



Wisdom, Wonder, and Delight



Glamour and Grammar

The career of every revolutionary ends in glamour.

I don't mean the superficial definition of glamour, an artificial sense of beauty that props up a celebrity. I am talking about its deeper meaning, which is related to the stories we tell. The word *glamour* literally means a magic spell created by language. To be

“beglamoured” means to be enchanted. Glamour was coined long ago as a mispronunciation of “grammar,” because writing—with its power to put lasting ideas directly into people’s heads without speech—seemed like magic to those who had never seen it before.

This kind of magic is still potent. You can see it in the stories we tell about political figures, especially the ones who changed history.

The journey of Mahatma Gandhi, the revolutionary who peacefully liberated India from the British Empire in the early twentieth century, began in a deserted railway station one lonely night after he found himself kicked out of a train compartment. Even though Gandhi was a lawyer and could afford a first-class ticket, he was excluded from riding in the carriage because of his brown skin. Starting with that moment of powerlessness, Gandhi began to transform his life and then the life of his entire nation. Over the next few decades until his death, he would build a movement that ended white, apartheid rule in India.

But Gandhi’s journey didn’t end with his eventual assassination. It continues through his existence as a lasting icon of progress and change. His image has been used to bolster the power of modern governments, and it’s also been used to sell computers in the United States. In the 1990s, Apple featured him in one of their first “Think Different” ads.

The glamour of another revolutionary, Alexander Hamilton, is currently selling record numbers of tickets on Broadway to the musical about Hamilton’s life written by Lin-Manuel Miranda. As of this writing, Hamilton’s glamour is worth about \$1.9 million per week in ticket sales.

Another American revolutionary, Benjamin Franklin, recognized the power of his own glamour while he was still alive. To get attention and enhance his influence in Paris, where he was stationed as the first U.S. ambassador, he exaggerated his own persona by wearing a coonskin fur cap. Franklin had worn the cap out of necessity on the long voyage from the United States to France to keep his bald head warm. But to French high society, such a primitive piece of clothing wasn’t a necessity but a charming symbol of American ruggedness.

I first learned about the glamour of revolutionaries and the power of their images at an early age. When I was a boy in Chile my parents told me to rip up my Fidel Castro poster on the day that Augusto Pinochet came to power. Castro was a communist and Pinochet was a fascist, so Pinochet hated everything Castro stood for. Even though the poster was on the wall of my bedroom in the privacy of our home, my parents told me it had to come down. So that day I learned that a piece of paper with an image and words had enough symbolic power that it could somehow be a threat to people who held real political power. To my childhood self, it seemed like magic.

I also learned that, whether in pixels or print, stories take up physical space in our lives. Once created and let loose into the world, the content that a story takes shape in becomes a conduit for influence and power.

I suppose one of the reasons I chose to pursue a career as a pollster and political strategist was to follow those conduits of influence to their origins, to figure out how the magic worked. I was always sure that hiding in the reams of data I gathered on voters, there was an overarching story about whatever country I was working in. Those who understood the story were destined for power and those who didn't were sure to lose it.

As a political consultant, I was also well served by the experiences that came from splitting my childhood between two nations. It continues to give me a knack for seeing the world around me as if for the first time, no matter how long I may have spent getting to know a particular place or set of people.

This was partly because I had so frequently been reminded that I was an outsider. As a child, and later when I travelled the world as a consultant, people always ended up asking me one form of the question: "You're not from around here, are you?" It happened so often that part of my mind expected it and prepared for it.

This ability to wipe away the familiar names of things, to always look for the hidden stories, has been a lifelong source of creativity and renewal. Two of my core beliefs about innovation are that it need not be left to chance and that it always begins the moment you see things anew—because that's the moment that we are free

to start telling new stories about ourselves. What started as a habit of adjusting myself to the ever-changing circumstances of my life has allowed me to help individuals, companies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and large institutions find their own hidden stories and see themselves anew.

As the careers of Gandhi, Hamilton, and Franklin show, lasting power comes from this process of finding what I call glamour.

So you can think of this book as a guide to uncovering your unique sources of glamour. In this chapter and throughout the book, you'll find useful techniques for finding and telling new stories about yourself or your organization and what to do with those stories once you have them. It's part practical manual and, I hope, part book of spells.

