

*New York Times Bestselling Author*

DONALD MILLER

# BUILDING A STORY BRAND



Clarify Your Message  
So Customers Will Listen

*Use the 7 Elements of Great Storytelling to Grow Your Business*

# INTRODUCTION

**This is not a book about telling your company's story.** A book like that would be a waste of time. Customers don't generally care about your story; they care about their own.

Your customer should be the hero of the story, not your brand.

This is the secret every phenomenally successful business understands.

What follows is a seven-part framework that will change the way you talk about your business and perhaps the way you *do* business.

Each year we help more than three thousand businesses stop wasting money on marketing and get their company growing by helping them clarify their message. This framework will work for you, regardless of your industry.

## INTRODUCTION

To get the most out of this book, I encourage you to do three things:

1. Read the book and understand the SB7 framework.
2. Filter your message through the framework.
3. Clarify your message so more customers listen.

Marketing has changed. Businesses that invite their customers' into a heroic story, grow. Businesses that don't are forgotten.

May we all be richly rewarded for putting our customers' stories above our own.

---

SECTION ONE

---

**WHY MOST  
MARKETING IS  
A MONEY PIT**

---



# **THE KEY TO BEING SEEN, HEARD, AND UNDERSTOOD**

Most companies waste enormous amounts of money on marketing. We all know how mind-numbing it is to spend precious dollars on a new marketing effort that gets no results. When we see the reports, we wonder what went wrong, or worse, whether our product is really as good as we thought it was.

But what if the problem wasn't the product? What if the problem was the way we talked about the product?

The problem is simple. The graphic artists and designers we're hiring to build our websites and brochures have degrees in design and know everything about Photoshop, but how many of them have read a single book about writing good sales copy? How many of them know how to clarify your message so customers listen? And worse, these companies are glad to take your money, regardless of whether you see results or not.

The fact is, pretty websites don't sell things. Words sell things. And if we haven't clarified our message, our customers won't listen.

If we pay a lot of money to a design agency without first clarifying our message, we might as well be holding a bullhorn up to a monkey. The only thing a potential customer will hear is noise.

Still, clarifying our message isn't easy. I had one client say that when he tried to do so, he felt like he was inside the bottle trying to read the label. I understand. Before I started StoryBrand I was a writer and spent thousands of hours staring at a blank computer screen, wondering what to say. That soul-wrenching frustration led me to create a "communication framework" based on the proven power of story, and I swear it was like discovering a secret formula. The writing got easier and I sold millions of books. After using the framework to create clear messages in my books, I used it to filter the marketing collateral in my own small company. Once we got clear, we doubled in revenue for four consecutive years. I now teach that framework to more than three thousand businesses each year.

Once they get their message straight, our clients create quality websites, incredible keynotes, e-mails that get opened, and sales letters people respond to. Why? Because nobody will listen to you if your message isn't clear, no matter how expensive your marketing material may be.

At StoryBrand we've had clients double, triple, and even quadruple their revenue after they got one thing straight—their message.

The StoryBrand Framework has been just as effective for billion-dollar brands as it has for mom-and-pop businesses, and

just as powerful for American corporations as it has for those in Japan and Africa. Why? Because the human brain, no matter what region of the world it comes from, is drawn toward clarity and away from confusion.

The reality is we aren't just in a race to get our products to market; we're also in a race to communicate why our customers need those products in their lives. Even if we have the best product in the marketplace, we'll lose to an inferior product if their offer is communicated more clearly.

So what's your message? Can you say it easily? Is it simple, relevant, and repeatable? Can your entire team repeat your company's message in such a way that it is compelling? Have new hires been given talking points they can use to describe what the company offers and why every potential customer should buy it?

How many sales are we missing out on because customers can't figure out what our offer is within five seconds of visiting our website?

