their lives, gives them a PLAN, and CALLS THEM TO ACTION. That action helps them avoid FAILURE and ends in a SUCCESS (p. 20).



*Figure 2: Visual of StoryBrand Framework*

Companies must create short sound bites that tell the customer the story. Each of these sound bites then work together to form a foundational story that can then be applied to various marketing. This helps companies filter their messaging into something that makes more sense. Miller refers to it as taking noise and making music (p. 16).

This framework then acts as a filter for all messaging. Miller draws on the work of Hitchcock, who describes a good story as “life with all the dull parts taken out” (p. 26). He argues that good branding is the same. This framework helps companies focus on the

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important things customers are looking for in their story as it relates to the brand. Miller breaks down how to create sound bites for each of the elements of the framework.

**Character.** The key to the beginning of the story is that for the StoryBrand framework, the customer is the hero of the story, not the company (p. 30). This is the most important paradigm shift companies must buy into in order to follow the StoryBrand framework. Green and Brock (2000) show that audience attachment to characters plays a critical role in narrative-based belief change. “Source credibility is usually an external ‘given’ in rhetorical communications; however, for fictional or narrative communications, attachment to a protagonist may be an important determinant of the persuasiveness of a story (p. 702). By placing the customers themselves, or a character based on customers’ specific wants and transformational desires, as the heroes of the story, a company allows for more narrative transportation and increases the positive affect a message can have on a customer.

In any good story, the audience must know what a character wants. The key for branding is to identify something a customer wants in relation to the product or service being offered. Companies are encouraged to find the one thing their customers want with regard to the brand.

Examples of this include: Financial Advisor: “A Plan for Your Retirement.” College Alumni Association: “Leave a Meaningful Legacy.” Fine-Dining Restaurant: “A Meal Everybody Will Remember.” Real Estate Agent: “The Home You’ve Dreamed About.” Bookstore: “A Story to Get Lost In.” Breakfast Bars: “A Healthy Start to Your Day.” When a company defines something their customer wants, the customer is invited to alter their story in the company’s direction (p. 47).

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The second part of understanding what a customer wants is to understand who a customer wants to be. What is the aspirational identity that a consumer longs for in relation to using a company's product or service? Miller says, "Brands that participate in the identity transformation of their customers create passionate brand evangelists" (p. 132). A company must identify what identity transformation looks like for a customer.

This element of the story allows brands to connect the values and identity of the customer with the iconic value of the brand itself. As Escalas (2007) says, these connections can shape how the characters feel about themselves by helping them affiliate with a specific group (p. 379). If a brand is luxurious or portrayed as helping someone achieve status, the customer will take on this identity by associating himself with the brand story. This also is an aspect of the framework that differentiates this framework from other types of narrative driven marketing frameworks.

Jonah Sachs (2012) argues that while story is increasingly becoming more of a buzzword in marketing, it can be just a continuation of "inadequacy marketing" developed in the 1960s to show how inadequate people are without a product. Inadequacy marketing says, "You aren't pretty until you lose weight" or "You aren't clean enough until you use this detergent." He contrasts this with "empowerment marketing" that calls the consumer to something higher. According to Sachs, empowerment marketing involves

stories told to help encourage audiences on their path to maturation and citizenship...you can define higher-level values appropriate to your message, brand, and audience. Then, using what we learn from Joseph Campbell, you can turn those values into a resonant moral of the story and create a story structure that will appeal to the heroic potential in your audiences. (p. 113)

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The identity transformation identified in the StoryBrand framework contributes to a story that calls the audience to be the best version of themselves.

Examples of identity transformation include: PET FOOD BRAND: From passive dog owner to every dog's hero. FINANCIAL ADVISOR: From confused and ill-equipped to competent and smart. SHAMPOO BRAND: From anxious and glum to carefree and radiant (p. 140).

By identifying these two elements of the character, a company does a few things. First, it keeps the story focused. Many companies try to communicate too many things and overwhelm the customer with confusing information. By starting with what the character wants, the story is focused and clear. Second, it also opens what is called a "story gap" and the audience begins to wonder if the hero will get what they desire. By identifying what a customer wants, this allows the company to place a gap between the character and what they want. That gap must be filled by the product or service the company offers (p. 47). However, for this to be effective, what the character wants and their identity have to be acknowledged by the company and stated in a clear and compelling way. The filter applied for this element of story is that it must clear, focused, and compelling.

In applying this to marketing, it translates into putting these two items in the header of a website or starting out an email by stating what the character wants. A company must be obvious and clear about what they offer with regard to customer wants. Using the examples above for a financial advisor, a sentence could look like, "When it comes to your finances, we know you want to be smart (character identity). In order to do that you need a plan for your retirement (character want)." This starts the story off with a clear objective for the character and helps them enter into a story. The sound bites created for these



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elements of the story act as a filter for messaging. It helps the financial advisor focus so that they are not adding extra messaging that causes the customer to feel overwhelmed and confused. By placing this first in a website header, or as the starting sentence in an email, it forces the company to start the story from the beginning, establishing coherency in the story.

**Problem.** Identifying a customer's problem deepens their interest in the story a brand is telling (Miller, 2007, p. 57). The problem in a story is the hook. Without a problem, there is no interesting story. In a good story there are three levels of a problem that work together to engage an audience. It is the same in branding. The three levels of problem are external, internal and philosophical.

The external problem acts as a barrier between where the character is and what the character wants. The external problem is often a physical, tangible problem the character must overcome. In a film this could be a bomb or the perilous journey a hero must take. If there is no problem, there is no story.

Most businesses exist to solve a problem for their customers. This tends to be obvious for most companies, but many do not state it expressly in their marketing. An external problem could be as simple as providing insurance, mowing a lawn, or fixing a leaky pipe. Because a good story does not begin until there is a problem to overcome, companies must consistently talk about the problem they solve for their customers.

However, an external problem is not the only problem customers are facing. The purpose of the external problem in any story is to manifest an internal problem. Miller argues that companies are losing thousands of dollars a year because they neglect to address the internal problem the external problem creates. "Companies tend to sell

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solutions to external problems, but people buy solutions to internal problems” (Miller, 2017, p. 62). By neglecting to address the internal problem, companies fail to engage in the deeper story their customers are living. If a customer needs her lawn mowed (external problem), but is not embarrassed or overwhelmed (internal problem) by the task at hand, she will not purchase lawn care services. Customers start by looking for services to solve an external problem, but ultimately buy to solve an internal problem.

In marketing, this means that companies must address the customer’s internal problem and talk about how their services solve this problem. They do this by looking at what frustrations their products or services solve and articulating this in marketing and branding. Simple phrases like, “Stop feeling overwhelmed” or “Are you worried about...?” allow the customer to enter into the story and identify it as their own. By speaking to a customer’s internal problem, a brand can offer deeper story connection with the customer and increase narrative transportation. Increased narrative transportation contributes to a change of values and ultimately a change of behavior.

The final level of problem is the philosophical problem. The philosophical problem in a story is about something larger than the story itself. Addressing the philosophical problem in a story allows the audience to be involved in a story that is larger than themselves (Miller, 2017, p. 67). In a story this can look like good vs. evil, tyranny vs. democracy, or individuality vs. groupthink. In a story, the authors place themselves on one side or the other of the argument by telling the story in a way that offers meaning and reason for action. The story is making an argument for one philosophy over another and can be best summed up by using terms like *ought*, *shouldn’t* or *deserve*. “Bad people shouldn’t be allowed to win” or “People ought to be treated fairly” (p. 67).

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Brands that invite customers into a larger narrative add value to their products by giving their customers a deeper sense of meaning. By speaking to a larger narrative, companies can tap into this deeper sense of meaning. They position themselves on the same side philosophically as their customers.

Strong branding offers to solve all three levels of problem for their customers. They must talk about the problems on their website, in emails, and in overall marketing. Examples of how to do this can be found in good brands. For Nespresso Home Coffee Machines, the external problem is “I want better coffee at home.” The internal problem is “I do not feel sophisticated.” The philosophical problem is “I shouldn’t have to be a barista to make gourmet coffee at home.” For Edward Jones Financial Planning, the external problem is “I need investment help.” The internal problem is “I’m confused about how to do this.” The philosophical problem is “If I’m going to invest my money, I deserve an advisor who will thoughtfully explain things in person” (p. 69-70). By identifying and then talking about all three levels of problem, a company will allow customers to engage at a deeper level and see the company as a part of their story.

**Guide.** In narratives, storytellers use the guide character to encourage the hero and equip them to win the day. Frodo had Gandalf, Luke Skywalker had Yoda, Hamlet had his father’s ghost (p.75). Heroes in a good story need a guide. If they do not need a guide then they can solve the problem on their own, indicating the problem was not strong enough to make an interesting story.

Miller posits that customers are not looking for another hero in their story; they are looking for a guide (p. 73). Every human is living a story and on a transformational journey. A mistake companies make is they try to make themselves the hero of the story.

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This positions themselves in opposing stories with their customers. They try to prove themselves and talk about how good they are, but by doing so, do not leave room for the customer to enter into the story.

Another reason for companies to position themselves as the guide in the story is that heroes in the story are often the weak character. Heroes are often thought of as strong because of who they become by the end of the movie, but throughout the movie they are filled with self-doubt and are ill-equipped to handle the journey alone. The guide is the one in the story who is not on a transformational journey. They have already won the day and are confident they can help the hero.

In marketing, this means keeping the story focused on the customer. The company as guide simply helps the customer along the journey they are already looking to win. There are two things a brand must communicate to position themselves as the guide. They must express empathy and authority (p. 78).

In expressing empathy, a company tells the customer that they understand what the customer is feeling. This creates a bond of trust. Empathetic statements with phrases like “We understand how it feels to...” or “Like you, we are frustrated by...”. Real empathy allows the customer to see the company is like them. Customers are looking for brands they have something in common with (p. 80). In keeping the story coherent, the most powerful way to express authority is to speak to the customer’s internal problem. This lines up with Fisher’s understanding of fidelity and coherency. The assertion by the guide does not need to be extensive or long, just a simple statement that lets the customer know that the company knows what they are feeling. This follows Green’s (2006) understanding that the more an audience can experience narrative transportation by experiencing a sympathetic

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character who models behavior, or sees the character as “like them,” the more likely they are to model their own behavior and beliefs after the character.

In expressing authority, a company must express that they have already won the day for other customers without bragging about themselves. It is about expressing competence. Companies need to show that they have experience helping other people overcome the same problems their potential customers are facing. This can be expressed in marketing through testimonials of success, statistics that show social proof, awards, or logos of other companies their service has helped. These show that the company knows what they are doing and has the ability to help (p. 81-82). Outside sources can also attest to the authority of the company. If a company talks about itself too much, it become the hero, but putting these types of authority on their website or in emails allows other people to speak to their competency. Combined with empathy, this positions the company as the guide in the customer’s journey to help them overcome their problems.

