

Telling a Good Story

You may have the greatest company in the world. But if you don't know how to convey that to customers, you may as well not exist.

Every entrepreneur believes his or her business is remarkable. As I work with clients to uncover and determine brand strategies, they're always very eager to tell me about how special their business is. Most of the time, I reply by saying, "You're right. You definitely have something unique to offer, and have a good operations system in place to deliver what you promise to customers."

"Then why," they ask, "are we struggling just to stay even, let alone grow?"

"Perhaps," I respond, "you're not telling a good enough story."

When it comes to marketing your business in a powerful and meaningful way, you need to give serious thought to that which makes you stand out in a way no one else can -- your brand story. Consider some of the most successful marketers in the small-business landscape today, and check out the stories they're telling:

The J. Peterman Company. Yes, there really is a J. Peterman, and the reason behind the clothing company's success can be found in a quote from J. Peterman himself. "People want things that are hard to find. Things that have romance, but a factual romance, about them." You're not buying an ordinary polka-dot skirt -- you're strutting down the Boulevard St-Germain in Paris. The man's Estancia shirt tells a tale of wealth and polo ponies in Argentina. J. Peterman weaves a tale around each and every piece of clothing that is very compelling. Customers aren't purchasing outerwear; they're buying into a dream of adventure.

Columbia Sportswear. In the mid-1970s, Columbia CEO Gert Boyle knew it was time for a change in marketing. "I always thought our advertising was kind of weird, with the 'engineered' and all that. Because the average person doesn't care anything about having something engineered. People care about having it fit well." That was the beginning of Columbia's "Tough Mother" campaign. Customers are convinced of the sturdiness of Columbia clothing, not only because of engineering, but Gert's stories about what she herself puts a piece of clothing through before selling it to the public. And what better guinea pig than her son, Tim? Their most famous ad showed Tim (now the company's CEO) submitting to a run through the car wash to test a Columbia parka, at his mother's behest. Today, Columbia Sportswear is a \$1.2 billion company.

One Hour Heating and Air Conditioning. What is the biggest complaint about repair people? You have to wait around for hours and they're always late (that is, if they even show up). One Hour Heating and Air Conditioning took that bad rap and turned it on its ear. They don't market themselves as having "timely service." They actually guarantee "Always On Time or You Don't Pay a Dime." And they mean it. If the repairperson is not there within an hour of your appointed time, you pay nothing. Quite a powerful story, and One Hour can do it, because they have the operations system in place to back up their guarantee. It is now one of the fastest-growing franchises in the United States today.

If you had to tell your story, what would it be? Would it have the right balance of fantasy, whimsy and fact? When creating your story, remember to:

Be authentic. The examples above are success stories because they draw from the "heart" of the company -- J. Peterman's love for storytelling, Gert Boyle's tough nature, and One Hour's commitment to saving the customer time. Anyone can make up a story, but the customer's innate sense of authenticity is what transforms a story into a brand message. Spend a good deal of time looking back at your history and personal values in determining why you're even in the business you're in. What's your passion, and how can you tell customers about it?

Be consistent. It's not enough just to tell a story; you must live it everyday through everything you do. I've written about the fact that every touch point of your business is a marketing opportunity. Columbia Sportswear wouldn't be the success it is today if the company talked about toughness, and then the zippers on their parkas disintegrated after a week. One Hour knew it had to have its operations structure in place to deliver on its promise of timeliness. From message to delivery to customer service, every element of your company has to align with your story.

The companies we call "super brands" use their unique (and sometimes personal) story to connect with customers in a way that makes them feel special; customers feel that they're in-the-know about who the brand is and what it offers. Do your customers really know *you*? And does the message get reinforced in everything you do? You can tell, and deliver on, a good story, even on the smallest of marketing budgets. It's a remarkable marketing strategy for a remarkable business -- *yours*.