## WHY SO MANY BUSINESSES FAIL

To find out why so many marketing and branding attempts fail, I called my friend Mike McHargue. Mike, often called "Science Mike" because he hosts a successful podcast called *Ask Science Mike*, spent fifteen years using science-based methodologies to help companies figure out how their customers think, specifically in the tech space. Sadly, he left advertising when a client asked him to create an algorithm predicting the associated buying habits of people with diabetes. Translation: they wanted him to sell junk food to diabetics. Mike refused and left the



industry. He's a good man. I called, though, because he still has incredible insight as to how marketing, story, and behavior all blend together.

At my request, Mike flew to Nashville to attend one of our workshops. After two days learning the StoryBrand 7-Part Framework (hereafter called the SB7 Framework), we sat on my back porch and I grilled him with questions. Why does this formula work? What's happening in the brains of consumers as they encounter a message filtered through this formula? What's the science behind why brands like Apple and Coke, who intuitively use this formula, dominate the marketplace?

"There's a reason most marketing collateral doesn't work," Mike said, putting his feet up on the coffee table. "Their marketing is too complicated. The brain doesn't know how to process the information. The more simple and predictable the communication, the easier it is for the brain to digest. Story helps because it is a sense-making mechanism. Essentially, story formulas put everything in order so the brain doesn't have to work to understand what's going on."

Mike went on to explain that among the million things the brain is good at, the overriding function of the brain is to help an individual survive and thrive. Everything the human brain does, all day, involves helping that person, and the people that person cares about, get ahead in life.

Mike asked if I remembered that old pyramid we learned about in high school, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. First, he reminded me, the brain is tasked with setting up a system in which we can eat and drink and survive physically. In our modern, first-world economy this means having a job and a dependable income. Then, the brain is concerned with safety,

which might entail having a roof over our heads and a sense of well-being and power that keeps us from being vulnerable. After food and shelter are taken care of, our brains start thinking about our relationships, which entail everything from reproducing in a sexual relationship, to being nurtured in a romantic relationship, to creating friendships (a tribe) who will stick by us in case there are any social threats. Finally, then, the brain begins to concern itself with greater psychological, physiological, or even spiritual needs that give us a sense of meaning.

What Mike helped me understand is that, without us knowing it, human beings are constantly scanning their environment (even advertising) for information that is going to help them meet their primitive need to survive. This means that when we ramble on and on about how we have the biggest manufacturing plant on the West Coast, our customers don't care. Why? Because that information isn't helping them eat, drink, find a mate, fall in love, build a tribe, experience a deeper sense of meaning, or stockpile weapons in case barbarians start coming over the hill behind our cul-de-sac.

So what do customers do when we blast a bunch of noise at them? They ignore us.

And so right there on my back porch, Mike defined two critical mistakes brands make when they talk about their products and services.

## **Mistake Number One**

The first mistake brands make is they fail to focus on the aspects of their offer that will help people survive and thrive.

All great stories are about survival—either physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual. A story about anything else won't

work to captivate an audience. Nobody's interested. This means that if we position our products and services as anything but an aid in helping people survive, thrive, be accepted, find love, achieve an aspirational identity, or bond with a tribe that will defend them physically and socially, good luck selling anything to anybody. These are the only things people care about. We can take that truth to the bank. Or to bankruptcy court, should we choose to ignore it as an undeniable fact.

Mike said our brains are constantly sorting through information and so we discard millions of unnecessary facts every day. If we were to spend an hour in a giant ballroom, our brains would never think to count how many chairs are in the room. Meanwhile, we would always know where the exits are. Why? Because our brains don't need to know how many chairs there are in the room to survive, but knowing where the exits are would be helpful in case there was a fire.

Without knowing it, the subconscious is always categorizing and organizing information, and when we talk publicly about our company's random back story or internal goals, we're positioning ourselves as the chairs, not the exits.

"But this poses a problem," Mike continued. "Processing information demands the brain burn calories. And the burning of too many calories acts against the brain's primary job: to help us survive and thrive."

## **Mistake Number Two**

The second mistake brands make is they cause their customers to burn too many calories in an effort to understand their offer.

When having to process too much seemingly random

information, people begin to ignore the source of that useless information in an effort to conserve calories. In other words, there's a survival mechanism within our customers' brains that is designed to tune us out should we ever start confusing them.