The Power of Stories

Even with data-based approaches, crafting influence, online and off, will always be an art and never a science.

No matter how much data we have about people, and no matter how cunningly we may calibrate the cues that guide them through a digital experience, what governs the final decision to buy an idea or a product will never be completely knowable. This is because people don't completely know themselves.

Consider your own life—from the most trivial objects you've selected for your home to the biggest choices you've made, like whom to marry, where to live, and what career to pursue. Think of the brands you trust and the ones you don't. Can you give a complete accounting of the thoughts and emotions that lead you to say "I do" or sign on the dotted line? Even if you remember the precise moment you made a choice or first believed in something, odds are you can't say exactly what got you there.

As long as we are partly a mystery to ourselves, we will be partly a mystery to every pollster, marketer, data scientist, or advertiser who wants to reach us.

And this is good news for content marketers, because the effectiveness of what we do is based not only on data but on enduring

aspects of human nature. Good content, especially compelling stories, sits between science and mystery. Stories command our attention and open our minds to receive new ideas. They aren't effective because they force ideas, but because they awaken our vital needs for wisdom, wonder, and delight.

Wisdom is a distillation of what is useful. And in our accelerated, overmediated present, providing a steady stream of truly useful information is a surefire way to differentiate yourself and elevate your brand.

Wonder stories have been popular as long as humans have been communicating. From ancient myths to superhero movies, people have always craved to know about things that are bigger, faster, more powerful, or just different from their day-to-day experience. Wonder also inherently contains pleasure mixed with the unexpected. We love mysteries because their solutions both surprise and delight us. We love jokes because their punch lines catch us off guard.

To catch the essence of wonder, think of its opposite: boredom. Any topic can be boring if it is presented without surprise. When we know what's going to come next, we're bored. Whenever we have even the slightest reason to guess at what's next, we are on the road to wonder.

This state of consciousness is what your brand should always strive to evoke or be linked to. When people see your logo or hear your brand name, some part of them, however small, should open up to a world of greater possibility.

This Is Your Brain on Good Content

Psychology researchers at Johns Hopkins University discovered that the most favored of over 180 Super Bowl ads were the ones structured like stories. The product or brand being advertised didn't matter. To be loved, an ad only needed this basic structure: a beginning, middle, and end, with some conflict and tension along the way.¹

¹Jill Rosen, "Super Bowl Ads: Stories Beat Sex and Humor, Johns Hopkins Researcher Finds," January 31, 2014, <http://hub.jhu.edu/2014/01/31/super-bowl-ads/>.

Stories, even ones assembled from the barest minimum of ingredients, automatically tap into our attention, which is the most precious resource that every product of media and communications—from the biggest Hollywood blockbuster to the lowliest tweet—is in pursuit of. If you can find a way to use your particular medium to tell a story, do it. You are bound to be rewarded with the gift of willing attention.

But attention is not the only state of consciousness that stories are good at evoking. Once you are in the realm of story, your mind is also more trusting. Good stories release a cocktail of neurochemicals in the brain that simultaneously increase focus and empathy. When we are caught up in a good story, our minds are exactly where advertisers want us to be: paying attention and full of good feelings to attach to the focus of that attention.² The more empathy we have for somebody, fictional or otherwise, the more we trust that person.

Brain scans reveal that the neural activity of a storyteller is the same as the neural activity of his or her listeners. As neuroscientist Josh Gowin puts it, when we tell stories we are actually taking our thoughts and implanting them in the minds of others.³

The hairs pricking up on the back of your neck during a horror film, or the warm feeling that fills your chest at the height of a love story are less intense versions of the same feelings you'd get if you were experiencing those moments firsthand.

This miraculous power isn't science fiction. It's simply the result of words, images, and sounds arranged in the right order.

What's more, there's an increasing amount of evidence that suggests that this synchronization of brain behavior actually translates to lasting empathy. When you share someone's thoughts, the aftereffect

²Harrison Monarth, "The Irresistible Power of Storytelling as a Strategic Business Tool," *Harvard Business Review*, March 11, 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/03/the-irresistible-power-of-storytelling-as-a-strategic-business-tool>.

