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Are You Telling a Great Story?

Last December I was asked to make a presentation at the Brand Masters conference in Ft. Lauderdale—my first workshop on brand storytelling. Faced with an audience that would rather be by the pool, I asked if we could move my session outside to the pool bar. No surprise—no resistance. Now I just had to worry about enthralling them with a 60-minute session on storytelling and how it relates to such current buzzwords as branding, brand experiences, CRM and the like.

Well, close to two hours later, I was still engaged in a lively dialogue about the importance of storytelling in the business world. And no, we didn't go almost double the allotted time because I'm long winded; I asked at the right time if we should stop and the audience said no. How many times have you seen that happen at a conference?

Now, many of the readers of *Entertainment Management* are probably saying "Big deal, we know all about storytelling, we do it every day!" And, yes, many of you probably do. But I was certainly surprised by how many of my brand colleagues could talk about storytelling, but couldn't necessarily translate that to brand storytelling. With this in mind, I've devised a little test for you—one that will give you a chance to see how effective your brand story is.

Here's exercise one: write down how you would describe your company as if it was a blind date you wanted to convince me to take out. What would she be like? Where would she like to go? Is she an expensive date or a cheap date? Would she like to be in a crowded hot spot, walking the streets of Soho or at a quiet restaurant?

Next, ask other people at your company the same question. Does everyone describe the same person? Sure, there will be some variances, but if you think your blind date would like to go to a noisy, hoppin' hot-spot and a colleague describes her as someone who would prefer a very quiet evening at the library, you either don't work for the same company or you've got some problems with your core story! That's step one in creating a brand story: understanding the stories that you believe are your company, theme park, museum, etc.—and understanding how your story plays to the different audiences within your company. If the people in your company don't believe the

brand story, no one on the outside will.

Exercise two involves tracing the conviction with which the brand story is told. How many employees of Enron would now believe upper management telling them that Enron is "all about the people who work here", as so many companies do? One of the biggest challenges to overcome in brand storytelling is making sure that it's told with the same conviction throughout the organization as you would have it told to your customer. Believe me, customers know when it doesn't ring true!

Find a third grader or group of third graders and tell them your company story. This is a great test group for storytelling. When kids are bored, they're bored and they let you know. How quickly is your third grade audience bored? When do they start the shuffle? When you get a story that is engaging to that audience, then you'll have the start of a usable brand story.

Here's a hint: your story is not the facts of your company—how many employees, when you started, etc. It is the soul and the why of your company. A few key points to consider:

- Do you know your story and your audiences?
- Are you telling the same story with your employees?
- Are they telling the same story to your customers?
- Is your story authentic?
- Is your story engaging your audience?
- Do your actions deliver on your message?

I'm always amazed at how very good companies can miss some of these key items and turn what should be a great story into either a neutral or worse, negative story. Do you know your story? Is it authentic? Does it pass the blind date test? Are third graders excited to hear it?

In the end, there are three things about a great story:

- People want to hear it.
- People want to tell it.
- People want to participate in it.

The key learning here is simple: If people want to hear, tell or participate in your story, then you are sharing your brand conviction with them; brand conviction means brand customers.

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