Imagine every time we talk about our products to potential customers, they have to start running on a treadmill. Literally, they have to jog the whole time we're talking. How long do you think they're going to pay attention? Not long. And yet this is precisely what's happening. When we start our elevator pitch or keynote address, or when somebody visits our website, they're burning calories to process the information we're sharing. And if we don't say something (and say something quick) they can use to survive or thrive, they will tune us out.

These two realities—the reality that people are looking for brands that can help them survive and thrive, and the reality that communication must be simple—explain why the SB7 Framework has helped so many businesses increase their revenue. The key is to make your company's message about something that helps the customer survive and to do so in such a way that they can understand it without burning too many calories.

## STORY TO THE RESCUE

Mike agreed the most powerful tool we can use to organize information so people don't have to burn very many calories is story. As he said, story is a sense-making device. It identifies a necessary ambition, defines challenges that are battling to keep us from achieving that ambition, and provides a plan to help us conquer those challenges. When we define the elements of a

story as it relates to our brand, we create a map customers can follow to engage our products and services.

Still, when I talk about story to business leaders, they immediately put me in a category with artists, thinking I want to introduce them to something fanciful. But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about a concrete formula we can use to garner attention from otherwise distracted customers. I'm talking about practical steps we can take to make sure people see us, hear us, and understand exactly why they simply *must* engage our products.

## THE FORMULA FOR CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Formulas are simply the summation of best practices, and the reason we like them is because they work. We've been given great management formulas like Ken Blanchard's Situational Leadership and formulas we can use in manufacturing like Six Sigma and Lean Manufacturing. But what about a formula for communication? Why don't we have a formula we can use to effectively explain what our company offers the world?

The StoryBrand Framework is that formula. We know it works because some form of this formula has been active for thousands of years to help people tell stories. Talk about a summation of best practices. When it comes to getting people to pay attention, this formula will be your most powerful ally.

Once you know the formulas, you can predict the path most stories will take. I've learned these formulas so well that my wife hates going to movies with me because, at some point, she knows

I'm going to elbow her and whisper something like, "That guy's going to die in thirty-one minutes."

Story formulas reveal a well-worn path in the human brain and if we want to stay in business, we need to position our products along this path.

If you're going to continue reading this book, I have to warn you, I'm going to ruin movies for you. I mean, these things really are formulaic. They're predictable. And they're predictable for a reason. Storytellers have figured out how to keep an audience's attention for hours.

The good news is these formulas work just as well at growing your business as they do at entertaining an audience.

## THE KEY IS CLARITY

The narrative coming out of a company (and for that matter inside a company) must be clear. In a story, audiences must always know who the hero is, what the hero wants, who the hero has to defeat to get what they want, what tragic thing will happen if the hero doesn't win, and what wonderful thing will happen if they do. If an audience can't answer these basic questions, they'll check out and the movie will lose millions at the box office. If a screenwriter breaks these rules, they'll likely never work again.

The same is true for the brand you represent. Our customers have questions burning inside them and if we aren't answering those questions, they'll move on to another brand. If we haven't identified what our customer wants, what problem we are helping them solve, and what life will look like after they engage our products and services, for example, we can forget about thriving

in the marketplace. Whether we're writing a story or attempting to sell products, our message must be clear. Always.

In fact, at StoryBrand we have a mantra: *If you confuse, you'll lose.*

## BUSINESS HAS AN ENEMY

Business has a fierce, insidious enemy that, if not identified and combated, will contort our company into an unrecognizable mess. The enemy I'm talking about is noise.

Noise has killed more ideas, products, and services than taxes, recessions, lawsuits, climbing interest rates, and even inferior product design. I'm not talking about the noise inside our business; I'm talking about the noise we *create* as a business. What we often call marketing is really just clutter and confusion sprayed all over our websites, e-mails, and commercials. And it's costing us millions.

Years ago, a StoryBrand client who attended one of our workshops pushed back. "I don't think this will work for me," he said. "My business is too diverse to reduce down to a simple message." I asked him to explain.