³Josh Gowin, "Why Sharing Stories Brings People Together," *Psychology Today*, June 6, 2011, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/you-illuminated/201106/why-sharing-stories-brings-people-together>.

is that you are more receptive to the total way they see the world.⁴ Stories, then, transfer perspective along with emotion.

It's no mistake that certain vital industries, like finance, energy, and pharma have, as of this writing, some of the steepest reputational battles to win. These industries have been traditionally reticent to share what they do with the world. Decades of self-defensive communications policies have insulated them from scrutiny and kept them safe. But in our fluid and volatile communications environment, safe is not enough. If you are not actively creating a future for your business, you will fall victim to a future created by others. A proactive approach to a reputation is the only truly safe approach.

Tech companies like Facebook and Apple, which are driving the transition to a digital-dominant communications world, have so far done an excellent job, intentionally or not, of telling their own story. It's one in which they are the heroes, channeling the world-changing forces of disruption and innovation to every corner of the economy. The companies of Silicon Valley are now some of the largest in the world, yet the feeling that they are still upstarts battling huge, conservative forces persists. This overarching narrative, which taps into currents of the narrative America tells about itself, has been of high strategic value to the tech industry.

When Apple publicly butted heads with the FBI in 2016 over the company's refusal to provide access to encrypted data on an iPhone, press coverage and public opinion sided quickly and overwhelmingly with Apple. Americans almost instinctively understood that they were siding with the forces of innovation and openness against the forces of tyranny and reaction. More than any factual nuance of the case, and whatever opinion of the case you may have, the overarching innovation story of which Apple has made itself the hero strengthened its negotiating position.

It is not just the ubiquity of its products that makes us feel so comfortable with the tech industry's place in our lives. We also

⁴Paul J. Zak, "Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling," *Harvard Business Review*, October 28, 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling>.

consume medicine, clothing, and energy and use transportation just as frequently as we use our devices. But those industries lack the storytelling capital that Silicon Valley has amassed.

Successful new technologies have always needed stories to usher them into wider social acceptance. You can hear the evidence in our very language.

When we want to change, we talk about turning over a new leaf (“leaf” is an old word for page). When we agree with another person, we’re “on the same page.”

When our plans go awry, they’ve been “derailed.” When things are on the verge of going well, they’re “building up steam,” and when they’ve been going well for a while they’re “on track.”

Even goofy terms like “blasting off” and “in orbit” are still in use. Each of these phrases has a nostalgic ring now, but when books, railroads, and rockets were first developed, the metaphors I’ve just listed were still fresh. People took what was exciting about new technology and used it to shape the way they saw moments in their own lives.

The power and the ongoing relevance of Silicon Valley’s innovation story can be seen in the freshness of the metaphors it continues to give us. Being “online” is still a good thing both literally and metaphorically. The word “disruption” has flipped its polarity and gone from negative to positive, as has the phrase “going viral.” When we figure something out, we’ve “hacked” it. And now any small, new company, not just tech companies, employs that wonderful bit of self-descriptive poetry, “startup,” so close to “upstart” with its inherent promise of insolence and sudden wealth.

These phrases are the atomized pieces of a single dominant Silicon Valley story that has captured the imagination of the world and, for the moment, granted an aura of invincibility to the handful of companies they refer to.

Storytelling, then, represents a remarkable opportunity for any brand that wants to forge or restore its reputation. When a pharmaceutical company, for example, conveys the wonder of curing a disease, or when an energy company chooses a new way to convey the joy of discovering how to power the world, both are sharing the

best of what it is like to work there. They are offering pieces of their story to the world to be taken up and disseminated.

A set of self-promotional talking points or the offer of a good deal bounces off the hard shell of skepticism that gets all of us through the day. But pieces of stories have a way of breaking through that shell to become tools that we use to make sense of our own lives.

To fully understand storytelling's power, think of those brands that are quite literally built out of stories—the personal brands of movie stars, musicians, and authors, and the corporate brands of major entertainment companies.

Why is Harry Potter capable of making grown men and women shed their normal state of consciousness and embrace wonder and delight? Because, by consuming J. K. Rowling's stories, many of us have effectively shared the minds and the emotions of her characters. We have lived in their world, and we have contributed our own imaginative resources to its construction. It isn't just Rowling's wonder and delight that we respond to when we read the *Harry Potter* books but our own as well.