**Plan.** In narratives, storytellers use the plan as a way to tighten the focus of the story and to give the hero a “path of hope” towards resolving the problem. It is typically given by the guide and acts as a bridge the hero must cross in order to arrive at the climactic scene (Miller, 2017, p. 87). Think of every heist movie or road trip. There is usually a scene where a character sits down and says, “Here’s the plan.” If there is no plan or people are confused, the audience will hear a character say, “What’s the plan?” The plan shows the audience and the characters that there is a way forward. Overcoming the problem is not only possible, but there is a clear way to do it even against sometimes impossible odds by avoiding the biggest risks. The plan creates clarity.

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Miller argues that customers trust a guide who has a plan (p. 85). As customers get closer to making a commitment to doing business with a company, the risk of losing something of value, like time or money, becomes higher. In order to overcome this fear, a company must give the customer a plan.

Effective plans in marketing do one of two things: they clarify how to do business with a company, or they remove a sense of risk by addressing questions the customer may have (p. 87). An example of the first type of plan could look like the following: (1) schedule an appointment, (2) allow us to create a customized plan, and (3) let us execute the plan together. These steps may seem obvious, but they allow customers to see there is an easy way forward.

This type of plan is also effective because narratives with a meaningful chronological structure help support the process of storytelling (Woodside, Miller & Sood, 2008, p.102; 135). The process plan gives a chronological path for customers to follow. They know they need to do things in order and there is a way forward.

The following is an example of the second type of plan: (1) easy to use, (2) lifetime customer support, and (3) money back guarantee.

This shows that the plan, or way of doing business with a company, is risk-free. This plan answers questions or fears the customer may be having, such as “What if I don’t know how to use it?” “What if I need help later?” or “What if I don’t like it?” Like a plan in a good story, these plans show the customer there is a path of hope going forward. This path is easy, clear, and avoids as many risks as possible.

For this to be effective, companies must place this on their websites, in emails and talk about it sales pitches. A company’s plan, or way they do business with customers, may

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involve 20 steps, but in order to keep things simple and not overwhelming for the customer, Miller recommends these steps be boiled down to three. This shows the customer the path is easy. It also makes the plan easy to memorize and repeatable so employees and customers can share the message. Rossen (2009) argues that by giving stakeholders something they can easily remember and repeat, positive word of mouth branding can occur more easily. A repeatable story is a more powerful story (p. 188).

**Call them to Action.** At this point in the story, the character's want has been defined, their challenges are clear, and a guide has been established who empathizes with their fears and has given them a plan to move forward. Now the character must take action. Characters do not normally take action on their own. There needs to be an inciting incident that causes the character to take action. In a movie this can be ticking bomb, a change in relationship, or a potential loss of a prize because of a countdown clock. Something must move the character to action because the audience knows intuitively that a hero will not take action unless something challenges him to do so.

In marketing, this looks like a "buy now" or "call now" button on a website. The call to action must be clear and it must be obvious. Consumers are faced with countless ad messages every day. Companies that do not make bold calls to action will be ignored (Miller, 2017, p. 96).

Miller suggests having two types of calls to action: a direct call to action and a transitional call to action, which work like two phases of a relationship (p. 99). A direct call to action is a clear call to do business. It offers the next step in the journey to purchase. It can involve placing an order, making a phone call or setting up a meeting, but it has to lead to a direct sale. It would be considered the "Marry me" proposal that gives the customer

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something to accept or reject. A transitional call to action might be “Let’s go on another date.”

Transitional calls to action offer less risk and offer something to their customers for free that help them move further down the customer journey by offering something that overcomes a problem or something of value. They are used to “on-ramp” customers to a purchase by continuing to build good will and position the company as the guide.

Transitional calls to action can do three things for a brand:

1. Stake a claim to your territory: This helps companies to be known for one thing by positioning the company as an expert in the field.
2. Create reciprocity: This continues to build the relationship with the customer by giving freely.
3. Position yourself as the guide: When the customer encounters the problem a company can solve in the future, they are more likely to return to do business (p. 103).

Transitional calls to action can take on a variety of forms. They can be PDF’s that offer “tips” to overcoming a problem or that give the potential customer value. They can be a series of free instructional videos that position the company as an expert and offer good advice for the potential customer. Other transitional calls to action could include free trials, samples, a quiz that gives the customer information about themselves they previously did not know, or testimonials told through compelling stories. These can be on a website, given at a conference, or placed in ads on Facebook. The purpose is to continue building relationship with the potential customer which will eventually call them to action.



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**Failure.** Every human being is trying to avoid a tragic ending (p. 107). A good story keeps audiences interested by revealing what is at stake in the story. The potential tragic ending is always known. The hero could fail at any moment and all will be lost. Each scene in a movie must answer the question, “What’s at stake for the hero?” (p. 108). Examples of failure would be the bomb going off and everybody dying, the kidnapped daughter being put on a boat and never seen again, or Jaws continuing to terrorize the town. The audience always knows what is at stake if the hero fails. Throughout the entire movie, failure is emphasized so the hero does not overcome the potential of the failure until the end of the movie.

Brands that do not warn customers about what could happen if the customer does not buy their product or service fail to answer the question “So what?” for their customers. Miller argues that people are motivated by loss aversion by quoting a study by Kahneman about why people make buying decisions, called Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Amos, 1979). Prospect theory proposes that people are more likely to be dissatisfied with a loss than they are satisfied with a gain. People are more likely to be moved to action to avoid losing \$100 than they are to work to gain \$100. Kahneman goes even further to say that in certain situations they are two to three times more motivated to make changes to avoid loss than to achieve a gain.

Brands must talk about the stakes for their customers to move. While movies focus heavily on the potential failure, brands cannot. They can quickly be seen as manipulative. Infante, Rancer and Womack (2003, p. 149) explain:

When receivers are either very fearful or very unafraid, little attitude or behavior change results. High levels of fear are so strong that individuals

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block them out; low levels are too weak to produce the desired effect.

Messages containing moderate amounts of fear-rousing content are most effective in producing attitudinal and/or behavior change.

Miller refers to failure as “salt in the recipe” (p. 112). If all the elements of story are ingredients for a recipe of bread, failure is salt. Too much and it will ruin the taste, but if it is not there, something is missing as well. Brands should put a few dire consequences in the messaging, but not make it the primary message. For a financial advisor customer, examples of potential failure could look like being confused about how their money is invested, not being ready for retirement, a lack of transparency from a financial advisor, or hidden fees (p. 113). Understanding the failure a customer may fear or identifying failures they are not aware of can help motivate a consumer to act.

In marketing, these can be listed as a set of questions, including: “Are you worried about not being ready for retirement?” Or, they can be stated in a positive result that overcomes the failure, such as “Stop worrying about not being ready for retirement.” The failures can also be overcome in language that is included in the “plan” portion of the framework. There does not have to be a lot of language around this element of the story, but it does have to be there.

**Success.** In good stories, there is a clear happy ending. If an audience does not see a closed story loop, traditionally with success, they leave unfulfilled. Good narratives also forecast what a happy ending looks like. Again, the audience knows what is at stake. They need to have an image of what life looks like on the other side. Miller says there are three dominant ways storytellers end a story for a hero (p. 121): (1) they win some sort of power

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or position, (2) they are unified with someone or something that makes them whole, or (3) they experience some kind of self-realization that also makes them whole.

Miller argues that this is the same for customers. They are longing for one of these happy endings. Brands need to speak to this happy ending for their customers. He instructs companies to never assume consumers understand how their brand can change their lives. Tell them (p. 117). Companies should cast a vision for what life is like after their purchase. It should be specific and clear. People are not drawn to a future that is fuzzy (p.188). Green (2006) says “Story-based mental imagery may be a particularly powerful means by which narratives can influence beliefs. Visual images, or mental pictures, can be evoked by a transporting narrative or provided by a visual narrative” (S170). Success imagery in marketing is a way of increasing narrative transportation through mental imagery.

In order to do this, companies need to include language that reflects the dominant ending for heroes in story. If a company product offers power or position, then a company needs to talk about the access or status the customer achieves. Companies can show the scarcity of the product or the premiums that are given to clients by being “preferred” or “Diamond members.” They can provide status through strong identity association with an iconic brand, like Rolex or Mercedes. If companies offer a union that makes them whole, then they can talk about how a product can reduce stress or workload or offers more time. All of these philosophies are designed to help customers feel more whole. If companies offer self-realization they can talk about inspiration, acceptance or transcendence (p. 121-126).

These types of successes can be written in copy that is placed in marketing or can be shown in images placed in websites, advertisements or commercials. If “failure” is salt

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in the StoryBrand formula, “success” is flour. Companies need cups and cups of flour. Miller advises companies to keep it simple and not overthink the application. Companies should stick to the obvious answers, but then cast a vision for future happiness and wholeness (p.128). Milton (2010) argues that every story needs to have a clear conclusion so others can learn from the story, and that showing a clear successful result of a customer purchase allows for the audience to have a clear conclusion to the brand story.

**Putting it together.** After brainstorming each of these elements of their customer story, companies are encouraged to write down short ideas or sentences that encapsulate each element of the story. This then acts as a foundational document to filter all messaging through to create a story with coherency. This is referred to as a BrandScript.

The first version of a written out BrandScript looks like the following:

At (COMPANY NAME) we know that you want to be (a/an) (IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION). In order to do that, you need (CHARACTER WANT). The problem is (EXTERNAL PROBLEM) which makes you feel (INTERNAL PROBLEM). We believe (PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM). We understand (EMPATHY) which is why we (AUTHORITY). Here’s how we do it: 1 (PLAN: STEP 1). 2 (PLAN: STEP 2). 3 (PLAN: STEP 3). So, (DIRECT CTA). And in the meantime, (TRANSITIONAL CTA). So you can stop (FAILURE) and instead (SUCCESS). (See Appendix C)

Miller goes on to show readers how to apply this messaging to websites, company culture, sales email sequences and nurturing email sequences. This is the part where companies can be creative in how the messaging is used. However, the power of the framework comes in sticking to the script. Miller says, “There shouldn’t be a single word, image or idea shared

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on your website that doesn't come from the thoughts generated by your StoryBrand BrandScript" (p. 155)

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The scholarly literature gives evidence that strong narratives can have a positive influence on a company with both internal and external audiences. Miller's framework teaches companies how to create focused narratives with coherency and fidelity to help companies communicate stories effectively to increase narrative transportation and is ultimately backed up by narrative theory and research. If companies apply this framework to their marketing, they should see positive results. With that in mind, the following research question will be used to guide the study:

R1: What are the most important factors that will help an organization to see positive influence by using the StoryBrand Marketing approach?

H1: The more thoroughly an organization implements the StoryBrand marketing approach, the more profitable an organization will be.

H2: The more thoroughly an organization implements the StoryBrand marketing approach, the more confidence employees will experience in creating marketing messaging.

H3: The more thoroughly an organization implements the StoryBrand marketing approach, the more time and money will be saved in creating marketing collateral.

### **Conclusion**

This section showed that while the research is limited, there is evidence that narrative-based marketing has the power to influence a company's internal culture as well as external communication. Following that, Miller's StoryBrand framework was connected

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to previous theory and discussed in depth in relation to story, as well as how it applies to marketing and branding. The next chapter will present the methodology that will be used to see what type of influence implementing the StoryBrand framework has on businesses.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

In the previous sections an introduction to the proposed area of research was presented. This included a history of StoryBrand, a review of relevant literature to justify the research, and the hypothesis that will serve to direct the data analysis. The intent of this section is to describe the methodology that was used for the research project. Included in the section will be a description of the research design, participants, instruments, procedure, and data analysis plan.