"I have an industrial painting company with three different revenue streams. In one division we powder-coat auto parts. In another we apply sealant to concrete, and in another we have a sterilized painting process used specifically in hospitals."

His business was diverse, but nothing so complex that it couldn't be simplified so more people would hire him. I asked if I could put his website on the giant television screen so the entire workshop could see it. His website was thoughtful, but it didn't

make a great deal of sense from an outside perspective (which is how every customer views your business).

The man had hired a fine-arts painter to create a painting of his building (was he selling a building?) and, at first glance it looked like the website for an Italian restaurant. The first question I had when I went to the website was, “Do you serve free breadsticks?” There were a thousand links ranging from contact information to FAQs to a timeline of the company’s history. There were even links to the nonprofits the business supported. It was as though he was answering a hundred questions his customers had never asked.

I asked the class to raise their hands if they thought his business would grow if we wiped the website clean and simply featured an image of a guy in a white lab coat painting something next to text that read, “We Paint All Kinds of S#\*%,” accompanied by a button in the middle of the page that said, “Get a Quote.”

The entire class raised their hands.

Of course his business would grow. Why? Because he’d finally stopped forcing clients to burn calories thinking about his life and business and offered the one thing that would solve his customers’ problems: a painter.

What we think we are saying to our customers and what our customers actually hear are two different things. And customers make buying decisions not based on what we say, but what they hear.



## STOP SAYING THAT

All experienced writers know the key to great writing isn't in what they say; it's in what they don't say. The more we cut out, the better the screenplay or book. The mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal is often credited for sending a long letter stating he simply didn't have time to send a short one.

If we want to connect with customers, we have to stop blasting them with noise.

The beautiful thing about clarifying our message using the SB7 Framework is it makes communicating easy. No longer will you sit in front of a blank page wondering what to say on your website, in your elevator pitch, in your e-mail blast, in your Facebook ads, or even on your television or radio commercials.

---

### CLARIFY YOUR MESSAGE

---

Whether we run a small company or a multi-billion-dollar brand, confusing our customers is costing us money. How many of our team members can't explain how we help our customers survive and thrive? How many people are buying from our competition because they've communicated more clearly than we have? How long will we last if we keep talking about aspects of our products our customers don't care about?

Things can be different.

To clarify our message we're going to need a formula. A serious formula. This formula needs to organize our thinking, reduce our marketing effort, obliterate confusion, terrify the competition, and finally get our businesses growing again.

Let's learn about that formula now.

## **THE SECRET WEAPON THAT WILL GROW YOUR BUSINESS**

To help you grow your company, I'm going to guide you in simplifying your message into soundbites that come from seven categories. Once you have these seven messages down, any anxiety you experience talking about your brand will subside and customers will be more attracted to what you offer. We are going to figure out your customers' story and place ourselves right smack in the middle of it.

Story is atomic. It is perpetual energy and can power a city. Story is the one thing that can hold a human being's attention for hours.

Nobody can look away from a good story. In fact, neuroscientists claim the average human being spends more than 30 percent of their time daydreaming . . . *unless* they're reading,

listening to, or watching a story unfold. Why? Because when we are engaged in a story, the story does the daydreaming for us.

Story is the greatest weapon we have to combat noise, because it organizes information in such a way that people are compelled to listen.

## STORY MAKES MUSIC OUT OF NOISE

Living in Nashville I've learned quite a bit about the difference between music and noise. Nearly half our friends here are musicians. I'm always amazed at their talent. Hardly a dinner party goes by without somebody grabbing a guitar.

I could summarize what I've learned about the difference between music and noise by saying my friends make music and I make noise, but there's actually some complicated science involved.

Technically speaking, music and noise are similar. Both are created by traveling sound waves that rattle our eardrums. Music, however, is noise that has been submitted to certain rules that allow the brain to engage on a different level. If I played you a recording of a dump truck backing up, birds chirping, and children laughing, you'd not remember those sounds the next day. But if I played you a Beatles song, you'd likely be humming it for a week.