Stories make information personal in a way that no other form is capable of. It's a peculiar quirk of our celebrity culture that when we chance to see an actor in person or ask an author to sign our book, we feel as if they should recognize us as an old friend. In a real way, we have actually known them for a long time, but to them we are total strangers. Such is the power of stories to evoke genuine emotion and goodwill once they are released into the world.

This power, even when employed to the smallest degree, is worth a thousand traditional PR plays pushed by TV talking heads or diffused through traditional outlets.

Strategies of Delight

Until now, I've focused on wisdom and wonder.

But the deployment of pure delight is a powerful strategic asset. Along with the quest for power and riches, the simple pursuit of delight has shaped history.

To see what I mean, let's consider a form of delight that is universal and consumed in discrete units, but which is by nature devoid of any messaging: food.

When asked how he planned to restore the international reputation of France, the great diplomat Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand said, "I don't need secretaries as much as I need saucepans!"⁵

Talleyrand was famous for his understanding of how power and influence really work. He was an aristocrat who kept his fortune after the French revolution when most of his peers not only lost their fortunes but also their heads. And he was a politician who worked for every warring faction in France for over 60 years. And in 1814, he pulled off what is still one of the most amazing feats in the history of public relations.

That year, representatives from all over Europe were in Vienna to restore the international order that Napoleon and his French armies had wrecked in 12 years of war. When the post-war government of France needed somebody to represent it in the aftermath, it booked Talleyrand. Think of him as one of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' ultimate fixers.

Within months of setting up his new embassy, Talleyrand had dissipated much of the fear and mistrust then directed at France. He gained the trust of the leaders of the German-speaking, English, and Russian alliance that had very recently been France's bitterest enemies. And he came to be seen by smaller nations and ordinary people as a champion of justice.

And he did it all with rich sauces, fine wine, and choice meats. He knew he couldn't best his opponents at the negotiating table outright, so he charmed them at the dining table first. His chef even named dishes after the diplomats they were buttering up, including Nesselrode pudding, named after the Russian ambassador, a rich dessert of cream and alcohol-soaked currants still on the menu in Vienna today.

Like a skilled content strategist, Talleyrand looked deep into his organization, located sources of delight, and made good strategic

⁵David King, *Vienna, 1814: How the Conquerors of Napoleon Made Love, War, and Peace at the Congress of Vienna* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), chap. 18.

use of them. Then as now, everybody found high French cooking irresistible, whatever their opinion of the French people.

By the end of the yearlong negotiations, everyone was fighting over invitations to the lavish dinner parties at the French embassy. Talleyrand understood that visceral, positive feelings experienced in the moment can rewrite the pathways of memory. To reset a conversation, he didn't need persuasive ideas or even any ideas at all. He just needed a mechanism to disseminate delight. This is a strategic insight that will never go stale.

Your company cannot and need not literally feed everybody it wants to influence. A steady diet of absorbing stories and useful information is enough. Even in our oversaturated, overcrowded media environment, there will always be room for another good story.

The creation of pure delight, devoid of actual content, is something that content strategists have actually managed to deploy today, with remarkable skill and inventiveness.

In partnership with Rémy Martin's cognac brand Louis XIII, John Malkovich made a film called *The Movie You Will Never See*. Written by Malkovich and directed by Robert Rodriguez, the film was locked in a specially made safe, along with a bottle of Louis XIII. The safe is programmed to open automatically in the year 2117, 100 years—not from the premiere but from the launch party. Three trailers, each imagining a different future, in a range from utopia to dystopia, were released on the Internet.

Perfect for Rémy Martin's purposes, the film provided all the visibility and cachet of a normal cinematic release but without the headache of promoting and distributing the movie, nor, presumably, seeing to its quality.

Articles about the film appeared in *People* and *Entertainment Weekly* and were featured online at *Variety* and the niche sci-fi enthusiast site io9, part of the now-defunct but famous Gawker Media empire. Malkovich gave a series of arch, witty interviews in his signature style, in one of which, mugging for an audience 100 years from now, he declared, "My name *was* John Malkovich."

But most important for the brand, there was a series of parties. The safe, followed by a crew of celebrities, played the role of host

of gala receptions starting on a rooftop in Los Angeles and ending at the Cannes Film Festival.

