



STORY BUILT

How to craft spellbinding brand stories that create epic customer engagement in 10 easy steps

PARK HOWELL

PREVIEW

STORY BUILT

CHAPTER 1

STORY BUILT BACKSTORY

I've been in the advertising business for 30 years. My agency has celebrated many great successes. We've also felt the thud of some mediocre missteps, and have been humbled by the occasional spectacular failure. I have always been curious about what makes creativity work. But the big question remained: how can we consistently turn creative campaigns into meaningful movements?

This quest is even more daunting when you consider how dramatically the world of advertising and marketing is changing.

Just consider the impacts of the democratization of social media where now EVERYONE is a communicator. Couple that with the global recession, which has robbed us of our buying power, and created distrust of authority - from Wall Street to Capital Hill through Madison Avenue. Fed-up baby boomers, vocal Generation X, Y and Millennials, and the growing class of consumers called Aspirationalists are redefining customer engagement. They embrace companies that stand for something greater than their products and services, and vilify those that don't.

These rapidly changing social dynamics have triggered an evolution in how newly empowered and emboldened consumers communicate.

To rise above the cacophony of the attention economy and to create more trust in worthy brands, I have created the Story Cycle.

It is a 10-step process distilled from the timeless narrative structure of the ancients, inspired by the story artists of Hollywood, influenced by masters of persuasion, guided by trend seers, and informed by how the mind grapples for meaning.

While storytelling has become ubiquitous in advertising, and innumerable books tell you why stories are important for your brand, I will actually *show* you how to craft and tell compelling stories that sell.

Smart story marketers have evolved from being promoters to becoming publishers of valued content. They view their customers as more than consumers, but as allies. Companies like Patagonia, Red Bull, Apple, Nike, Toms Shoes, Unilever, and Pedigree are expert at content marketing. They weave their brand stories into the customer's journey to fulfill their collective goals and aspirations.

But why and how does story work?

My quest to understand story began in Hollywood. In 2006, our son was studying film at Chapman University in Orange, California. I asked him to send me his textbooks so that I could learn what Hollywood knew about creating spellbinding stories. I was curious how their storytelling tricks and techniques would translate into advertising and marketing.

The first person I was introduced to was Joseph Campbell. Unfortunately, he had been dead for 20 years. However, his work in mythology lives on. Campbell identified a common pattern to stories that has been around since the beginning of time. He called it the Hero's Journey, or monomyth. Great storytellers from Aristotle to The Apostles to Maya Angelou, from Shakespeare to Sheldon to Spielberg have used the universal sequence of the hero's journey to create timeless adventures.

Legendary screenwriting coach, Robert McKee, told me that storytelling is magnetic to humans because it mirrors life. “Story is about trying to make sense out of the confusion, chaos, and terror of being a human being.” Jonathan Gottschall, author of *The Storytelling Animal*, says our minds yield helplessly to the suction of story because it is how we create meaning from the events around us and learn from life.

For instance, the Greeks told the story of Narcissus. He was a brave hunter of spectacular beauty. When he saw his own reflection in a pond, he became transfixed. He died staring at himself. The meaning behind this cautionary tale is to not fall prey to your own ego.

Another example of the captivating power of narrative is found in the ridiculous story of storks delivering babies. Fifteenth century Europeans used this fib to bring meaning to childbirth for their children without all of the messy and embarrassing details.

Think about Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address. Isn't “Four score and seven years ago” just another way of saying “Once upon a time”? His speech was structured like a classic three-act play with exposition, development and resolution, and is one of most profound stories in American history. Amazingly, it was barely two minutes long.

Given all of this evidence for the power of story, I asked myself: if our brains are hardwired for narrative, and story is indeed the mirror to life for how we learn to survive and thrive in this world, and brilliant minds like Joseph Campbell have uncovered a universal pattern to crafting and telling great stories, then why aren't more brands embracing storytelling in their content marketing? I needed to test my hypothesis.

I took the structure of Campbell's Hero's Journey and overlaid it on our process for creating brand strategy. I felt like Indiana Jones

focusing the sunbeam in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to find where to dig for the lost Ark of the Covenant. That's when this universal pattern appeared before me. The backstory, or the protagonist's “ordinary world,” as Campbell called it, is the brand's position in the market. The story's hero is not the brand, but the customer. The “What's at Stake” chapter explores what motivates our hero to pursue their journey, and includes the aspirations of the customers combined with the brand's business goals.

