

# Writing screenplays for brands

**John Griffiths**, Planning Above and Beyond, suggests brand marketers should learn to be storytellers

**T**HIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES a new method for developing brands using Hollywood screenplay writing techniques. It overcomes many of the drawbacks in conventional brand development methodologies. But it will also prove useful in the emerging field of reputation management, as audiences watch and judge the performance of companies in national media.

Brand development methodologies have become institutionalised in marketing departments, thanks in large part to the efforts of advertising agencies and brand consultancies who used them as a conceptual and sales tool for selling-in advertising and corporate identity. This might have been acceptable when advertising took the lion's share of the budget, even if there were often more words on the brand schematic than in the press and TV advertising that emerged from it.

## Weaknesses of brand personae

However, it is becoming clear that using a brand schematic based predominantly on one communication form creates problems when this is adapted for other channels or integrated campaigns. For example, brand personae in advertising are essentially static, because of the constraints of advertising as a form. Other

communication channels such as direct marketing and PR allow the brand persona to be dynamic and even to change over time in a way that is not credible for advertising. Most communications channels introduced in the past ten years allow the audience to talk back – so there is a need for subtlety and ambiguity, which brand essences try to banish. And the growth of branded entertainment has introduced narrative elements into the public presentation of brands and companies. So the conceptualising and presentation of brand personae requires a thorough rethink.

Recent interest in archetype theory has shown a desire to break through media clutter to a more compelling and universal understanding of how brand personalities operate – but without storytelling, the different types become masks that can be swiftly exchanged to suit the next strategy meeting. Archetypes revert into stereotypes. Constructing a unique narrative takes time and discipline, but can establish a brand persona that is qualitatively different from competitors and transcends a particular market category. This is because the strength of storytelling is to show how one individual can stand out and succeed against rivals and a

hostile environment. It is storytelling that creates authenticity and universality.

## Brands are verbs

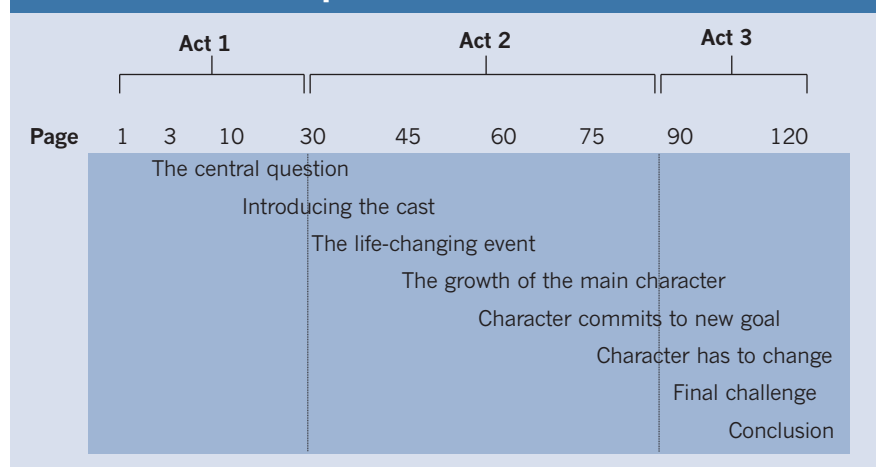
Considering how central stories and storytelling are to human thought and dialogue, it is astounding how brands have become bogged down in lists of nouns and adjectives. Narrative is to character as ground is to figure. Real characters *do* things – and living brands are verbs, not nouns. Stories are essentially about how conflicts are resolved and how characters change and develop in the process. Characters evolve – they have to – and how and why a character changes is one of the oldest tricks to gain and hold the attention of an audience. Considering attention is perhaps the fastest dwindling resource today, this ought to make narratives and the development of branded narratives of considerable interest to brand builders.

There are huge resources for any would-be storyteller, and few larger than the Hollywood film industry, where one blockbuster pays for the 19 others that do not make the big time. Screenplay development has always been formulaic – every studio has a small army of writers and consultants to hone the next winning formula. There are courses and books aplenty on how to write the ideal screenplay. In other words, there is a ready-made suite of tools for taking a character and making something of it.