This case is instructive in many ways. It takes an almost goofy idea, a time capsule, and wraps it skillfully in a thick layer of glamour and mystery. But the most important takeaway is this: Content marketing is about convening people around an aspirational idea, one that delights them and inspires them. The ability of *The Movie You Will Never See* to do this without actually providing any content is a fluke—something that only two brands as idiosyncratic as Malkovich and Louis XIII could really pull off, but the lesson is applicable to all content marketers.

Don't underestimate the power of content to convene and to activate far-flung networks simply because of the promise of wonder and delight.

The Runway and the Beltway: Informal Networks of Influence

The case of Talleyrand's saucepan diplomacy illustrates another important point about the advantages of a strategy based on wonder and delight. It activates forces that travel along the informal channels of influence that do so much to govern our lives.

One of the remarkable facts of the so-called Congress of Vienna, the pan-European diplomatic congress that was supposed to vote on a new international order, was that the congress itself never actually convened. Despite a year of being in the same city, the kings, princes, diplomats, and celebrities that gathered there never formally met as one body. The work of the congress, which preserved peace for almost a century, took place behind closed doors and in a succession of glittering balls, dinners, and after parties. Kings and emperors would gather in the morning to hunt, in the afternoon to have lunch, and in the evening at salons, and late at night in trysts and duels. And somehow the work got done.

This is how influence works in our own time, too. We are simply more fond of applying a thick overlay of process and pomp on top of this process. But the reality is that fashion and fun rule over

our lives as much as any other set of influences. Influence emanates just as surely from the centers of fashion as it does from the centers of power.

So what does this have to do with content?

Let's start with internal communications—the newsletters, company-wide e-mails, annual reports, and so forth—that we all love to ignore. If crafted to attract attention, these communications can be forces of transformation within your company.

The father of management studies, Peter Drucker, relates how company changes are sold within certain Japanese corporations. The change is announced autocratically from on high, and then all employees are required to handwrite and turn in a document detailing exactly how that change will affect them. And the process is considered done.⁶

This is, of course, the exception that proves the rule, which is that company-wide change is a chaotic, undefined process in most of the rest of the world.

Change is usually driven through a company according to a principle that originated in the discipline of public relations, “third-party credibility.” If you want your boss to buy an idea, the best way to start is to make sure he doesn't hear it from you first. If the idea is diffused through the network of people that surround your boss, he'll be prepared for it when it comes.

The great actor Orson Welles had the most amusing version of this principle I've ever heard. When explaining why he took the part of Harry Lime in *The Third Man*, Welles said that it was the perfect example of what he called “the star part.” The cast spends all of act one talking about the star part, how mysterious or formidable or grand he is. By the time the character walks on stage, the audience is in such a fever pitch of anticipation that all the actor has to do is mutter a few lines or raise an eyebrow at the right time, and all the intermission chatter is devoted to what an amazing job the actor or actress playing the star part is doing.

⁶Peter F. Drucker, *The Daily Drucker* (New York: Harper Business, 2004).

When you want to change your company's reputation or sell an idea, content plays the role of all the characters talking up a star part. Content, because it is inherently sharable, acts like a surrogate member in the various networks of influence within your company. Give them a succession of boring e-mails or, worse, a presentation deck glutted with clichés, and the idea is dead on arrival. But give them stories, and change will spread with all the speed and delight of a particularly dishy rumor.

How Good Content Helps Us Be Our Best Selves

There's a reason big moments in our private and public lives are always accompanied by feasts. When we invite people to our homes to celebrate a marriage, a rite of passage, or a holiday, we also have another motive in mind—creating and sustaining relationships with our family and with friends.

People forge bonds if they're in an open, flexible state of mind, and good food and drink are a reliable way of creating that state of mind.

When we throw a party, we also put on our best clothes, put out the good china, and make sure the house is spotless. It doesn't matter if the house is usually a mess or if we actually prefer a comfy t-shirt and jeans to a suit or a party dress. It is not an act of dishonesty to tidy up and dress up, because parties are an occasion to be our best selves. The same is true of content.

When a company tells its best stories, when it showcases the people in its ranks who are best able to tell those stories, it is putting its best foot forward. By amusing people, informing them, and delighting them, a brand creates the occasion to forge or strengthen a relationship. This convening power of content is unique in the communications landscape.