There is an obvious difference between a well-choreographed piece of music and the sound of a cat chasing a rat through a wind-chime factory, which is the equivalent of the average corporate website, keynote speech, or elevator pitch.

The brain remembers music and forgets about noise just like the brain remembers some brands and forgets about others.

Story is similar to music. A good story takes a series of random events and distills them into the essence of what really matters. There's a reason the final cut of a movie is called a final cut. Prior to the theatrical version, a film has gone through rounds upon rounds of edits, omissions, revisions, and deletions. Sometimes entire characters end up on the cutting room floor. Why? Because storytellers have filters to cut out the noise. If a character or scene doesn't serve the plot, it has to go.

When clients want to add a bunch of confusion to their marketing message, I ask them to consider the ramifications of doing so if they were writing a screenplay. I mean, what if *The Bourne Identity* were a movie about a spy named Jason Bourne searching for his true identity but it also included scenes of Bourne trying to lose weight, marry a girl, pass the bar exam, win on *Jeopardy*, and adopt a cat? The audience would lose interest. When storytellers bombard people with too much information, the audience is forced to burn too many calories organizing the data. As a result, they daydream, walk out of the theater, or in the case of digital marketing, click to another site without placing an order.

Why do so many brands create noise rather than music? It's because they don't realize they are creating noise. They actually think people are interested in the random information they're doling out.

This is why we need a filter. The essence of branding is to create simple, relevant messages we can repeat over and over so that we "brand" ourselves into the public conscience.

## STEVE JOBS AND THE MESSAGE OF APPLE

Apple grew much larger only after Steve Jobs began filtering his message through the lens of story. Transformation in his thinking happened after working with (and partially creating) the genius storytelling factory that is Pixar. When Jobs came back to Apple after being surrounded by professional storytellers, he realized story was everything.

Just think about the incredible transformation that took place in Steve's life and career after Pixar. In 1983 Apple launched their computer Lisa, the last project Jobs worked on before he was let go. Jobs released Lisa with a nine-page ad in the *New York Times* spelling out the computer's technical features. It was nine pages of geek talk nobody outside NASA was interested in. The computer bombed.

When Jobs returned to the company after running Pixar, Apple became customer-centric, compelling, and clear in their communication. The first campaign he released went from nine pages in the *New York Times* to just two words on billboards all over America: *Think Different*.

When Apple began filtering their communication to make it simple and relevant, they actually stopped featuring computers in most of their advertising. Instead they understood their customers were all living, breathing heroes, and they tapped into their stories. They did this by (1) identifying what their customer wanted (to be seen and heard), (2) defining their customers' challenge (that people didn't recognize their hidden genius), and (3) offering their customers a tool they could use to express themselves (computers and smartphones). Each of

these realizations are pillars in ancient storytelling and critical for connecting with customers.

I'll teach you about these three pillars and more in the coming chapters, but for now just realize the time Apple spent clarifying the role they play in their customers' story is one of the primary factors responsible for their growth.

Notice, though, the story of Apple isn't about Apple; it's about you. You're the hero in the story, and they play a role more like Q in the James Bond movies. They are the guy you go see when you need a tool to help you win the day.

Despite what acolytes of the cult of Mac may say, Apple likely doesn't make the best computers or phones. "Best" is subjective, of course. Whether Apple has the best technology, though, is debatable.

But it doesn't matter. People don't buy the best products; they buy the products they can understand the fastest. Apple has inserted themselves into their customers' story like no other technology company, and as a result, they're not only the largest technology company, they're in the top ten largest companies period.<sup>1</sup> If we want our companies to grow, we should borrow a page from their playbook. We should clarify our message.

## STORY CAN GROW YOUR BUSINESS

To better understand what Steve Jobs learned during his days at Pixar, let's take off our business hats for a few pages and pretend we're learning about story for the first time. Once you understand how story integrates with your brand message, you'll be able to create communication pieces (and even a brand strategy)

that engages more customers and grows your business. And if you really get this down, people around the office will wonder how in the world you became such a marketing genius.