### Research Design

The purpose of this study is to determine the overall effectiveness of the StoryBrand marketing approach to increase an organization's ability to become profitable, have a positive influence on team confidence, and save time and money in creating marketing collateral. Further, the study looks to see if variables such as degree of implementation, company size, or the type of workshop purchased by the company might contribute to the increased positive impact of the StoryBrand approach.

In order to focus the study, one independent variable and three dependent variables were used to determine the impact of the StoryBrand framework on an organization. While there are many variables that may contribute to the positive impact of the StoryBrand framework, the following independent and dependent variables (IV, DV) will be used to help focus the scope of the study.

IV = The degree to which a company has implemented the StoryBrand Framework measured in the areas of marketing collateral

DV1 = The perceived influence on the profitability of the organization

DV2 = The perceived influence on employee confidence in creating marketing

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DV3 = The perceived influence on saving time and money in creating marketing

### **Participants**

The participants for this study were individuals who have become StoryBrand alumni in the previous 18 months. While the *Building A StoryBrand* book has sold hundreds of thousands of copies and contains the framework, for the purposes of this study, a StoryBrand alumni is defined as someone who has completed an online, live, or private workshop.

These individuals come from companies that range from start-ups to multi-million dollar international brands. There are individuals from companies with only one employee as well as large companies with thousands of employees. Some are non-profit and some are for-profit organizations. Some have internal marketing teams and some hire external agencies to create marketing. They wildly vary, but all have gone through the StoryBrand framework in a workshop setting in the past 18 months. This total number represents approximately 3150 alumni.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The StoryBrand company has an email database that tracks all purchasers of the various workshops. A list was created of all purchasers of StoryBrand online, live and private workshops from the previous 18 months. A SurveyMonkey link was delivered to the alumni through email and participation tracked through the Infusionsoft platform.

The survey included an introductory note to describe the study and its purpose. The participants were entered into a drawing to receive one of ten \$25 Amazon gift cards and given one week to complete the survey. Participation were tracked through Infusionsoft and one follow-up email was sent as a reminder of the one-week deadline.



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### **Measuring Instruments**

In the study, a survey (Appendix A) was used to measure one independent variable and three dependent variables as well as four participant (demographic) variables.

The independent variable for this study measured the degree to which organizations have implemented the StoryBrand framework into their marketing. Implementation of the StoryBrand Framework was determined by using matrix questions consisting of degree of implementation in nine areas of marketing: advertising/branding messaging and communication, direct mail campaigns, emails campaigns, sales messaging and collateral, social media messaging, specific offers, website, one-liner (elevator pitch) and overall implantation (all areas). Participants self-identified the percentage of implementation in each of these areas.

The dependent variables measured the degree to which companies see StoryBrand implementation as having a positive influence on their company. This involved two Likert scales that measure the positive results of implementation. The first is a five point Likert scale that measured the degree to which organizations implemented the StoryBrand framework into various areas of marketing as well as overall implementation. The second was a seven point Likert scale measuring the positive impact of StoryBrand implementation on the internal workings of the company, including saved time, having made jobs clearer/easier, improved team morale, satisfied customers, having made team more confident, and reduced marketing costs.

In addition to the above independent and dependent variables, four secondary independent or participant variables were considered. The participant variables helped determine the extent to which the relationship between the two major variables is

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influenced by secondary factors. In this study the participant variables are type of organization, customer focus, which type of workshop they attended and size of company.

Two types of data analysis were used for this study. First, in order to provide an understanding of the participants, description information was gathered to inform demographics, size of company, background of participant, type of company, gender and age. Second, analysis of variance (ANOVAs) and T-tests were used to examine for any significant differences between levels of implementation and positive influence on a company.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

In this chapter the findings for this study are presented, including descriptive statistics for all the major variables of interest, demographic characteristics of the sample, and information on the organizations and individuals who represented them in the study. Then, the results of the inferential statistical analysis of the survey data, including ANOVA, and T-tests, are presented and discussed. This analysis was conducted to determine if variables such as type of product purchased, company size, company type or non-profit focus influence success. Findings related to the specific hypotheses will be presented to show the influence of the implementation of StoryBrand on the overall success of an organization.

### **Attributes of Respondents and their Organizations**

The descriptive data collected in the StoryBrand customer survey included which type of product a customer purchased, type of business (marketing/branding agency, non-profit, for profit), and a breakdown of for-profit type (Business to customer, i.e. B2C, Business to business, i.e. B2B, or both). Of the 261 respondents, the highest percentage of respondents, 149 (57%), came from customers who identified as for-profit businesses while 49 (19%) identified as non-profit and 48 (18%) identified as a marketing agency. Of the for-profit businesses, 68, (46%) identified as business to customer focused, 50 (33%) identified as business to business focused and 31 (21%) identified as both. The largest number of respondents took the StoryBrand Workshop online, 152 (58%), while 95 (36%) attended a Live Workshop and 45 (17%) attended a Private Workshop. The largest percentage (22%) of organizations described their company's annual gross revenue to be between \$1MM-\$5MM; however, companies in the survey represented sizes of less than \$100,000 to more than \$100MM.

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### StoryBrand Variables

StoryBrand customers were asked “Please tell to what degree you have implemented StoryBrand in the areas of your business/organization where it could be applied” based on the percentage of integration. The specific areas of implementation addressed in question 3 include: Advertising/branding messaging and communications, direct mail marketing campaigns, email marketing campaigns, sales messaging and collateral, social media messaging, specific offers, website, one-liner (elevator pitch), and overall implementation (in all areas).

The highest reported level of implementation in individual pieces of marketing collateral were website ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ ) and one-line (elevator pitch) ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ). These are the two primary individual collateral items that are most often addressed in StoryBrand teaching and included in implementation teaching at the end of live workshop and private workshop events. A general application of the framework in overall advertising messaging and communications had the second highest mean overall ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ).

*Table 1*

*Descriptive Statistics for Implementation Variables*

	N	Range	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Advertising messaging and communications	261	5	0	5	3.46	1.54	2.37
Direct mail campaigns	261	5	0	5	1.74	1.86	3.47
Email marketing/campaigns	261	5	0	5	2.64	1.80	3.27
Sales messaging and collateral	261	5	0	5	2.83	1.75	3.07
Social media messaging	261	5	0	5	2.65	1.73	2.98
Specific offers	261	5	0	5	1.74	1.85	3.42
Website	261	5	0	5	3.48	1.70	2.90
One-liner (elevator pitch)	261	5	0	5	3.25	1.75	3.06
Overall implementation	261	5	0	5	3.16	1.38	1.91

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The lowest reported level of implementation came from responses related to direct mail marketing/campaigns ( $M = 1.74$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ) and specific offers ( $M = 1.74$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ). Organizations reported a mean of 3.16 ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) for overall implementation.

Customers were asked in question 4, “Thinking about the areas of your business/organization where you have used StoryBrand, how would you characterize the overall results/impact on a 7-point scale where 1 is strongly disagree and 7 is strongly agree?” While 17 areas of results were tested, the specific ones that have relationship to the hypotheses were as follows: StoryBrand has saved us time, StoryBrand has made our job cleaner/easier, StoryBrand has made our team more confident, Our marketing costs have decreased, StoryBrand has increased the profitability of our organization.

*Table 2*

*Descriptive Statistics for Success Variables*

	N	Range	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Saved us time.	257	6	1	7	4.56	1.79	3.21
Made our job cleaner/easier.	257	6	1	7	5.07	1.70	2.91
Team morale improved.	256	6	1	7	4.63	1.73	3.00
Increased customer satisfaction.	253	6	1	7	4.36	1.69	2.84
Been a positive experience.	257	6	1	7	5.67	1.59	2.53
Made our team more confident.	256	6	1	7	5.24	1.75	3.07
Marketing costs have decreased.	246	6	1	7	3.48	1.77	3.15
Increased number of customers.	250	6	1	7	3.96	1.86	3.47
Increased quality of products/services.	253	6	1	7	4.53	1.89	3.56
Contributed to organization's growth.	248	6	1	7	4.16	1.81	3.29
Increased revenues.	249	6	1	7	3.83	1.83	3.34
Gaining more employees.	247	6	1	7	2.62	1.81	3.30
Increased profitability.	247	6	1	7	3.56	1.80	3.26
Failed to deliver positive results.	251	6	1	7	2.22	1.67	2.79
Not realized gains we had hoped for.	250	6	1	7	2.91	1.84	3.39
Overall, we are completely satisfied.	255	6	1	7	5.37	1.57	2.48
StoryBrand makes the world a better place.	252	6	1	7	5.30	1.79	3.21

## STORYBRAND NARRATIVE MARKETING

### Results for Hypotheses

The first hypothesis predicted that the more thoroughly an organization implements the StoryBrand marketing approach, the more profitable an organization will be. When asked to characterize the results of StoryBrand on business profitability, 54% of respondents had a net positive response (4-7), indicating over half of all organizations saw an increased profitability.

To examine this hypothesis, an Analysis of Variance (one way ANOVA) was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference with the level of implementation as compared to increased profitability. The data show that greater implementation of StoryBrand leads to greater perceived profitability of the organization ( $F (df = 5, 24.2) = 8.6, p < .001$ ). Thus, hypothesis 1 is supported.

Figure 3 illustrates crosstabs by questions 3 and 4. It illustrates the positive influence between the level of success as compared with the implementation. Of customers who said they had fully implemented at the highest level (80%-100%), the mean was higher, while those who had barely implemented StoryBrand had a lower mean. These trends continue through all individual areas of implantation. For every individual piece of marketing, website, emails, one-liner, etc., when implementation increases, so does perceived profitability.