The raw materials for constructing a narrative are as follows: to have a genre, a lead character and a cast of other characters, usually branded competitors. The most common story form is the epic where the hero overcomes a major obstacle and grows in the process. Many genres are based on this format (see Figure 1). The storyline begins with a crisis that the hero spends the remainder of the story resolving. The crisis reveals that the hero does not yet have what it takes: through a series of tests and trials, aided and hindered by other cast members, the hero

FIGURE 1

## Plot structure for an epic narrative



**John Griffiths** runs Planning Above and Beyond, a planning consultancy intended to push the boundaries of communications planning. His website [planningaboveandbeyond.com](http://planningaboveandbeyond.com) attracts over 5,000 visits a month.



eventually succeeds, having discovered in the process the will and the skills to succeed.

This simple, predictable framework enables the brand developer to do a number of things: to explore what qualities the brand possesses; to determine what qualities the brand lacks; and to find out how credibly the brand can be seen to acquire these qualities.

One of the major weaknesses with conventional brand theory is the muddling of values that are generic to the category, those that may be shared with certain competitors, and those that are unique to an individual and so a point of difference. Through storytelling the qualities of the hero are established, tested and developed. And these qualities are different from those of competitors, and they are certainly not generic.

Second, the brand does not have everything it needs to succeed – if it did, it would not have to set out on the heroic journey in the first place. Through storytelling the weaknesses of the brand become evident and the narrative is an exploration of how these weaknesses are overcome. Advertised brands do not have weaknesses – which is why they may be aspirational, but they can also be two-dimensional.

The brand succeeds by changing and evolving – it may be necessary to make sacrifices. But in the process, the essence of the character is tested and drawn out. Running workshops to construct brand narratives is a right-brained activity, but what are really being explored are the fundamentals of credible marketing activity. One of the most satisfying aspects of the technique is to switch back into analytical mode at the end of the workshop, only to discover that the basics of the marketing programme have already been developed in narrative format and are ready for translation into a communications programme.

### Storytelling workshops

The workshop structure is simple. The current brand character/essence brought

to the workshop is used as the starting point. The conventions of the market category and the communications conventions are discussed briefly to choose an appropriate genre. Then the cast is defined – where these are competitors, their characters are summarised. The initial crisis and the objective or quest the main character undertakes are agreed. Then the collective story-writing begins in earnest. The workshop follows the classic formula for epics: the hero faced by a crisis sets out to change. Usually the first set of changes is not sufficiently radical, so further sacrifice is required. When the screenplay is complete it can be useful to explore ‘genre flipping’, experimenting with variants in particular cinematic genres, such as horror, western or sci-fi. This forces the character into new shapes and extreme situations, again drawing new and unique characteristics out of the hero.

This concludes the right-brain part of the workshop, so we switch to analysis – how did the brand succeed? What were the new behaviours that made a difference? Typically half-a-dozen behaviours emerge; and each of these is taken in turn and used to brainstorm communication mechanics that would bring these to life. One of the biggest difficulties in using brand characters is to use them in any practical way to derive activities other than advertising. So many sales promotions, for example, are generic mechanics

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with a bit of brand ‘paint’ slapped on as an afterthought. From a protracted debate about authentic behaviours, the mechanics and the way they are used emanate directly from insights into how the brand must be seen to behave differently. The chosen brand value is like the lettering on a stick of rock – all the way through the behaviour – to the benefit of the mechanic.

### The workshop in practice: three examples

**1. For an upscale German car brand:** how does the entry-level model become a ‘proper’ model in the range? It does not look the same as the rest of the range, and most of those buying it cannot afford anything else in the range. The storyline was cast in the form of ‘How does the nerd win the hand of the daughter of the rich industrialist?’ The denouement of the story took place on the slopes of an exclusive ski resort. Much of the heated debate was about how the protagonist got there. Could he ski? Did he teach himself? How did he afford to get there? Did his friends help him? Did the daughter help him? Did she know his secret? How did she find out? Answering these questions with a story gave a very specific set of answers on the way the entry-level models could be communicated and tied to the rest of the range.