As of this writing, the most valuable brand in the world is Disney. As a company, Disney doesn't clothe us, put a roof over our heads, keep us safe, or feed us from day to day. It does one thing supremely well. Disney delights and surprises us. Whenever children and adults who have a history with the brand see Mickey Mouse's silhouette,

their minds and hearts open up. They enter an altered state of consciousness, in which they are willing to spend money on something nonessential—because they know that by doing so they’re accepting an invitation, for however brief a duration, to the never-ending banquet of Disney’s content.

Disney’s theme parks are literal feasting grounds. People convene their families there to celebrate milestones. They eat good food, share experiences, and consume great stories together. The brand tagline may be about storybook magic, but Disney’s real magic is the relationships it helps sustain.

Content Creates Guiding Narratives

Some of our most important work is to help each other construct guiding narratives, big-picture stories that make sense of the world and define our place in it.

Imagine yourself sitting down to watch a friend’s favorite TV show. Unless your friend explains the show’s guiding narrative—the big-picture story—the names and events of a particular episode won’t make much sense.

We do something similar every day, but in our own lives and with much higher stakes questions like: How do I do my job? What will the world be like in the near future? How should I spend my time and money?

The more long-term context we have about everything, the more confidence we have in answering those questions.

Guiding narratives used to be dictated by the received wisdom of our culture, which was a blend of family history, national history, folklore, and religion. By the time we grew up, we knew our place in the world. And by the time we grew old, it hadn’t changed that much. All the good and bad events in our lives were reconciled in one guiding narrative. Even if life was difficult or confusing, we had a larger context of meaning to fit it into.

With the fragmentation of experience, including our media, guiding narratives aren’t a given anymore. We have to piece them together

ourselves from the bits of information that float to us on the streams of information we all swim in.

For anybody crafting a reputation, either for themselves or for a company, this is important to remember. Unless you make the raw ingredients of your big-picture story available, either to your friends and family, your potential customers, or the public in general, they'll use whatever they have to construct their own guiding narrative about you. Even without realizing it, people are always making up stories in their heads and casting elements of the world around them as characters. It's something that's going to happen with or without your input.

For companies, this means you've got to get the right knowledge about your brand out there in the form of stories that people absorb and share. In the age of atomized content, where every story might be split up into pieces as small as a phrase or a single image, or assembled into long-form articles or video pieces, having a master brand narrative in mind—one that everybody in your company can use—is crucial.

One beneficial effect of this guiding narrative is that it reduces the challenge of creating small pieces of content or responding in the moment to what seem like isolated communications challenges. With a clear guiding narrative, choosing an image or a few words for an Instagram post, for example—something that can eat up a surprising amount of time and mental energy—gets a lot easier. If you are, for example, a large agricultural company that wants to emphasize the wonder and discovery that goes into growing and harvesting food, then just having those keywords in mind is enough of an idea to keep a steady stream of content flowing. Guiding narratives are where strategy begins.

The context provided by a guiding narrative extends to your audience, too, not just your company's story.

A content marketing strategy is optimized for the creation of master brand narratives in our atomized media environment, because it allows people to approach content in their own way. When they tap into a social media feed, the raw elements of your story will be there. When they do web searches, the same thing will be true. And the task

of remixing it and assembling it is the creative act of each individual user—it's not imposed from on high.

It's important to remember, too, that the job of assembling your guiding narrative is something undertaken not only by everybody who works to forge your brand image but also by every piece of content. No individual has the task of hitting all your messaging in a single communication.

Where do guiding narratives live?

They begin in collaboration. Start by convening people from throughout your company who have key elements of its story. While it's important to have buy-in from people at the top of the hierarchy, it's equally important not to stop there.

Don't be afraid to cast (literally cast, as a fisherman does with his line and hook) deep and wide into your organization. Look for what business writer Michael D. Watkins calls “natural company historians.” This can be anybody from a long-time, trusted administrative assistant to your chief marketing officer.

It's the informal networks of influence that you want to tap into, not just the official org chart. Be sure to look for people whose job it is to tell your company's story on a regular basis, like the head of corporate social responsibility or experienced salespeople. If you're savvy enough to have an in-house content marketing team, they're an obvious invite.