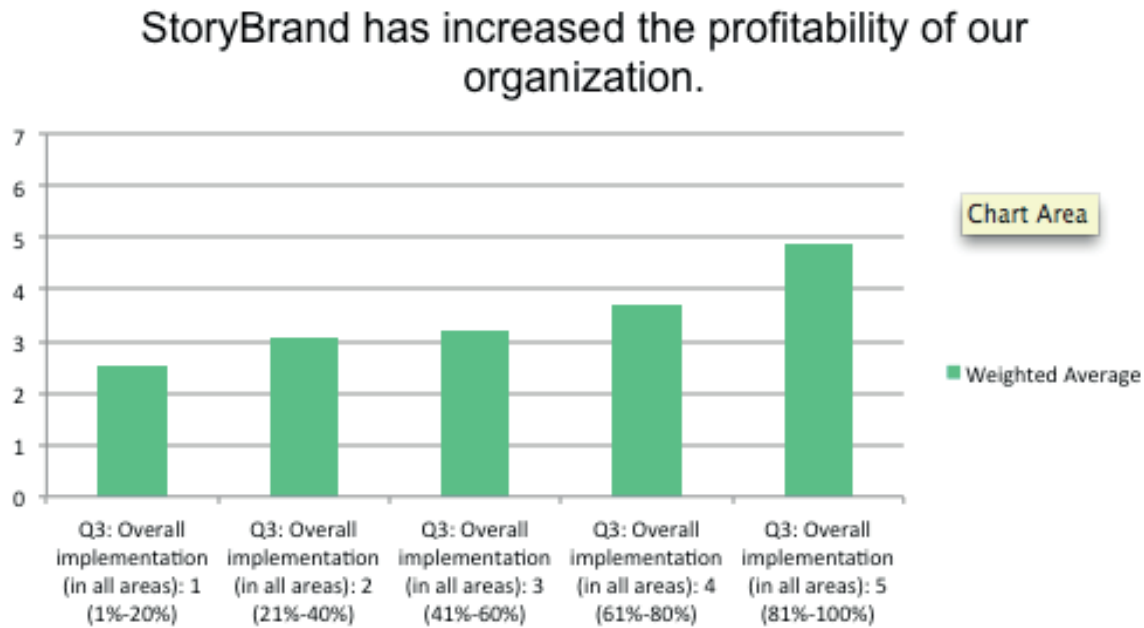


Figure 3: Graph of relationship between implementation and profitability

Other questions were asked in the survey that were not directly related to profitability, but identify areas of potential growth that may ultimately lead to profitability. Questions were asked with regard to increase in new customers, contribution to overall growth and increase in revenue. ANOVAs were conducted for each. The results show that the trend continued. The greater level of implementation results in higher scores in all areas that can influence profitability. StoryBrand messaging has directly contributed to our organization's growth ( $F(df = 5, 242) = 13.2, p < .001$ ), StoryBrand has contributed directly to increasing the number of customers ( $F(df = 5, 244) = 8.46, p < .001$ ) and StoryBrand has contributed directly to increased revenues ( $F(df = 5, 243) = 10.216, p < .001$ ) all show significance.

The following figures illustrate these results through cross tabs pulled for the corresponding results:

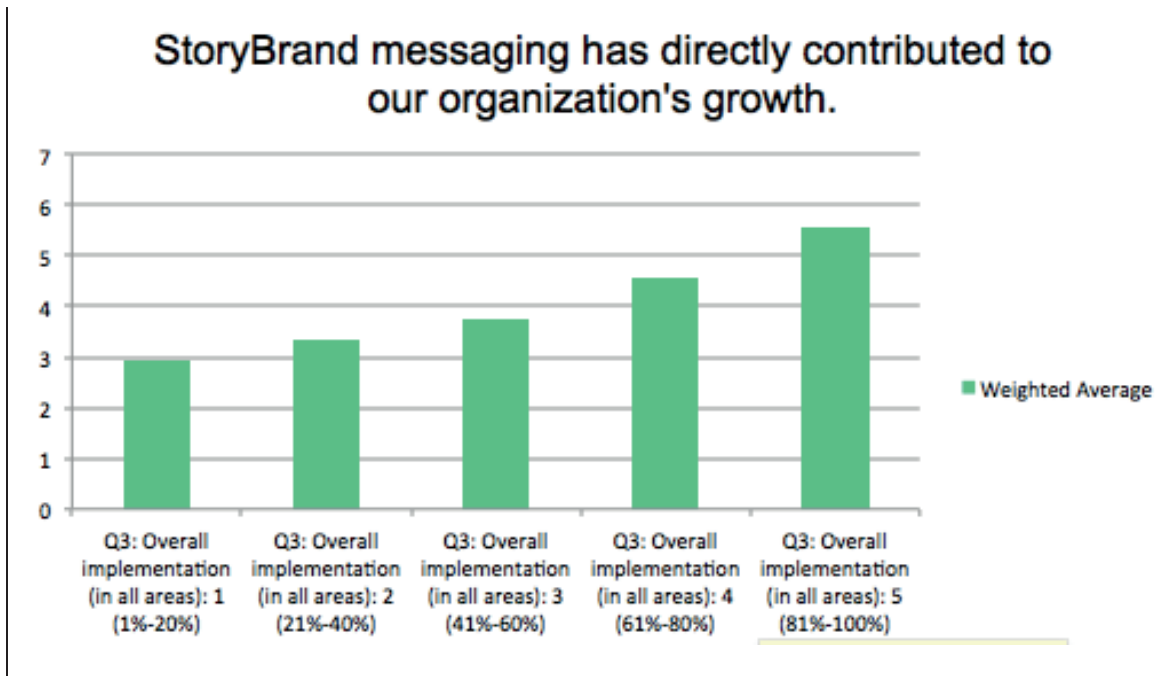


Figure 4: Graph of relationship between implementation and growth

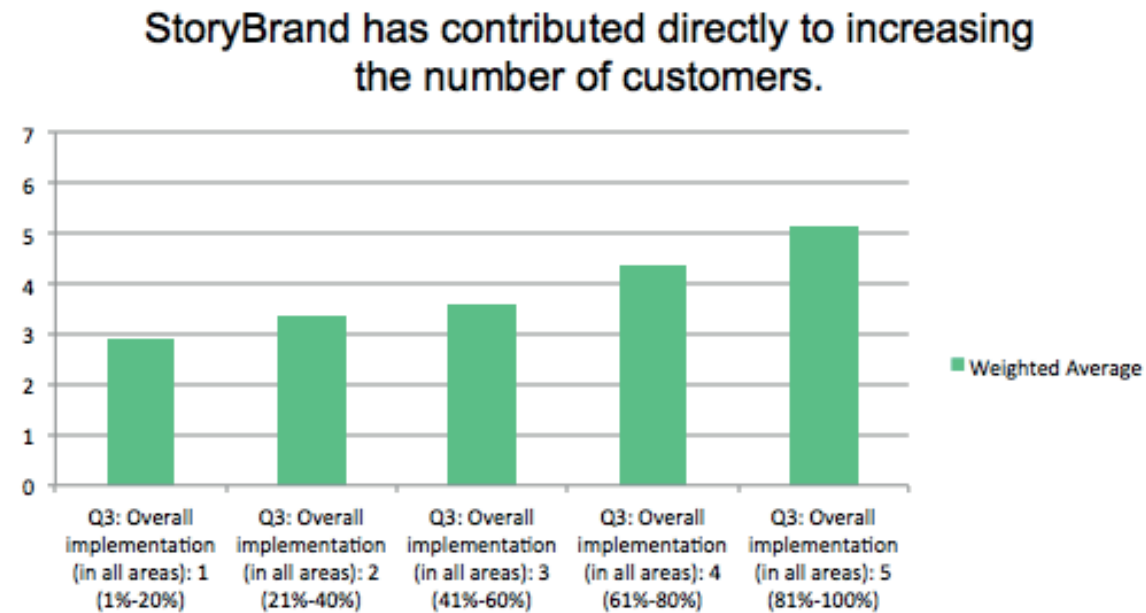


Figure 5: Graph of relationship between implementation and increase in customers



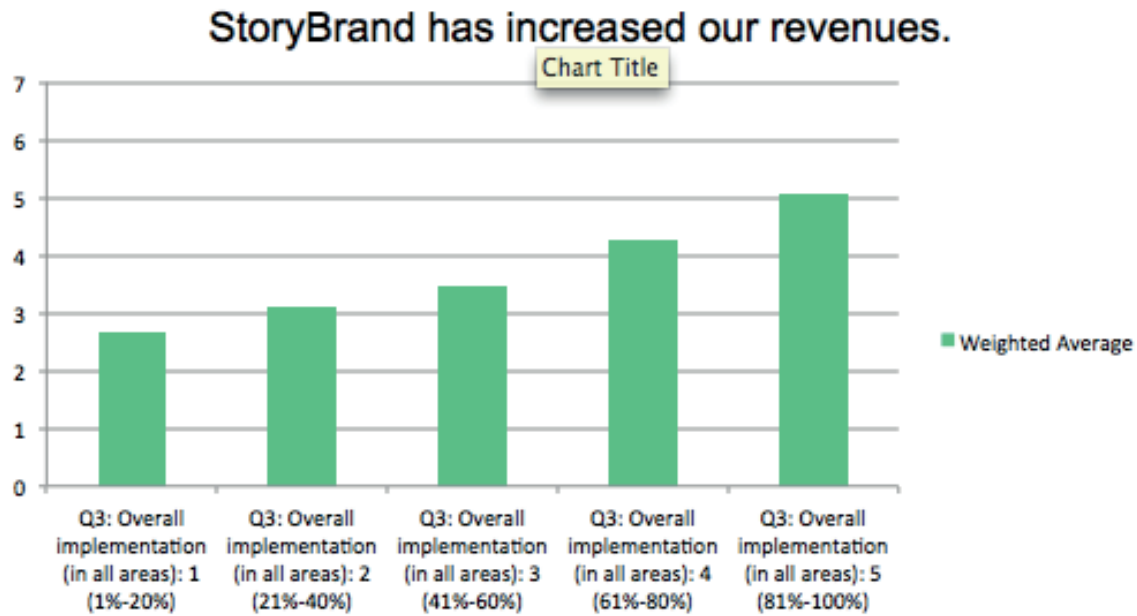


Figure 6: Graph of relationship between implementation and increased revenue

The second hypothesis predicted that the more thoroughly an organization implements the StoryBrand marketing approach, the more confidence employees will experience in creating marketing messaging. When asked to characterize the results of StoryBrand on increased employee confidence in creating marketing, 82% of respondents had a net positive response (4-7), indicating over three quarters of all organizations saw their employees experience more confidence in creating marketing messaging. This question had the highest mean ( $M = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) of the four questions directly related to the three hypotheses.

To examine this hypothesis, an ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference with the level of implementation as compared to increased employee confidence. The data show that greater implementation of StoryBrand leads to greater perceived employee confidence ( $F(df = 5, 250) = 9.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, hypothesis 2 is supported.

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The following table pulls crosstabs by questions 3 and 4. It illustrates the connection between the level of success as compared with the implementation.

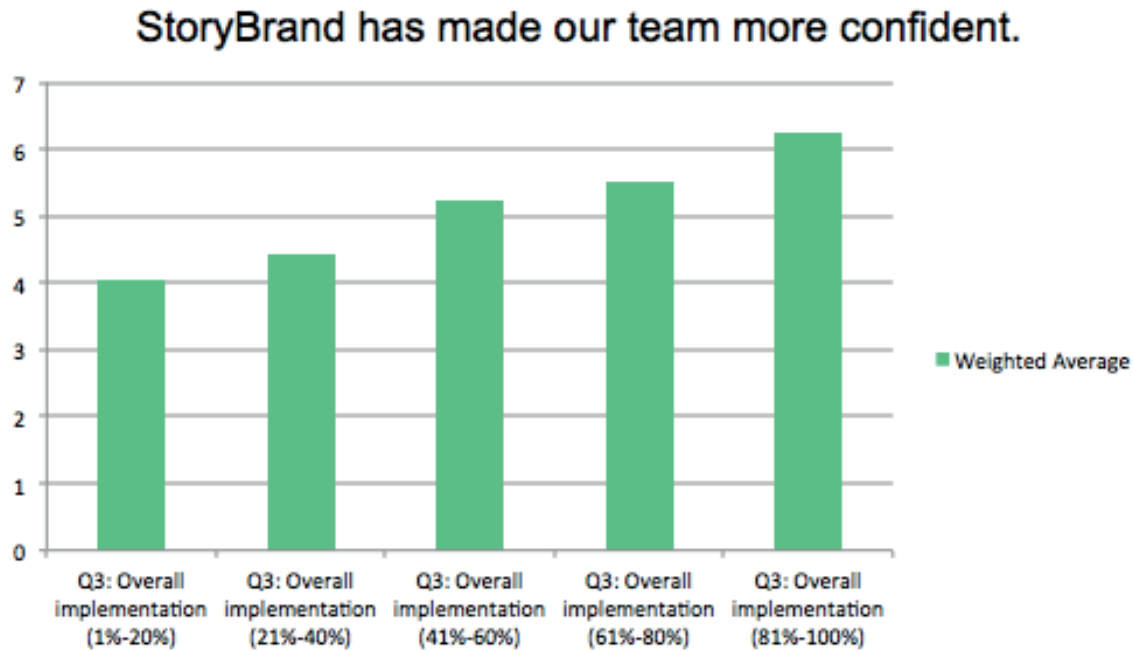


Figure 7: Graph of relationship between implementation and team confidence

Other questions were asked in the survey that were not directly related to confidence, but identify influences on internal employees' ease of job and team morale. The results show that the trend continues. Greater level of implementation results in an easier job for employees ( $F(df = 5, 251) = 13.78, p < .001$ ) as well as a higher team morale ( $F(df = 5, 250) = 9.24, p < .001$ ).