The call to adventure, or the “inciting incident” as McKee calls it, reflects the market tension that propels the brand story forward. The hero has obstacles and antagonists they must overcome with the help of a mentor - the brand. There are peaks and valleys the allies and brand experience together on the road of trials textbook marketers call customer engagement. We celebrate the initial victories and provide a moral to every brand story to fulfill our human need for meaning and understanding. And then we build ritual use of the brand's product or service, empowering our customer in the process and inspiring the next virtuous revolution of the cycle.

I was amazed at the parallels of Campbell's work and our process. It underscored to me that the Hero's Journey does indeed map the natural progression that life events seem to follow, which corroborates the monomyth's power in story structure. It is a powerful branding tool because the Hero's Journey humanizes the process. To be effective, the brand must consider how to connect with its customer's journey on a personal level.

As you might imagine, I was pretty excited at this point. I felt like I found a proven, universal process we could use to ensure the success of our campaigns. We applied the architecture of Campbell's Hero's Journey to create the Story Cycle to help brands craft and tell compelling stories that sell. The Story Cycle is not a formula, but a form. The process helps content marketers infuse more meaning into their brands, create greater engagement with

customers, build ritual use around their offerings, and arm allies with stories they can evangelize through word of mouth marketing.

Where Campbell's monomyth is illustrated as a closed-loop story structure, with the hero beginning and ending his journey in their ordinary world, the Story Cycle is an open loop. It is a reinforcing virtuous cycle that expands and grows with every revolution.

But to work effectively, the brand must act as the mentor in the story that empowers and enlightens the true hero of the journey - its customer.

So how can you help ensure more successes than failures with your brand? Start thinking like an author about your business. Use the Story Cycle to help guide everything from the development of your high-level brand strategy to inspiring the tactical creative elements of your campaign.

What's surprising about the Story Cycle is that when you learn its organic structure, you will start recognizing it in most aspects of your life. In fact, story is so innate to our character that I bet you were at the top of your storytelling game when you were in kindergarten. Your personal storyteller has simply been shushed through education and society. Remember the first time you were told to "Stop telling stories"? That's when the man-made curtain began to close on your God-given talent.

However, your latent storyteller is waiting, eager to be released. Let me show you how to use the Story Cycle to ignite your inner storyteller. Once you learn it, you will have the capacity to "own" every boardroom, break room, chat room, and living room through persuasive storytelling.

When you complete the Story Cycle process - whether you're using the methodology to create brand strategy, customer personas, a communications plan, online user experience, or a creative brief - you will have infused your brand with meaning, humility,

and humanity through the universal power of proven storytelling. The Story Cycle will help you...

1. Articulate your #1 brand position in the marketplace from your backstory
2. Define your heroes by drafting customer personas for your target audiences
3. Identify what's at stake for your heroes and the goals of your brand
4. Create your unique buying proposition in answer to the market tension and its call to adventure
5. Finger the obstacles and antagonists that confront your heroes and may thwart your brand
6. Describe your brand's emotional promise, unique gift, and authentic archetypical personality
7. Explore what initial customer engagement looks like and how you will overcome potential buyers remorse
8. Craft your foundational brand statement
9. Clarify your brand ideal in the values you share with your customers
10. Instill brand rituals to begin the next revolution of the virtuous Story Cycle.

Congratulations. You are now prepared to nudge the world in any direction you choose through the power of storytelling.

What's your story?

*"All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town."
—Leo Tolstoy*

CHAPTER 1

WHERE IN THE WORLD HAVE YOU BEEN?

The Backstory & Positioning of Your Brand

For our exploration into the Story Cycle, I would like to introduce you to Edgar. Edgar was created by a talented story artist at Pixar. We asked her for a character that would help us bridge the gap between the often cold, heartless realm of business and the humanity we are all trying to connect with.

Recently, a rather cynical brand guy confronted me about the wisdom of using a “storybook character” in the “serious business of branding.” He asked if business people “really bought into it?” His reaction makes my point. We have found that many ad agencies and the brands they represent take themselves so seriously that they lose connection with the humanity of their customers. In typical textbook fashion, the branders and the brands they represent have the misconception that they are the heroes of their stories when it’s really the customers who are the center of the journey. Customers don’t want to interact with business. They want to experience life.