After studying hundreds of movies, novels, plays, and musicals across nearly every imaginable genre, and after having written eight books of my own along with a nationally released screenplay, I've narrowed down the necessary elements of a compelling story to seven basic plot points. If we were writing a full screenplay, of course, we'd need more, but for purposes of understanding and entering into our customers' story, there are only seven.

## **Story in a Nutshell**

Here is nearly every story you see or hear, in a nutshell: A CHARACTER who wants something encounters a PROBLEM before they can get it. At the peak of their despair, a GUIDE steps into their lives, gives them a PLAN, and CALLS THEM TO ACTION. That action helps them avoid FAILURE and ends in a SUCCESS.

That's really it. You'll see some form of this structure in nearly every movie you watch from here on out. These seven basic plot points are like chords of music in the sense that you can use them to create an infinite variety of narrative expression. Just like playing the guitar, with these seven chords you can create any number of songs. Varying too far from these chords, however, means you risk descending into noise.

Here's the framework laid out in a grid:

Let's look at how this simple framework plays out in a couple familiar stories. Once you can recognize the framework in stories, you'll start to understand exactly where the story of your brand is confusing customers by not sticking to the formula.



In the first *Hunger Games* movie, Katniss Everdeen must compete in a twisted, fight-to-the-death tournament forced upon the people of Panem by an evil, tyrannical government called the Capitol. The problem she faces is obvious: she must kill or be killed. Katniss is overwhelmed, underprepared, and outnumbered.

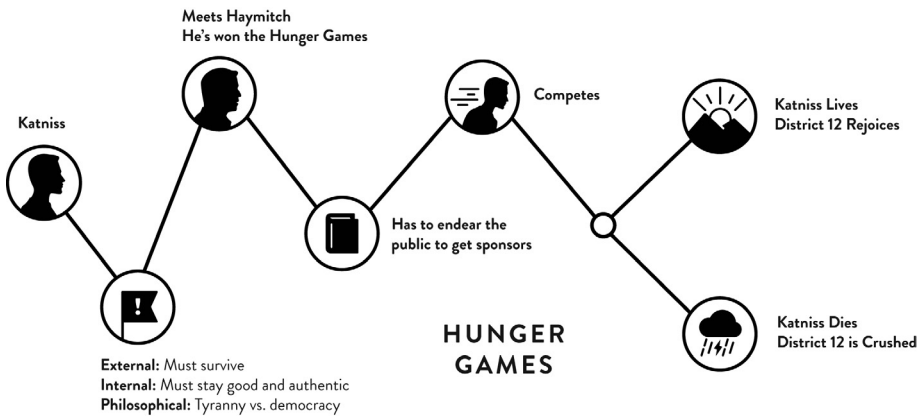
Along comes Haymitch, the brash, liquor-loving, grizzled winner of a previous Hunger Games tournament. Haymitch assumes the role of Katniss's mentor, helping her hatch a plan to win over the public. This gains Katniss more sponsors, thereby equipping her with more resources for the fight and increasing her chances of winning.

Here is the first *Hunger Games* story laid out on the StoryBrand grid:

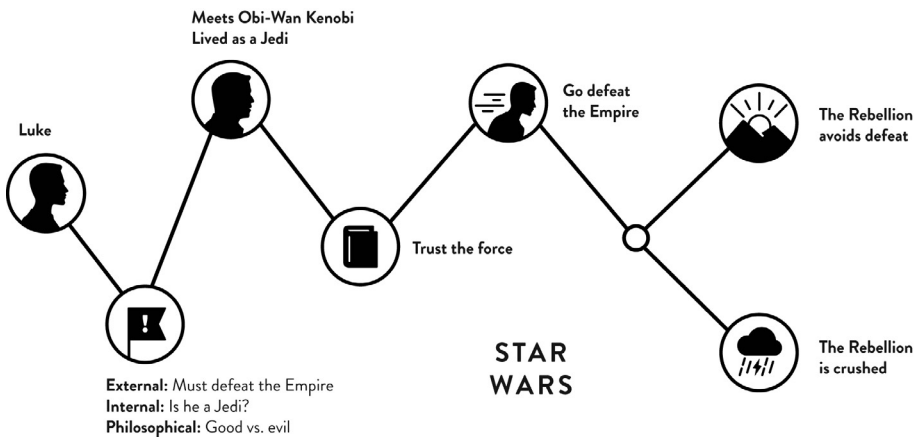
In *Star Wars: A New Hope*, our reluctant hero, Luke Skywalker, experiences a devastating tragedy: his aunt and uncle are murdered at the hands of the evil Empire. This sets a series of events in motion: Luke begins the journey of becoming a Jedi Knight and destroys the Empire's battle station, the Death Star, which allows the Rebellion to live and fight another day. Enter a guide, Obi-Wan Kenobi, a former Jedi Knight who once trained Luke's father.