The following figures pull crosstabs by questions 3 and 4. They illustrate the connection between the level of success as compared with the implementation.

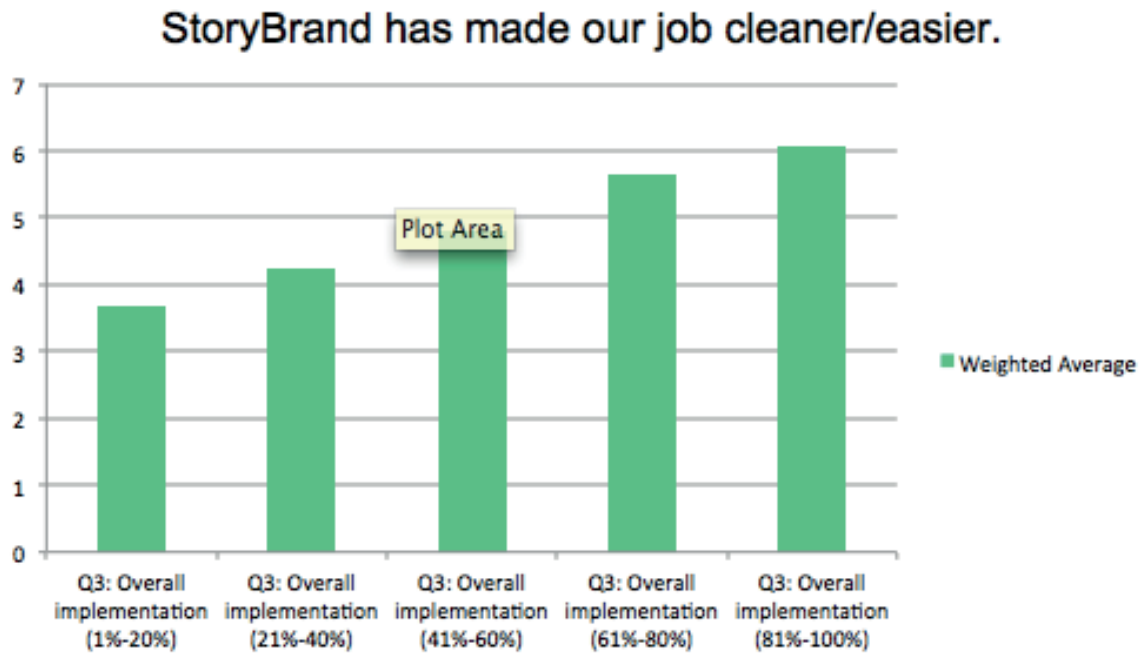


Figure 8: Graph of relationship between implementation and easier job

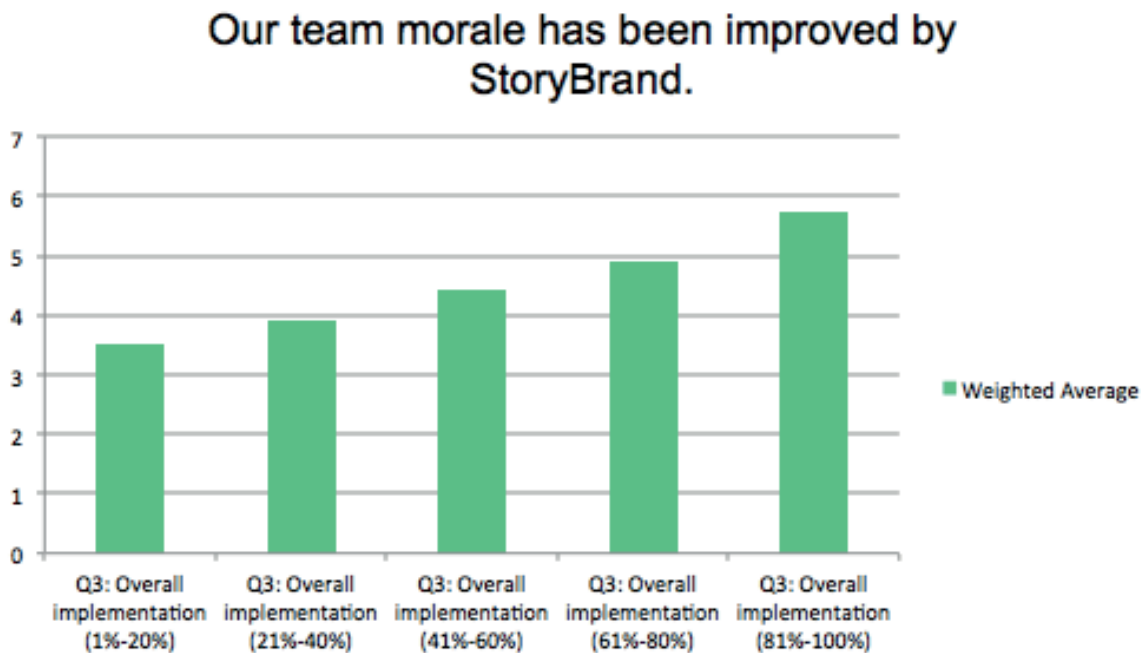


Figure 9: Graph of relationship between implementation and team morale

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The third hypothesis predicted that the more thoroughly an organization implements the StoryBrand marketing approach, the more it would save time and money in creating marketing collateral. There were two questions associated with this. For the question about saving time the mean was 4.56 ( $M = 4.56, SD = 1.79$ ) and for the question about saving money the mean was 3.48 ( $M = 3.48, SD = 1.77$ ), which was the lowest mean of the four questions asked associated with the hypotheses.

To examine this hypothesis, an ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference with the level of implementation as compared to saving time and money on creating marketing collateral. The data show that the greater implementation of StoryBrand leads to greater saving time in creating marketing collateral ( $F(df = 5, 251) = 10.98, p < .001$ ) and greater saving in marketing costs ( $F(df = 5, 240) = 7.18, p < .001$ ). Thus, hypothesis 3 is supported.

When asked to characterize the results of StoryBrand on saving time for creating marketing collateral, 70% of respondents had a net positive response (4-7). When asked to characterize the results of StoryBrand on decreased costs of creating marketing material, 49% of respondents had a net positive response (4-7). The following tables pull crosstabs by questions 3 and 4. They illustrate the connection between the level of success as compared with the implementation.

**StoryBrand has saved us time.**

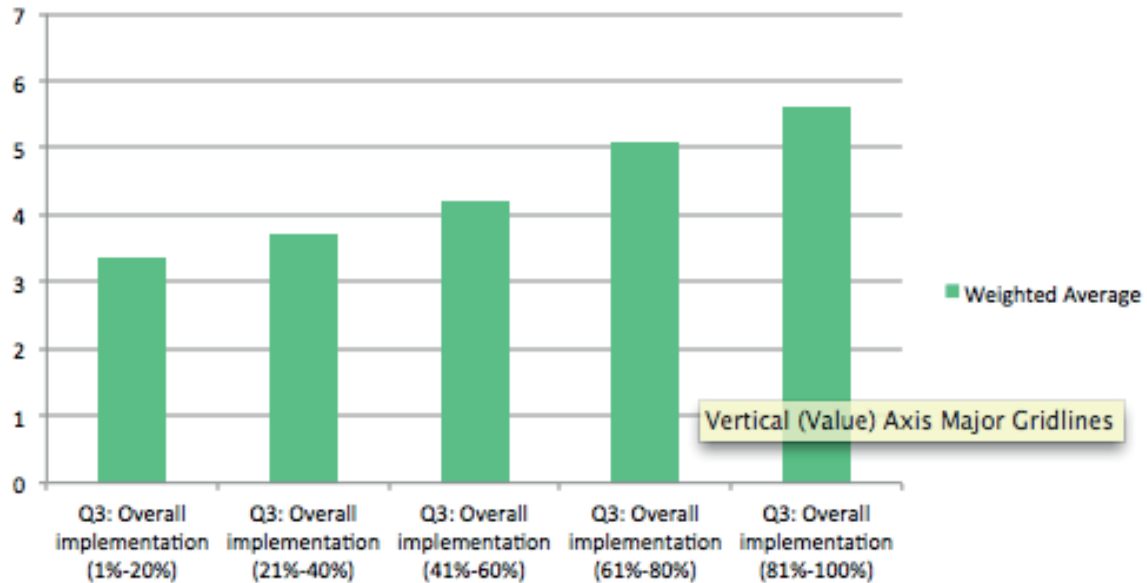


Figure 10: Graph of relationship between implementation and time saving

**Our marketing costs have decreased since we implemented StoryBrand.**

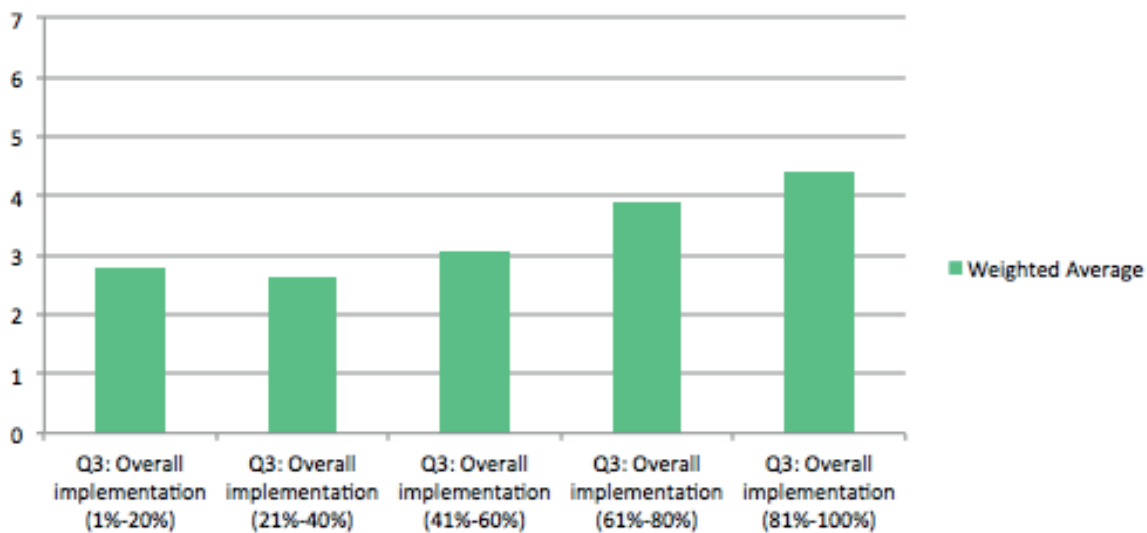


Figure 11: Graph of relationship between implementation and marketing cost decrease

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All of the results show that in both overall implementation and implementation in specific areas, the higher level of implementation, the higher the level of positive influence on a company.