Filtering your brand through the Story Cycle forces you to reframe your narrative from a self-serving perspective to a customer-centric perspective. The customer’s mind can’t help but hug your story, because you are driven by human storytelling not business speak



(Remember all of us being at the top of our storytelling games in kindergarten?). Your offering becomes immensely more relevant and interesting to them. Thinking more like an author instead of a businessperson brings the fun and adventure into your otherwise meaningless world of branding.

Tolstoy, the famous Russian author who wrestled with the existential crisis of finding meaning in what he called a meaningless life, is the ideal poster boy for branding. How does one bring meaning to a meaningless brand? I chose his quote to lead into this chapter because I think it is intensely relevant to your brand. Your backstory is all about the journey that brought you to town. Now that you're here, you run the danger of being a stranger to both your customers and prospects unless your story connects with them on their terms.

In storytelling, the "backstory" creates the setting for action. In marketing, we "sex it up" with titillating terms like "situation analysis," an example of the over-important jargon that rote learning creates in us. I'd rather call it "brand lore." Brand lore is the accumulated facts, traditions, and beliefs about a particular product or service. It describes where your brand has been, where it is now, and where it wants to go. Appreciating your backstory and honestly sharing it sets the stage for your brand's future journey and begins to define your brand's unique position in the market.

A brand's position refers to how your brand is perceived by customers in terms of its features and benefits relative to its competition. Marketing expert and bestselling author Seth Godin describes a brand as a "set of expectations, memories, stories, and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer's decision to choose one product or service over another." What he means is that proper brand storytelling creates invaluable meaning.

Branding is the stories your customers tell themselves and others about your product or service. Your definable and defensible "market position" is like the opening scene in every movie. It creates the context and setting from where your brand story will unfold both physically and philosophically. Unfortunately, we brand storytellers don't have it as easy as Hollywood.

Imagine a movie that opens on an array of gold-plated gears ticking away time. The music clicks and pulses in synchronicity. The scene dissolves from the mechanized clockworks into a bird's eye view of the manic circular streets of Paris, which mirror the timepiece's relentless march forward. We swoop into a train station as passengers hurriedly fill the Pullman cars. No time to lose. The camera travels headlong down the boarding ramp as we whiz past hurried riders and porters, into the terminal and up to the clock tower that stands as a sentinel in the grand mall. We push to a close-up of the number "four" on the clock's face. It frames another face: that of a boy peering out from the clock tower onto the oblivious crowd below. The setting for the movie, Hugo, is established in seventy-four seconds.

Martin Scorsese, director of Hugo, does a brilliant job of setting the scene. He simply shows us what we need to see to capture the unique setting, plot, and characters that will make his story one of a kind. We strive to be as equally illustrative and captivating for the brands we represent. That effort starts by accurately and honestly articulating the brand's backstory. A vivid foundational backstory allows you to create a potent brand position.

Throughout decades of advertising and marketing, it has been proven that the first brand to occupy a prominent position in the customer's mind is typically the market winner and virtually impossible to unseat. This basic premise of positioning - establishing significant brand meaning in the minds of your customers - was introduced in the 1981 best-selling business book by Al Ries and Jack Trout called Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind.

AdAge named it the top media and marketing book of all time. Ries and Trout describe the mind of the consumer like a chicken that requires a pecking order to make sense out of the world. The first brand to register with a consumer in a given category goes to the top of the pecking order and benefits from top-of-mind awareness. The competing laggard brands have a near-impossible task of dethroning the first brand, and therefore must find a secondary position that is considerably weaker. According to Ries and Trout:

“To cope with complexity, people have learned to simplify everything.... This ranking of people, objects, and brands is not only a convenient method of organizing things but also an absolute necessity to keep from being overwhelmed by the complexities of life.”

As all great market positions are developed from the backstory of the brand, the marketing science of brand positioning meshes perfectly with the first chapter in my ten-step methodology: the backstory in any hero's journey is his or her “ordinary world.” In marketing, your brand's backstory tells you something about its ordinary world. Where has your brand been? What operational features and benefits have gotten it to where it is today? What stories has it been telling? And where do you want the brand to go?