Once you've got your cast of characters, get them together for a planned exploration of your company's story. Planned is not the same as formal. In our experience we find that informal works better. Depending on the client, we've found that different things can loosen minds and tongues and get the stories flowing. We've planned workshops built around arts and crafts, drawing, painting, dancing, festive food, and even, in some cases, alcohol.

The goal is the creation of a document that can eventually be shared with everybody whose job is to be public-facing. We've also found that it's best to think of the guiding narrative as a living document, something to be revised yearly or quarterly. We've seen it function as something of an informal company newsletter, but one that employees actually want to read. It's a way for each department to put

its best foot forward in the form of new stories and proof points. The guiding narrative's job is to keep information flowing throughout your organization, to generate ideas for content marketing, and to form the raw materials for the image you want to broadcast to the world.

What's Old Is New Again

In its current digital incarnation, content marketing is truly something new under the sun. The continuous diffusion of messaging throughout different platforms combined with real-time feedback about what works has never before been possible.

But in its essence, content marketing is what was practiced in the so-called golden age of advertising, which coincided with the rise of legends like Bill Bernbach and David Ogilvy. Both were committed to creating beautiful, interesting, and informative pieces of communication. And both were committed to elevating the conversation rather than reducing the craft to the quick and easy attractions of either sex or the manipulations of direct marketing.

Turn to the introduction of Ogilvy's most famous book, still one of the best books ever written about strategic communications, *Ogilvy on Advertising*, and you won't find a quote from the *Harvard Business Review* or statistics from market research. You'll find a quote from the ancient Athenian orator and statesman Demosthenes. Elsewhere in the book you'll see an ad for a shipping company that quotes the philosopher Epictetus, and another that explains the religious customs of Singapore. The book is filled with examples that provide delight and wisdom in at least equal parts to persuasion. And on every page you'll see ads that look and read like articles—content marketing long before its time.

What SJR, the innovation consultancy I cofounded, does is to take these core principles and apply them to what's possible in the digital age. We are no longer constrained by space as we were in the era of print advertising. We move faster. And we are no longer reliant on paying the advertising rates charged by publications for the distribution of content. But the core strategy of relentlessly

crafting communications that never go out into the world without being of benefit to the reader remains as effective as it was half a century ago.

How to Find Good Stories

TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADER

The practice of content marketing is essentially alien to the way most corporations operate. One member of my firm even describes the process of launching a content strategy as akin to mounting a benevolent alien invasion.

After convincing the relevant leader in marketing, corporate communications, or some other department that content is the best way forward, there is that inevitable first interaction with a company.

You show up with your crew of photographers, writers, journalists, filmmakers, and artists, and you start to poke your head into what's going on in search of stories that will inform and delight the public and the company's customers.

This process involves asking a lot of questions about how different parts of the company interact (or don't). It also means asking a lot of seemingly stupid questions about a company's products, which may have been answered internally so long ago that they seem obvious.

Coming in under an agency banner can excuse some of this behavior, even have it come across as the charming eccentricity of "creative types." If you are an in-house marketer or communicator attempting to implement a content strategy, you won't have this advantage.

My advice for you and for your team is to lean in to the strangeness and awkwardness of this initial phase. It can only help you. It is precisely your freshness of mind that makes you valuable.

When you come in asking funny, authentic questions, people don't know what to make of you. If they don't have a category to

put your questions in, they won't have a category for you, either, and that can get you through doors that wouldn't otherwise open for you. Young children wield this power without realizing it. Driven by pure curiosity, they are unafraid to ask questions to any person, and their curiosity is indulged. And just as with young children, indulging the question can change the questioned as much as the questioner.

SJR is an innovation consultancy, and one of our key areas of specialty is that we have no specific area of specialty. We make a point of hiring from every field. We have lawyers, management consultants, filmmakers, journalists, writers, advertising creatives, experts in policy, graphic and fine artists, musicians, and people from the world of philanthropy and nonprofit organizations. And one of the things I love to do is toss one or two people onto a team with little to no experience of the client's industry. It always yields new insights and crisp ways of reimagining things.

In the Middle Ages, when there was bad news to give to the king, they often called in the court jester. Because he expected jokes and not substantive news, the king was more likely to actually listen to that news, and less likely to cut off anybody's head because of it.