### Additional tests

Additional T-Tests and ANOVAs were conducted to determine if other factors contribute to greater success. Specifically, demographic data such as the type of workshop a customer attended, what type of organization they work for (for-profit, non-profit, marketing agency), the size of company and whether they were B2B, B2C, or both. Additionally, a new variable was created called “exposure” to see if attending multiple types of workshops increased success. There is no significance in the various data points that show any of these variables contribute to overall success in relation to overall StoryBrand implementation.

Only one other T-Test showed significance. Those who attended a private workshop showed a decrease in marketing costs, but the significance had a weak effect. Because this was a one-tailed test, the results of the two-tailed test are divided in half, resulting in  $p = .025$  and thus  $p < .05$ , confirming statistical significance.

*Table 1*

*Descriptive Statistics for Agency Marketing Decrease in Marketing Costs*

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff	Std. Error Diff	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Marketing costs have decreased	Equal variances assumed	2.04	.15	-2.01	244	.05	-.60	.30	-1.19	-.01
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.099	61.64	.040	-.60	.29	-1.18	-.03

### **Conclusion**

The data showed that level of implementation in all areas of marketing has a strong influence on the success of an organization. All three hypotheses were supported. The more an organization implements StoryBrand in their marketing, the more they will see a positive influence on profitability, confidence of employees in creating marketing collateral, and saving time and money in marketing collateral creation. Size of company, type of company, which workshop the organization attended, or whether a company was for-profit or non-profit had no significant influence on the positive results for an organization outside of implementation.

### **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The research was conducted to first discover if StoryBrand alumni perceive the framework to have a positive influence on organizational success and then to discover the factors that may contribute to increased success of organizations that have learned and begun applying the StoryBrand framework to their marketing. Customers were surveyed and asked demographic and applications questions to determine the level to which organizations incorporated the StoryBrand framework into their marketing and messaging. Additionally, customers were asked to assess the level of success they would attribute to the implementation.

While there have been many studies on the effectiveness of the use of good story in marketing that look at what parts of story allow for the greatest influence, there were no studies testing the effectiveness of telling a very simple story through the StoryBrand framework. This study specifically measures participant perceptions of whether it works and leads to greater profits, ease of collateral creation and saving time and money. The results show that there is a positive effect. The results also show that the only variable that has significant influence on the levels of success is the degree of implementation.

StoryBrand teaches organizations how to tell a good story in simple terms that are applicable to all organizations no matter the size or type. Insights gained from the research study may provide hope for small businesses and non-profits with little to no marketing budget because the only contributing factor to success that offered statistical significance was the level of implementation of the StoryBrand approach.



## STORYBRAND NARRATIVE MARKETING

This chapter will present the key findings and discussion of those findings, limitations of the study, implications for practice both in the academic and marketing world, and recommendations for future research.

### **Key Findings and Discussion**

The present study was guided by the overall research objective of assessing the most important factors that will help an organization to see positive influences by using the StoryBrand marketing approach. In order to focus on specific variables, there were three hypotheses that developed. It was hypothesized that all three areas, profitability, saving time and money, and employee confidence, would be positively influenced by the degree of implementation of the StoryBrand framework. These were all supported.

Customers saw results when they applied the StoryBrand Framework to their organizations. The more they implemented StoryBrand, the more success they reported. All 16 areas customers were asked to evaluate were positively influenced by implementing StoryBrand into their organizations. Some found StoryBrand more effective or helpful than others, given responses to the instrument, but for those who implemented it “thoroughly,” the positive effects (or perceptions of this) were more considerable. These positive effects were not contingent on the size of the organization, the type of implementation process chosen (website, email, etc.), the type of organization, the customer focus, the type of workshop attended (online, live, etc.), or the gender of the participants. Even overall exposure to more than one type of workshop had no influence all of the outcome variables tested.

The only statistically significance changes in the outcome variables occurred when examining the effects of the level of implementation of the StoryBrand framework.

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Furthermore, the results indicated that the most important factor in helping an organization see positive influences by using StoryBrand is by integrating the messaging into marketing collateral.

Customers were asked to report the degree to which they have implemented the StoryBrand framework in the various areas of their marketing. There is a striking correlation between the level of success as compared with implementation across all channels. This pattern was the same across every individual area of marketing collateral as well as overall implementation. It also influenced every area of success. While every level of implementation still showed net positive results, the higher level of implementation resulted in more positive results, as demonstrated in the strong statistical support for all three hypotheses. The more thoroughly an organization implemented the StoryBrand marketing approach, the more profitable an organization was,

the more confidence employees had in creating marketing messaging, and the more time and money was saved in creating marketing collateral.

These findings are important for a number of reasons. Forbes (VanBoskirk, 2017) estimates that US organizations will spend nearly \$120 billion by 2021 on digital marketing alone. The trend is not just to spend more money, but to spend money on things that work. “Marketers are more mature now with capable measurement practices. This means they will spend judiciously on what works for their goals.” Based on these research findings, StoryBrand is an effective marketing approach. By implementing StoryBrand into digital marketing, organizations have the opportunity to save money on overall costs and increase profitability.

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Another significant contribution this study offers is that it shows that even small and non-profit organizations have access to tools that can increase success without having to spend large amounts of money on marketing agencies or outside contractors. By learning how to tell stories and then applying those stories to their marketing, small companies and non-profits can have impactful results as much as large for-profit companies.

### **Limitations**

There are three primary limitations of the study. First, this study is self-reported and does not have the ability to determine if the participants fully understood and implemented the StoryBrand framework in a way that reflects the model to the degree it was intended. A deeper study of marketing collateral, websites and employee interviews would be needed in a second round of research to dive deeper into the implementation.

Second, this survey does not determine the level of competence, time or money an individual has to write copy, create materials, or run a marketing program. These could all be contributing factors to success of implementation. While competence may be difficult to test objectively, other factors may contribute to successful implementation of the framework on marketing collateral. Future studies should consider assessing other important variables that may affect the successful implementation of a StoryBrand type of marketing approach.

A third limitation is that the survey instrument in the present study was only sent out to alumni who had gone through one of the three StoryBrand courses over the previous 18 months. This limits the ability to look at long-term influence, both positive

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and negative, that would better be assessed through a longitudinal research design that utilizes both pre-test and post-test measures.

### **Implications for Communication Theory**

While many of the previously discussed communication theories have been used to evaluate story branding are insightful, very little research has been conducted to show how to achieve long-term marketing success through the strategic use of stories. While earlier chapters in this study centered on Fisher's discussion of the need for fidelity and coherency and the use of narrative transportation to influence audience behaviors and values, Miller's StoryBrand methodology provides a simple way to understand how to create stories that achieve these results.

Fisher argues that fidelity and coherency in narration add to a story's credibility (Gilder, 2006, p.4). Specifically, human beings actually gain rational ability through their capacity to determine narrative probability (the likelihood that a narrative would emerge in a given legitimate coherent form) and to ascertain narrative fidelity (the narrative's credibility) (Fisher, 1987, p.118). The more a story follows a clear path and the more that it aligns, the easier it is for humans to not only understand a story, but actually make sense of their own personal story. There is an order to a well-told story and it must be coherent, meaning it follows a structure, is logical and consistent, and has fidelity, meaning that it is accurate and consistent, follows a pattern and is predictable based on a repeatable process.

One of the reasons that narratives must hold these attributes to be persuasive is that they represent how people encounter nature. In movies, bringing the natural world to

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the real screen is important because it allows the audience to trust what they see. Russian film-maker Tarkovsky explains this principle as follows:

Nature exists in cinema in the naturalistic fidelity with which it is recorded; the greater the fidelity, the more we trust nature as we see it in the frame, and at the same time, the finer is the created image: in its authentically natural likeness, the inspiration of nature itself is brought into cinema.

(Tarkovsky, 1989, p. 212)

This applies to telling any kind of story, even story in marketing. The story must reflect the natural order of things. Humans, as Fisher states, are homo-narrative. They already think in story form and they use story to make sense of their lives. When a story breaks these rules, the audience cannot trust it.

While this is true, the understanding of what this means is often limited because Fisher offers no prescribed framework to ensure this happens, specifically in marketing. Miller's StoryBrand methodology advances Fisher's theory by offering a repeatable, proven structure to create stories with fidelity and coherency. The elements of a story are prescribed and follow a specific order. The problems that arise in a story must follow an understanding of what a character wants and they must be directly related to the getting in the way of what the character wants. The guide is not introduced until after the character has encountered the problem. The only reason a guide is introduced is because she has both empathy for and authority to overcome the problems. The guide only exists within this context. There is a clear path with a plan and there are predictable results that fall under success and failure, again, related only to the character getting what she wants by overcoming problems. The success and failure must relate to the problem.

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This is true in an overall story as well as individual pieces of marketing collateral. For instance, when a customer comes to an organization's website, the first thing they see is the header. This is the beginning of the organization's story. The header language must start with a clear and simple explanation of what the customer wants. Too often, website headers contain vague language that comes from a different part of the story. It may be language that comes from the plan or success section of the story. This can be confusing for the customer.

The following is a real-life example from a recent StoryBrand alum that sells cauliflower-based food. The company website header headline says, "Read Your Food." This language comes from the middle of the story, not the beginning. What the company was trying to do was start out by differentiating from other cauliflower-based foods by saying that the customer should read labels to see what is in the food they are eating. However, this was confusing for customers because it did not start with the beginning of the story. This language comes out of the plan part of the story or the failure part, because it is trying to show that if a customer does not read labels, they may be eating food that is not good for them. To start at the beginning of the story, the language needs to reflect what the customer wants, the first step in a good story as illustrated by the StoryBrand framework. In this case, the customer wants great tasting cauliflower-based foods, specifically, pizza crusts and pasta. So instead of saying, "Read Your Food," the header should say something along the lines of "Get healthy cauliflower pizza crusts without sacrificing taste." This starts the "story" of the website with what the customer wants. It makes the story clearer because it does not start in the middle of the story. "Read Your Food" or "Compare Labels" can come further down the website as the story continues.

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This is one way that the StoryBrand methodology ensures that the story has fidelity and coherency. It grounds Fisher's theory in practice and allows creators to have a filter with which to determine whether a story has fidelity and coherency. It also allows Fisher's theory to be used in the business world as a filter for evaluating marketing material, not just commercials or short films.