Ideally your brand should occupy and own that sought-after #1 position in your customer's mind relative to its performance around features and benefits. What does your brand provide better than anyone else, as perceived by your customers? Know that in the minds of consumers, *perception is reality* as it brings meaning to your product offering. It's not about how your brand outperforms your competition operationally. The product differentiation is conceived in your customer's mind by the stories you artfully tell them. Don't get me wrong. Your product or service has to perform beyond what it promises. It's just that the actual performance is secondary to owning your customer's perception:

what your performance means to them. As the old axiom goes, nothing kills a poor product faster than good advertising. And the demise of a mediocre product is especially quick in the hands of a great storyteller.

How strong is perception in your brand positioning? Rolling Stone magazine was founded in 1967 in San Francisco by Jann Wenner. The magazine became popular for its musical coverage and political reporting by enigmatic and controversial writer, Hunter S. Thompson. Although the magazine had an ardent following, by the 1980s advertisers dismissed its readership as burned out, pot-smoking hippies with little disposable cash. To show respect towards its readership, the magazine needed to celebrate the legacy of its backstory, while at the same time embracing the misperception of its potential advertisers with a story consistent with its brand. A small, upstart agency in Minneapolis called Fallon McElligot reframed *Rolling Stone's* story with its now legendary “Perception. Reality.” campaign. This is one of my favorite ads in the campaign because of how they addressed the stereotype of their readerships' “appetite” for life.



“The One Club, which awards excellence in advertising and design, named it the best print campaign of the 1980s.”

The copy read...

“If you think a plate of homemade brownies can satisfy the munchies of a Rolling Stone reader, here’s the scoop on what else it takes. Last week, Rolling Stone readers spent 290 million dollars in grocery stores, drank 40 million glasses of soda, ate 6 million cups of yogurt and polished off 4 million candy bars. And they’re still hungry.”

To me, Rolling Stone’s “Perception. Reality.” campaign is one of the most effective examples of a brand being true to itself and owning its backstory to reposition its importance in the minds of its customers—in this case, the businesses that buy advertising in its magazine. More than sixty print ads were created for this campaign, each its own persuasive story about the misunderstood buying strength of the Rolling Stone readership. Over the course of the seven-year campaign, ad sales increased by fifty-seven percent. It was a mind-altering business-to-business success story about winning the battle of the psyche.

How about the backstory of the Austrian toothpaste salesman who had been raising the heart rates of people around the world for more than two decades? In 1982, Dietrich Mateschitz was on a sales trip in Thailand when he learned that truck drivers there were downing energy drinks like crazy. The top brand was called “Kratindaeng,” meaning water buffalo. It was a high-octane mix of sugar, caffeine, water, and an amino acid called taurine, which studies suggest benefit the cardiovascular system. Mateschitz was intrigued. On this same trip, he read about Mr. Taisho, the richest man in Japan, who had introduced a high-energy drink to his countryman. Mateschitz, known as an energetic and highly creative marketer, connected the dots. He quit pedaling toothpaste and with a partner, each investing a half million dollars, began creating an energy drink for the Western market.

The first can of Red Bull hit the streets on April 1, 1987 in Austria. Because Mateschitz poured his life savings into creating the beverage, he had little money for advertising. His bane became his blessing. Because Mateschitz was such a gifted marketer, honing his craft with Unilever before his toothpaste gig, he began staging spectacular stunts on the cheap that would draw gasping crowds and gawking onlookers. He pinned his Red Bull logo and his hopes on young, unknown extreme athletes, including street lugers, base jumpers, surfers, air acrobats, mountain bikers, snowboarders—virtually any kind of adrenalin junky with enough talent and charisma to reasonably ensure their survival.

Spectators and media flocked to his events, which celebrated the human potential within all of us. One particularly bombastic stunt starred fellow Austrian daredevil Felix Baumgartner, who rocketed across the English Channel (twenty-two miles) from Dover, England to Calais, France with nothing more than a jet pack strapped to his back. He was dropped from an airplane at thirty-three thousand feet and reached speeds in excess of two hundred and twenty miles per hour in a flight that lasted less than seven minutes. More than two hundred million people around the world saw the event—and the Red Bull logo—on TV. This was more than a marketing stunt to sell an energy drink. Mateschitz was literally firing a shot over the bow of the French ministry that had been blocking the entrance of Red Bull into its country.