**2. For an fmcg trading brand** with a very diverse and generic product portfolio wanting to break out of a pack of ‘me-too’ brands: we used the genre of the chick-flick school movie and how the new girl in the class achieves acceptance, stand-out and popularity. There was much discussion about how to win through when the established class hierarchy included those who were more popular, better-looking and better-off – and how to succeed without resorting to a dirty tricks campaign. The ramifications affected pack design and ranging, in addition to more conventional communications. ▶

**3. For a Middle Eastern financial brand** that was staid, risk-averse and recessive: The new category leader was younger, more competitive and was trading on strong Islamic values. We cast this as a romantic drama, where the category leader precipitates the crisis by sending his parents round to ask for the hand of the girl with whom the client brand has always been in love. There was a second rival, who represented an American brand who was more materialistic and libertarian. The challenge was to write a credible drama where the recessive client brand gets the girl. Through the debate, the different motivation and behaviours of the key characters became very clear.

It took some time to complete, because the best stories have the hero declaring himself, nearly losing the girl, and end with him getting her back; and this hero was so quiet we could not find a way for him to declare himself before the end of the story. Once we had found the change in behaviour required, we found a whole new territory for the brand to communicate and a set of values that no other competitor could credibly espouse, but that enabled the client brand to outperform a dominant Islamic competitor without direct confrontation. Note how the storyline was able to work within the framework of Islamic culture and conventions; the working out of appropriate behaviour and cultural values stayed relevant because we began with the narrative. Narrative enabled complex and highly emotive territory to be negotiated creatively.

### Conflict is central

With all these examples it is clear that conflict is central to how the narrative develops and how it is resolved. This is fundamentally different from the way brands are currently conceived and implemented, but I would argue that using conflict is more engaging and more realistic about the environment in which marketing takes place.

The use of screenplays for brands was originally intended purely as a developmental tool. But it can also be used in other ways that are in the public eye.

First, branded entertainment with the addition of narratives can create much stronger engagement with the audience



Managing brand reputation: B&Q's positive message was in stark contrast to IKEA's

and is more likely to be remembered. Why do downsizing companies produce evasive press releases and engage in corporate doublespeak when they could tell the *Bridget Jones* story of giving up smoking and getting down to the gym twice a week to get back in shape? Companies are now embarking on branded programming exercises – creating their own programming and channels. An example is Camp Jeep, which is run twice year in the US for Jeep owners (and paid for by them) to gather and test their vehicles to the limits. This is a potential programming property as audiences follow the thrills and spills of ordinary drivers and their Jeeps. A TV series based on Camp Jeep would create a focus for people to learn more about the products. But the real prize would be using such a programming vehicle to tell the story of where Jeep is going as a company, with so much more programming time than there is room for in an advertising campaign.

Then, narratives can be used to manage brand reputation. Two contrasting examples are retailers B&Q and IKEA.

**'Branded entertainment with the addition of narratives can create much stronger engagement with the audience and is more likely to be remembered'**

Both operate in the territory of their customers doing it themselves. But in the same week last February very different stories were told about their organisations. B&Q invested £10 million to sponsor British sailor Ellen McArthur's round-the-world voyage. This resulted in ten times the exposure value, on a yacht clearly branded with the message 'You can do it' written on the side.

By contrast, IKEA, overwhelmed by crowds at a midnight store opening in north London, locked its customers out in the car park, leading to crush injuries and a stabbing, communicating 'You're on your own.' Both are messages about DIY. But there was the potential for both companies to do so much more than tell a good news story or to minimise a bad news story – both were an opportunity to demonstrate how each brand would empower you to do it yourself. And narrative is a means of doing this credibly without making bland assertions about customer care.

In summary, building brand narratives using screenplays is an exciting method for making brand activity more credible and more effective. It can be used as a workshop tool to show the strengths a brand has and its competitors do not. Brand essences and characters do not do this as effectively and do not provide a solid enough foundation for integrated marketing programmes. Once the branded behaviours have been identified, this can lead to much more consistent branded communications activity through the line. Finally, as branded entertainment increases, brands and companies are going to have to provide storylines to which their audiences will want to pay attention. ■

**john.griffiths@paab.biz**