Another area where Miller's StoryBrand approach advances communication theory is when it comes to narrative transportation. Narrative transportation argues that the people who become absorbed into narratives change their attitudes more easily by reducing counter-argumentation in order to accept the story that is told. The greater the transportation, the greater the influence of the story on the audience. It is used to explain the success of compelling narratives in changing people's attitudes towards meanings and values (Kim et al. 2015, p.2).

Green & Brock (2000) developed the transportation scale to look at cognitive, emotional, and imagery processes. Transportation can be enhanced by creating connections with characters, reducing counter arguing and making narrative events seem more like real experience. Creating stronger connections with the main character allows for greater narrative transportation because the audience cares about the character, but also sees themselves as the character. (Green, 2006, S167-S168). Attachment to and involvement with characters can play a critical role in narrative-based belief and behavior change (Brown, 2015; Green & Brock, 2000, p. 702). Green and Brock (2000) even argue that transportation not only describes involvement in a story (like getting lost in a good book), but "attachment to characters may play a critical role in narrative-based belief

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change” (p. 702). As Brown (2015) states, this transportation can go beyond just story and has implications for other media.

When watching a movie about a hero who must save his daughter from kidnappers (external problem), the audience may not connect with that character if the story is only about defeated the kidnappers, because the audience has never experienced it for themselves. The story must also be about the internal problem that character is facing because of the kidnapping. That character may feel like a bad father, overwhelmed, or out of his league. Even if audiences can't relate to the kidnapping, they can relate to the internal problem. The more that the audience becomes involved with the character through processes of parasocial interaction and identification, the more likely the audience will learn from the character and model his or her beliefs and behavior on him (Brown, 2015). Miller identifies having a clear internal problem within a character as a mark of a good story.

In terms of marketing, a company needs to identify with and speak to a customer's internal problem in their marketing. Using the previously mentioned cauliflower food company, this may be done by identifying the internal struggle customers feel about looking for healthy food that is great tasting. When a potential customer cannot find healthy pizza crust alternatives, they feel frustrated or feel like they are being left out. The company can then create copy for websites and emails that addresses this internal struggle by saying, “Stop feeling left out” or creating an empathetic statement that says, “We know how frustrating it can be to feel like you have to sacrifice great tasting food because of your allergies.” By identifying the customer's internal problem and then specifically addressing it in copy language, the company can



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help the customer have a greater connection with the marketing story the company is trying to tell.

This gives another level of meaning to Green & Brock's and Brown's understanding of what causes parasocial connection with a character in a story. Any character can be relatable if an internal problem is clearly identified and illustrated. While this study did not specifically measure audience perception of narrative transportation, there is evidence that the framework itself contributes to company success. The focus in the framework to discover and speak to a customer's internal struggles has the potential elevate the narrative transportation, parasocial interaction, and identification an audience will experience.

### **Implications for Practice**

Marlboro introduced the Marlboro Man in 1955, created by Leo Burnett Co., offering an aspirational identity for smokers of a rugged masculine man. The story Philip Morris told through this campaign was that by smoking Marlboro cigarettes the consumer would be rugged themselves. The character was introduced in 1955 and resulted in a 3241% jump in sales over 1954. Stories matter.

Many business and non-profit leaders feel that the only way to tell compelling stories is to hire an expensive ad agency, pour a large amount of money into ad campaigns, be born incredibly creative, or these days, get lucky with something going viral. It feels frustrating that only large, sometimes nefarious, companies have the ability to tell good stories because they, like Marlboro, are the ones with the money. A mantra that StoryBrand repeats at live events and on their podcast is that one of their stated missions is to "give the good guys the microphone." StoryBrand defines "good guys" as

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those doing good work in the world, raising the middle class, and working ethically to solve problems for their customers. This framework has the ability to give the good guys the microphone in a way that has not been done before.

Research shows that a good story in marketing will increase customer engagement with a brand, but there is very little work that gives a simple and clear path to telling a good story in marketing. While Fisher discusses the need for characters, actions, sequence, plot and setting in story (Fisher, 1984, p.265, Patron, 2006, p. 120), scholars like Green and Donahahue (2008) discuss the necessity for good stories to facilitate the process of narrative transportation, and screen writers like Blake Snyder offer page by page description of how to write a movie, no scholar or practitioner offers a framework for telling stories in a simple way that can easily be translated into marketing. Most academic research is focused on the influence and structure of stories ex-post facto, not analyzing the story creation process.

The StoryBrand framework offers a simple way to create and evaluate stories while they are being created. These stories then act as a filter for all marketing and messaging. This study shows that organizational leaders do not need a college degree, years of experience, high budgets, a screenwriting degree, or be employed at large companies with resources to create effective marketing. Small companies, solo entrepreneurs, non-profits, churches and more can use the framework to increase their influence and spread their message to a broader audience.

The research also shows that the StoryBrand methodology has the ability to impact team morale and make people's jobs easier, meaning it can improve people's work life. It offers a clear and simple tool for leaders to be able to tell its story to

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communicate the organization's mission, vision, values, and goals. This is what Rhodes & Brown (2005, p.14) call strategic narration. Strategic narration leads to less turnover, higher buy-in for company values and higher team morale.

The application of the StoryBrand framework has implications for the academic classroom as well. Currently, both Lipscomb University and Liberty University are using the Building a StoryBrand book as a text for marketing classes. Many other universities are in the process of working with StoryBrand to integrate the framework into their curriculum. As the book and the framework begin to make their way into academia, narrative marketing research like the present study are important to connect the framework to foundational communication theory and previous research, and also to continue to test its effectiveness in providing successful results for multiple types of organizations. If StoryBrand marketing is going to be taught in institutions of higher learning, then the community needs to know it is a tested and effective means of using story in marketing. Based on the initial research presented here, the StoryBrand framework is shown to be an effective approach for increasing profitability, employee confidence, and marketing efficiency with lower overall costs.

While churches are sometimes hesitant to use the word "marketing" when it applies to sharing their message, the StoryBrand framework may also be effective in not only the overall branding of churches, but also in helping specific departments within churches to recruit more volunteers, communicate announcements, and promote events. This study shows that non-profit religious organizations report an equal amount of success compared to for-profit organizations when they implement the StoryBrand methodology. StoryBrand can be used to promote volunteer opportunities, fundraise for

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mission trips and increase attendance at special events. Jared Wellman from Tate Springs Church in Arlington, TX said, “We implemented the StoryBrand philosophy onto our website and our marketing strategy, and it’s worked wonders. We’re seeing an astronomical increase in attendance to the events we’ve run through the brand” (personal communication, 2017). Specifically, average attendance grew from 422 to 510 in less than a year. Wednesday night bible study grew from 40 to 200. Wellman says:

Several (people) personally shared how the marketing hooked them. I literally had people emailing or taking me out to lunch sharing how they came because of how we communicated it. I could see their eyes lighting up. I even ran some of my lessons through the framework, which I think helped people keep coming back. (personal communication, 2017)

While churches are good storytellers, they are not often good marketers. The StoryBrand framework has the ability to have a significant influence on helping churches grow.

The research has also had implications in the way StoryBrand as a company teaches the framework and equips customers to see more success. Because the research shows that the primary variable that influences success for an organization is implementation, StoryBrand has chosen to create more resources to help with implementation. The next book scheduled to be released was about helping companies write a mission statement, but that has now changed. Based on these findings, the next book that is being written and released is called *The StoryBrand Marketing Checklist*. This book will be released with Harper Collins as a major release and offered as a companion to *Building a StoryBrand*. It is a step-by-step guide to applying the framework to marketing collateral, specifically websites, lead generators, one-liners and email

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campaigns. This will also be integrated into the online and live workshop teaching.

Specifically, the entire second afternoon of the two-day live event will be dedicated to implementation starting at the planned April 2019 StoryBrand event.

Overall, this research has the ability to inform academia, non-profit organizations, for-profit organizations and StoryBrand itself. It offers a foundational study on how the StoryBrand methodology is informed by communication theory. As it is being taught in universities, it moves the study forward and provides a stronger justification for its application. In the non-profit and for-profit world, this study gives hope that any type of organization can use story, specifically through the lens of StoryBrand, to increase profits and employee confidence while also reducing marketing costs. And finally, it is influencing the way StoryBrand teaches and empowers organizations and will ultimately lead to more success.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several recommendations for further research can be made based on the findings from this research. First, the survey was limited to alumni from the previous 18 months. While this research shows at least short-term success from implementing the framework, extending the time frame or returning to these same participants would allow researchers to see if the StoryBrand framework has lasting and continuing influence on sustained growth or if it just has an initial positive influence. Further more, reduced costs and profitability were less often indicated on average than items that reflected the creative/strategizing process or perceptions of ability to do it. Profits, less costs, or more customers would be less likely to be able to be determined by participants as being influenced by this. There is a possibility that too many other influences besides

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StoryBrand implementation could influence this, such as if the profits were outside the area of responsibilities of the participants or if they were not that far along in the implementation or the process to tell. Also, this research may have been completed too close to the time customers finished the course and did not have enough time to see the results of profit and growth. Confidence can be experienced in the moment, but organizational growth takes time. Further research that examined outside factors would be needed to determine true effectiveness.

Second, the primary mode of surveying was through Likert scale questions, allowing only for quantitative data. A qualitative study could reveal what parts of the StoryBrand framework had the greatest influence or what other factors may have led to success. This could also reveal more nuances about what types of success were achieved. While this study measured self-reported influence, it was up to the respondent to define what success meant. An individual working by herself who doubled her \$25k annual sales and sees that as a huge success is given the same opportunity to respond to the survey as a billion dollar brand who made \$100Million more because of the StoryBrand framework. A follow-up qualitative or mixed methodology study would be able to take this initial research to a deeper level.

Third, a parallel study should be conducted to research the influence of two different types of campaigns for the same organization: story based marketing and fact-based marketing. When done at the same time, research could determine if one truly is more effective than the other.

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Fourth, participation in the alumni survey achieved the goals, but a higher response rate would give better data. Some of the specific areas of questions were unable to be used because of low response rate.

Fifth, in the hypotheses, success was primarily defined as ease of and confidence in creating marketing collateral, profitability, and saving time and money. However, the top five highest weighted averages came from the questions that had nothing to do with traditional success. These were (1) Implementing StoryBrand has been a positive experience ( $M = 5.67, SD = 1.59$ ), (2) Overall, we are completely satisfied with StoryBrand ( $M = 5.37, SD = 1.57$ ), (3) StoryBrand is making the world a better place ( $M = 5.3, SD = 1.79$ ), (4) StoryBrand has made our team more confident ( $M = 5.24, SD = 1.75$ ), and (5) StoryBrand has made our job cleaner/easier ( $M = 5.07, SD = 1.70$ ). None of these questions were used to specifically test the hypotheses. Numbers 4 and 5 could contribute to organizations saving time and money, but were higher than questions directly related to those outcomes. These data sets show that customers think highly of StoryBrand and their experience, even going so far as to say it makes the world a better place, but what that actually means requires more in-depth research. Does the positive experience with StoryBrand as a company influence the reported results compared to actual results? Further study into this aspect of the relationship between StoryBrand and its customers would be valuable.