Red Bull is the world’s number one energy drink, a position it has held proudly for over twenty-five years. In hindsight, you can examine the Red Bull’s DNA in its backstory. The brand is a powerful expression of its founder. He expended immense amounts of his own energy and financial resources over several years to launch the product with the added pressure from friends and family who thought he was insane. Unable to afford expensive - and passive - traditional advertising, Mateschitz defaulted to what he knew best: enticing crowds of potential customers to live vicariously through his extreme athletes by participating as witnesses to heart-stopping events.

What's important here is that Red Bull's stories are not merely told, they're experienced. And the product is always secondary to the visceral connection of the "happening" around the brand story.



Red Bull daredevil Felix Baumgartner prepares to leap into the history books to further exemplify the brand's story of giving its customer wings.

Red Bull has remained true to the spirit of its first slogan, which Mateschitz considers to be more of a manifesto: "We give wings to people and ideas." This is a simple and powerful expression of an "überly" energetic brand that invites customers to experience its authentic, rebellious archetype. The slogan is also a reflection of its founder who once told a reporter, "If we don't create the market, it doesn't exist." That kind of fearlessness takes foresight and above all, energy.

Today, Red Bull is the undisputed leader in "buzz marketing," or content marketing. It is a publishing empire that creates stories to attract readers, viewers, and listeners to its brand. The Red Bull Media House publishes its own magazine, *The Red Bulletin*, which rivals *Sports Illustrated* in circulation. It has its own recording artists with its label, Red Bull Records. The brand provides its more than five thousand videos and fifty thousand photos to users—

including network TV stations—free of charge. Red Bull even produced a movie, *The Art of Flight*.

Red Bull stages events like Flutag, German for "airshow," that in locations around the world attract upwards of fifty thousand people to fly their homemade flying machines—a brilliant hands-on celebration of its "We give you wings..." brand story. It recently sponsored Russian daredevil, Valery Rozov, who set a base jumping record by leaping off the north face of Mount Everest and flying like a squirrel in a Red Bull wingsuit. And the brand pushed its own extreme envelope with its Stratos project. In 2012, Baumgartner, the man who streaked over the English Channel, set the new free-fall record when he leaped from a Red Bull can at 128,100 feet above the earth. Red Bull simply called it "The World's Biggest Jump."

"'Everybody is fascinated by mythology,' Mateschitz once said. 'I was most fascinated by Zeus, the King of the Gods. When he came down to earth to see Europa, he changed into a bull.'"

The epic brand of Red Bull charges on.

The key takeaway from understanding the two backstories of *Rolling Stone* magazine and Red Bull is that a brand must first appreciate its own limits, and then overcome those limits with an authentic story to engage customers. This requires an honest assessment of where your brand has been, where it is now, and where you intend to take it. In the process of creating your own backstory, you will uncover weaknesses that require strengthening and conflicts that must be resolved. As your brand's character grows in this process, so does the power of its offering, and its story becomes ever more enchanting.

THE TRACTION OF BRAND POSITIONING

It's hard to top the brand positioning and storytelling feats of iconic brands like *Rolling Stone* and Red Bull. But now I'd like to demonstrate how the rubber meets the road in brand positioning in the hearts and minds of your customers (especially in a highly commoditized industry like automobile tires).

All tires essentially do the same thing. They are black, round, rubber, and get you from point A to point B. What separates one tire from the next is its story. For instance, people pay top dollar for a "high performance" Pirelli tire, which owns a premium position in the mind of a consumer who cares about sports car-like performance in a tire. On its website, Pirelli shares its "passion for high performance," which translates into a luxury brand, and backs up its story by touting the fact that Pirelli supplies tires to all the Formula 1 racing teams (including Red Bull, by the way).

While Pirelli is the performance tire, Michelin owns a completely different story about safety. The Michelin story captures the number one position in the mind of consumers who care about safety, and the brand visually tells the story by featuring small children in diapers scooting around on Michelin tires with one of the most classic story lines ever:

"Michelin. Because so much is riding on your tires."