Sometimes I think of SJR as performing the function of court jesters. Because we are storytellers, we have a kind of license to tell the truth to the people in charge.

Sometimes I think of us as being like children who don't yet have names for the things they see and are therefore better able to understand them. And sometimes we are like aliens on a new planet, discovering it for the first time.

PLAY UP

By bringing your company up to speed, content marketing done right provides a valuable service. We force you to reexamine and hone your purpose, and we help you become agile because you don't have time to be otherwise.

Content marketing forces its practitioners to become some combination of detectives, storytellers, and tricksters. To turn your company into a story with speed, we invite you to play a sort of game. And

like all games, the prize is real self-knowledge without the cost of real-world failure.

If you don't have the ability to hire an outside agency to kick-start your content marketing efforts, one thing you can do is cultivate an outsider's attitude by asking this simple question: Where in our company are people having the most fun?

This may not be any officially approved endeavor. It is likely to be a passion project of a few dedicated employees or an idea that seems way ahead of its time.

But there are two reasons fun is likely to be the source of a great story. The first is that fun is where people naturally make new connections within themselves and forge lasting relationships with others. According to Stuart Brown's book *Play*, games are where we learn as children most authentically who we are and where we, quite literally, learn how to play with others and where we fit in. In a company context, this means that playful activities, like clubs, sports teams, or side projects are where you're going to find the real stories and real relationships that mark out how your company really does business.

Another reason that fun is a good place to look for stories is that it tends to be a good predictor of the future of a business. The steam engine, the submarine, the internal combustion engine, robots, and computers all started out as side projects or toys that serious inventors made for fun and amusement, either their own or others.⁷

GETTING THE STORY APPROVED

Inevitably, it's the best stories that are most in danger of getting killed off in the approval process.

That is entirely understandable. Stories are memorable, and the job of in-house public affairs, public relations, or corporate communications departments is to protect the brand. And one sure way to do it is to deflect attention and minimize interest. But a safe, conservative approach will only get you so far.

⁷Steven Johnson, *Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016), 1–15.

You can't restore a reputation or transform one unless you take action. And in the world of communications, stories are the most effective action you can take.

Let's look at two common pitfalls to avoid.

1. Putting Too High a Burden on Every Piece of Content.

Like the famous anecdote about the sculptor (often suggested to be Michelangelo) who, when asked how he carved such a perfect statue of an elephant replied, "I simply take out all the pieces of stone that are not an elephant," the content marketer's job is to know what to leave out.

An entrenched communications team is likely to want every outgoing message from the company to hit every major messaging point and respond to every current of discussion in the public sphere. This is always a mistake. To be captivating, a story has to create something like a self-contained universe. And this means leaving a lot of seemingly essential things out.

As Voltaire said, "To be a bore, one merely has to say everything."

2. Analysis Paralysis. Velocity, the quality of moving with both speed and intention, is essential to any good content strategy. The Internet is built for speed and for a site to stay relevant, it needs a steady supply of stories.

Marketing and communications departments that are used to being reactive may have fully bought into a content-based strategy and yet still unconsciously kill off its chances of success by passing stories along to every stakeholder before they are finally approved. If newspapers and daily news sites behaved this way, the public would forever be uninformed and unamused.

Involving too many stakeholders in the approval process can also risk making your ideas muddled. As the saying goes, "a camel is a horse designed by committee." If you want good stories told at speed, give them to a few trusted people who care about the brand and have access to a few high-level stakeholders capable of keeping things moving. Consensus can be necessary for certain decisions, but when it comes to stories, velocity and a coherent vision are far more important.

Insights

- ◆ Data-based approaches can help us influence hearts and minds, but intangibles, like wisdom, wonder, and delight will always move people in ways that can never be quantified.
- ◆ Stories are reliable sources of wonder, wisdom, and delight and have been for all of human history.
- ◆ For a brand to convene people and create lasting influence, it needs to tell stories.

Ask Yourself

- ◆ In what way is my brand telling its own story? In what ways has it allowed others to tell that story?
 - ◆ What sources of delight exist within my company that the world should know about? That other employees should know about?
 - ◆ Is my company's strategy based on laying low and avoiding criticism, or is it based on forging a narrative that people can relate to and take up?
-