An extension of this would also be to look at why StoryBrand is different from other marketing frameworks in making the world a better place? What makes StoryBrand something that stands out from other marketing that taps into story? A possible additional research question could be asked: How does the StoryBrand marketing approach differ

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from other narrative driven approaches? In *Winning the Story Wars*, Jonah Sachs (2012) argues that there is a difference between the use of narrative paradigm in a more traditional sense, which he refers to as "inadequacy marketing" strategies, compared to more "empowerment marketing" that can be used today. While inadequacy marketing uses story to show consumers that they are lacking (i.e. not pretty enough, not rich enough, not cool enough) and a product can fix that, empowerment marketing uses story to call the consumer to something higher, to be something more, instead of appealing to fear or simply the love of money.

The StoryBrand framework offers a paradigm shift in marketing. It positions the organization as the guide in the story, not the hero. This creates a posture of serving the customer and has the potential to not just change marketing, but also how organizations actually do business. The role of the organization is no longer to make money, but to help the customer along her journey, calling her to something more. This not only offers a gentler approach to selling, but allows organizations to filter products, services and marketing through a lens of service. A study of the influence of this type of marketing, compared to storytelling through inadequacy marketing, would help determine the positive influence of the StoryBrand framework in areas other than traditional measurements of success like profitability or saving time and money.

Sixth, a future study that explores the nuances of the process itself, in terms of perceived value by the participants, could help determine which parts of the framework are most effective. For instance, does focusing simply on positioning the organization as the guide in the story have a greater influence on success of the marketing than making



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sure the plan is clear is and simple? Which specific area of the framework offers the highest perceived value to the participants?

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that implementing the StoryBrand framework into marketing can have a positive influence on the emotional and financial aspects of an organization. It does not matter the size, budget, or type of company the organization is. Communicating a clear and compelling story and implementing it in marketing was shown to make a positive difference in the success of an organization. StoryBrand teaches companies how to tell these kinds of stories and then shows them how to use them in marketing and messaging. The best way to see positive influence is to thoroughly implement the StoryBrand messaging approach through all areas of marketing and messaging.

There is even greater potential for the StoryBrand framework to empower organizations to further their messaging. Knowing that this framework has just as much positive influence on non-profits, both religious and non-religious, offers an encouraging option for those who are not sure they are good storytellers or do not see themselves as good marketers.

I will conclude with a quote by C.S. Lewis (2002) that uncovers one of the key attributes of the StoryBrand approach:

I thought I saw how stories... could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The

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whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday School associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.” (p. 37)

While the research shows that participants believe the StoryBrand framework helps make companies money, increases their confidence and saves them time and money, it also might be the key that unlocks the mystery of storytelling for churches and non-profits working to make the world a better place. It might be able to help organizations who have a message to share of hope and life be able to invite people into a more compelling story and engage them in a way that makes the world around them better.

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# STORYBRAND NARRATIVE MARKETING

## Appendix A – Survey Instrument

### Email Language

Subject Line: Complete our survey for a chance to win a \$25 Amazon gift Card!

Dear StoryBrand Customer (or personalize),

We want to understand and serve our customers with excellence. So, we care what you think.

Please take a few minutes to complete our survey and give us your opinions.

As a thank you for participating, you will be entered into a drawing to **WIN A \$25 AMAZON GIFT CARD**. A total of 10 will be given based on a random drawing of survey participants.

All of your answers will be confidential and no attempt will be made identify you or to sell you anything.

Thanks in advance for your help!

*Signature*

Donald Miller

Story Brand

1. In which of these ways have you invested as a StoryBrand customer? (Check all that apply)

- Attended a Live a StoryBrand Workshop
- Participated in a Private Workshop
- Participated in a StoryBrand Online Workshop

2. How many months have you been a StoryBrand customer? (Please use a whole number)

\_\_\_\_\_

### Results of Implementation

3. Please tell to what degree you have implemented StoryBrand in the areas of your business / organization where it could be applied. Choose N/A if this is not an applicable area for you.

	1	2	3	4	N/A
	Barely (0%- 25%)	Partially (25%- 49%)	Mostly (50%- 74%)	Fully (75%- 100%)	Does not apply
Advertising/Branding messaging and communications	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Direct mail marketing/campaigns	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Email marketing/campaigns	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sales messaging and collateral	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social media messaging	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Specific offers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Website	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
One-liner (elevator pitch)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overall implementation (in all areas)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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4. Thinking about the areas of your business/organization where you have used StoryBrand, how would you characterize the overall results/impact on a 7-point scale where 1 is strongly disagree and 7 is strongly agree.

	How much this has been a positive result							N/A
	Disagree			Strongly Agree				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
StoryBrand has saved time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
StoryBrand has made our job clearer/easier	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our team morale has been improved by StoryBrand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
StoryBrand has increased our customer satisfaction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Implementing StoryBrand has been a positive experience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
StoryBrand has made our team more confident	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Our Marketing costs have decreased since we implemented StoryBrand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
StoryBrand has contributed directly to increasing the number of customers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
StoryBrand has contributed directly to increasing the quality of our products/services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
StoryBrand messaging has directly contributed to our organization's growth	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
StoryBrand has increased our revenues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We are gaining more employees as a result of StoryBrand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
StoryBrand has increased profitability of our organization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
StoryBrand has failed to deliver the positive results for our organization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
We have not realized the kind of gains we had hoped for through StoryBrand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overall, we are completely satisfied with StoryBrand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
StoryBrand is making the world a better place	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. Are you...

- Female  
 Male  
 Prefer not to answer

6. How old are you?

\_\_\_\_\_

## STORYBRAND NARRATIVE MARKETING

7. Which best describes your current business?

- Marketing/branding/advertising company/agency
- Non-profit (not religious)
- Non-profit (religious)
- For-profit business
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

(ASK Q 11 IF Q10 IS "FOR PROFIT BUSINESS")

8. Which best describes your for-profit business focus?

- Business to Consumer (B2C)
- Business to Business (B2B)
- Both (B2C and B2B)

9. What is your type of business (industry/market sector)?

\_\_\_\_\_

10. How many years of experience do you have in your profession?

\_\_\_\_\_

11. Which best describes your current position/role?

- Business owner/proprietor
- Executive/Officer
- Manager/supervisor
- Employee (not owner)
- Volunteer
- Other (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

12. What is the name/designation of the department in which you work?

\_\_\_\_\_

13. How many people does your business/organization employ full-time?

\_\_\_\_\_

14. Which category best describes your company's annual gross revenue/income?

- Less than \$100,000
- \$100,001 - \$250,000
- \$250,001-\$500,000
- \$500,001-\$1,000,000
- \$1,000,001-\$5,000,000
- \$5,000,001-\$10,000,000
- \$10,000,001-\$25,000,000
- \$25,000,001-\$50,000,000
- \$50,000,001-\$100,000,000

## STORYBRAND NARRATIVE MARKETING

- More than \$100,000,000

15 What is your predominant ethnicity?

- African American/black
- Hispanic American/Latino
- Asian American/Asian
- Caucasian/European
- Other (please specify)

# STORYBRAND NARRATIVE MARKETING

## Appendix B- SPSS ANOVA Results that Test the Hypotheses

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
StoryBrand has saved us time.	Between Groups	147.72	5	29.54	10.98	.000
	Within Groups	675.71	251	2.69		
	Total	823.43	256			
StoryBrand has made our job cleaner/easier.	Between Groups	160.87	5	32.17	13.78	.000
	Within Groups	585.87	251	2.33		
	Total	746.74	256			
Our team morale has been improved by StoryBrand.	Between Groups	119.49	5	23.90	9.25	.000
	Within Groups	645.99	250	2.58		
	Total	765.48	255			
StoryBrand has increased our customer satisfaction.	Between Groups	154.65	5	30.93	13.60	.000
	Within Groups	561.61	247	2.27		
	Total	716.27	252			
Implementing StoryBrand has been a positive experience.	Between Groups	114.50	5	22.90	10.79	.000
	Within Groups	532.72	251	2.12		
	Total	647.22	256			
StoryBrand has made our team more confident.	Between Groups	121.27	5	24.26	9.16	.000
	Within Groups	661.71	250	2.65		
	Total	782.98	255			
Our marketing costs have decreased since we implemented StoryBrand.	Between Groups	100.39	5	20.08	7.18	.000
	Within Groups	670.97	240	2.80		
	Total	771.35	245			
StoryBrand has contributed directly to increasing the number of customers.	Between Groups	127.74	5	25.55	8.46	.000
	Within Groups	736.77	244	3.02		
	Total	864.52	249			
StoryBrand has contributed directly to increasing the quality of our products/services.	Between Groups	176.37	5	35.27	12.09	.000
	Within Groups	720.71	247	2.92		
	Total	897.08	252			
StoryBrand messaging has directly contributed to our organization's growth.	Between Groups	174.30	5	34.86	13.21	.000
	Within Groups	638.56	242	2.64		
	Total	812.87	247			
StoryBrand has increased our revenues.	Between Groups	143.98	5	28.80	10.21	.000
	Within Groups	684.93	243	2.82		

## STORYBRAND NARRATIVE MARKETING

	Total	828.91	248			
We are gaining more employees as a result of StoryBrand.	Between Groups	51.72	5	10.35	3.29	.007
	Within Groups	758.74	241	3.15		
	Total	810.46	246			
StoryBrand has increased the profitability of our organization.	Between Groups	121.01	5	24.20	8.58	.000
	Within Groups	679.89	241	2.82		
	Total	800.90	246			
StoryBrand has failed to deliver positive results for our organization.	Between Groups	54.20	5	10.84	4.12	.001
	Within Groups	644.18	245	2.63		
	Total	698.38	250			
We have not realized the kind of gains we had hoped for through StoryBrand.	Between Groups	60.79	5	12.16	3.79	.003
	Within Groups	783.27	244	3.21		
	Total	844.06	249			
Overall, we are completely satisfied with StoryBrand.	Between Groups	93.18	5	18.64	8.65	.000
	Within Groups	536.42	249	2.15		
	Total	629.60	254			
StoryBrand is making the world a better place.	Between Groups	73.07	5	14.61	4.90	.000
	Within Groups	733.61	246	2.98		
	Total	806.68	251			

Appendix C



**BRANDSCRIPT**

At \_\_\_\_\_ we know that you want to be (a/an) \_\_\_\_\_  
COMPANY NAME IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

\_\_\_\_\_. In order to do that, you need \_\_\_\_\_. The  
CHARACTER WANT

problem is \_\_\_\_\_ which makes you feel \_\_\_\_\_  
EXTERNAL PROBLEM INTERNAL PROBLEM

\_\_\_\_\_. We believe \_\_\_\_\_  
PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM

We understand \_\_\_\_\_ which is why we \_\_\_\_\_  
EMPATHY AUTHORITY

\_\_\_\_\_.

Here's how we do it: 1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_  
PLAN: STEP 1 PLAN: STEP 2

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_  
PLAN: STEP 3

So, \_\_\_\_\_ . And in the meantime, \_\_\_\_\_  
DIRECT CTA TRANSITIONAL CTA

\_\_\_\_\_. So you can stop \_\_\_\_\_ and instead  
FAILURE

\_\_\_\_\_ .  
SUCCESS