Michelin's story of safety personified in its advertising

Two brands can own different front-runner positions in the mind of the consumer in one product category simply by the stories they tell - and live. Do you know what Dunlop Tires stands for in consumers' minds? Me neither. No story. Little differentiation leaves us, and their sales, flat.

As you capture your backstory, begin to look for a brand position at the edges of your market that you can own first. For example, can you be the biggest, fastest, most expensive, cheapest, or the most fun? What can your brand do better than any of your competition? Then, make certain you can defend your position with a long-term view toward product improvement and fresh brand storytelling that evolves with your customer's own personal evolution.

Ben & Jerry's ice cream is another terrific example of brand positioning in a commoditized market where many ice cream makers had come before them. According to a member of the board of directors, Jeff Furman, "Ben & Jerry's became an icon [because] it always was an edge-dweller, not only in business practices but also in progressive politics and social issues, and that edge-dwelling behavior is what enamored a lot of people..." For instance, Ben & Jerry's has always been more of a business-minded hippie than corporate denizen. It proudly proclaimed its social convictions on the labels of its "euphoric concoctions" with funky-named flavors like Cherry Garcia, Whirled Peace, and Wavy Gravy. Ben & Jerry's is not afraid to take a stand on controversial issues either, like same-sex marriage. They renamed their apple pie ice cream to "Apple-y Ever After" to support gay rights. By staking out an edgy position as an ice cream-wielding activist for a better world, Ben & Jerry's creates more authentic emotional depth and flavor for what is otherwise a frozen commodity.

Is your brand an edge-dweller? We use the following simple exercise to start the discussion and to help you define the unique market position for your brand. By the way, I found this process

in a branding book many years ago, and we've used it ever since. But for the life of me I can't remember the name of the book or the authors. So if you are they, give me a shout-out and I'll provide the proper attribution in the next printing of *Story Built*.

1. What industry are you in?
2. What category are you in?
3. What specialty do you provide?
4. What is your number one specialty?

In Red Bull's case, they are in the beverage industry. Its category, the one Mateschitz essentially carved out, is energy drinks. Red Bull's specialty is providing a beverage that enhances human performance, even if this is only an emotional promise: some studies, and countries for that matter, argue the validity of its product claims. Nonetheless, Red Bull ventures on by sharing the emotional appeal of its events and stories with its high-flying customers. Red Bull's number one specialty is that it is the undisputed international leading energy drink in sales, which gives its drinkers - and shareholders - "wings."

While Red Bull is an extreme example of a well-played position, your brand doesn't have to jump from Mount Everest or free fall from the stratosphere to experience the same exhilarating benefits of story. Allow me to show you how Park&Co developed a unique brand position for a local water utility by playing off of its backstory to create a promising future for the company, its customers, and the planet.

EXPERTS AT RESOURCE SCARCITY

Giving a hint of its original aspirations, the company was named Global Water. In the early 2000s, Global Water began purchasing small water utilities in Arizona to create a new brand of water supplier in the desert Southwest. Their business model had a much higher purpose than just becoming another water provider.

Global Water, at its own expense, was double-plumbing new communities with purple pipes for reclaimed water so that it could be easier to recycle this valuable resource for landscapes, green belts, and other nonpotable uses, essentially creating a new source of water through reuse in this drought-stricken region.

As Trevor Hill, president of Global Water would say, "Why would you flush your toilet with Perrier when recycled water will do?"

Here's how we boiled down Global Water's dominant position in the market.

Industry:	Utility
Category:	Water
Specialty:	Water reclamation and reuse
#1 Specialty:	The number one expert at resource scarcity management



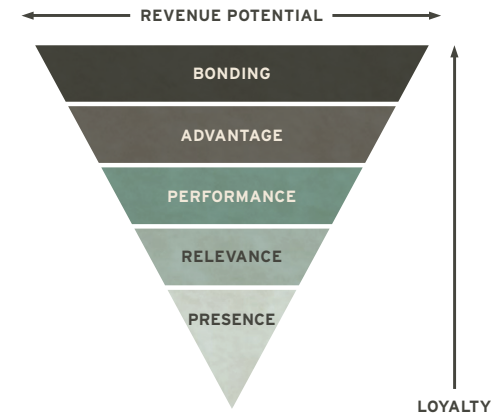
An ad from the print campaign that launched the new Global Water brand.

How many water utilities can stake out an edgy market position as the protectors of our most essential resource and stand by it? Global Water's intent is to propel the entire water industry forward by educating regulators about the safety of recycled water and to make it more accessible for the good of the planet, its people, and their profit line.

Global Water is the metaphorical pebble in the pond, and the concentric circles of its story are quickly spreading internationally as the company is consulting and servicing water utilities and municipalities from Southern California to Thames, England to Sydney, Australia. Their journey reflects the power of a well-defined backstory and market position that holds real meaning and speaks the truth.

Ironically, your goal in developing your backstory is to begin with the end in mind. What does ultimate success look like to your organization and its brand, and what kind of customer engagement and loyalty will be needed to achieve your business goals? The Story Cycle is about connecting emotionally with your customer. It helps you understand the universal path we all travel, and creates empathy for your customer's individual journey. If you're not a startup business, then you already have customers interacting with your product or service at various levels of engagement. Understanding your current customer awareness of—and loyalty for—your brand is critical to informing an accurate backstory.

A simple tool to use is the Brand Pyramid developed in the mid-1990s by Millward Brown, a global marketing research and consulting firm. The firm created its model following thirty years of research on brand health. The pyramid demonstrates the five key stages consumers go through with a brand, starting with basic product or service awareness with little to no emotional attachment to ultimate brand bonding and customer loyalty.



The Brand Pyramid by Millward Brown

The Brand Pyramid is all about courting the customer. Let's think about it like you're at the high stakes social drama of a high school dance. We'll begin at what I call the wallflower level of "Presence," at the bottom of the pyramid. At this level, your potential suitors (customers) may be aware of you or have talked to you (tried your product or service), but they have zero emotional connection with your brand. They know you're at the dance, but they're more interested in the punchbowl. They are indifferent, and you teeter on the brink of being marginalized. You'll need an attractive price, good performance, and a great story to move up to relevance.

"Relevance," the dance floor of brand engagement, is when the customer plucks you from the crowd and takes you for a spin. They're testing your price/value at this point, and they're considering how your product or service fits into their life.

Score! You managed to stay off their toes and displayed enough charm that leads to the first serious date. You've stepped up to the "Performance" level. Here, customers will begin comparing your brand with other suitors to see whether it delivers on its potential. Instead of being insecure about their wandering eyes, now is the time to demonstrate your brand's performance by drawing

attention to your physical attributes through consistent and authentic storytelling. Your customer is beginning to appreciate the brand's identity and may even begin associating his or her identity with yours. Turn up the charisma by romancing benefits and not features at this point. We'll talk more about this as you develop your unique buying proposition in Chapter 4.

You're building brand trust. The next step is to go steady (do people still do that?) in the "Advantage" level of engagement. Your brand clearly has the upper hand over its competitors. Even though you may be lower in price or offer more value, the "softer" influences are beginning to shine through. Customers are attaching emotions like fun, excitement, health, or "being cool" to your brand and may be seeking approval from their peers for the relationship. Now is the time to ask for a bond for life.

Every brand aspires to achieve the "Bonding" level, where customer engagement turns to loyalty. It takes two to dance. Your brand must be forever committed to the customer relationship and help customers ritualize the use of your product or service into their lives. You'll learn more about how to create brand rituals in Chapter 10. How you ritualize a brand is not too dissimilar from the above customer engagement process that, by the way, conveniently mirrors the hero's journey. You will see how it all comes full circle in preparation for the next revolution of the Story Cycle.

So who is your dance partner? Before we eagerly twirl over to Chapter 2 and study the audience and the character development of your customer, let's collect ourselves. Please take a moment to consider the backstory of the brand, product, service, and your cause. Then draft your position statement using the process below and announce to the world your brand's number one position in the marketplace.

REFLECTION:

1. Where have you been, where are you now, and where are you going?
2. Create your brand positioning statement: what your customers perceive you stand for in terms of features and benefits?
 - What industry are you in?
 - What category do you represent?
 - What is your specialty within your chosen category?
 - What is your #1 specialty: what do you deliver better than anyone else that is relevant to your customers and ownable and defensible by your brand?