BUILDING A STORYBRAND



Not every story works this way, but most do. Sometimes a writer will bring in multiple guides or (usually to the story's peril) leave the guide out, but the formula holds up in almost every story you'll encounter.



The fact that nearly every movie you go see at the theater includes these seven elements means something. After thousands of years, storytellers the world over have arrived at this formula as a means of best practices. Simply put, this framework

is the pinnacle of narrative communication. The further we veer away from these seven elements, the harder it becomes for audiences to engage. This is why indie films, which often break from the formula to gain critical acclaim, fail miserably at the box office. Critics are hungry for something different, yet the masses, who do not study movies professionally, simply want accessible stories.

It seems true that some brands (as well as some screenwriters) break these formulas and succeed all the same, but when you look closely this is rarely the case. Truly creative and brilliant marketers and screenwriters know how to use the formula while still avoiding cliché. This, in my opinion, is what makes them brilliant. When you get good at the SB7 Framework, hardly anybody will notice you are using it.

## **The Three Crucial Questions**

So how do we make the story our company is telling clear?

Remember, the greatest enemy our business faces is the same enemy that good stories face: noise. At no point should we be able to pause a movie and be unable to answer three questions:

1. What does the hero want?
2. Who or what is opposing the hero getting what she wants?
3. What will the hero's life look like if she does (or does not) get what she wants?

If you've ever started daydreaming in a movie, it was likely because you couldn't answer one of these three questions, or worse, you didn't care. Here's the kicker: if these three questions

can't be answered within the first fifteen to twenty minutes, the story has already descended into noise and will almost certainly fail at the box office.

At StoryBrand our Certified Guides have reviewed thousands of pages of marketing copy that had nothing to do with the story of the customer. We tell our clients the same thing my filmmaker friends told me when I was writing screenplays: anything that doesn't serve the plot has to go. Just because a tagline sounds great or a picture on a website grabs the eye, that doesn't mean it helps us enter into our customers' story. In every line of copy we write, we're either serving the customers' story or descending into confusion; we're either making music or making noise.

Nobody remembers a company that makes noise.

## DOES YOUR MARKETING PASS THE GRUNT TEST?

Just like there are three questions audiences must be able to answer to engage in a story, there are three questions potential customers must answer if we expect them to engage with our brand. And they should be able to answer these questions within five seconds of looking at our website or marketing material:

1. What do you offer?
2. How will it make my life better?
3. What do I need to do to buy it?

At StoryBrand we call this *passing the grunt test*. The critical

question is this: Could a caveman look at your website and immediately grunt what you offer?

Imagine a guy wearing a bear-skin T-shirt, sitting in a cave by a fire, with a laptop across his lap. He's looking at your website. Would he be able to grunt an answer to the three questions posed above? If you were an aspirin company, would he be able to grunt, "You sell headache medicine, me feel better fast, me get it at Walgreens"? If not, you're likely losing sales.

## CLARITY PRODUCES RESULTS

One of our early clients, Kyle Shultz, was a fireman in Ohio who looked into StoryBrand because he wanted to leave his job and pursue his passion of teaching photography. He had recently launched an online photography course aimed at parents. He'd worked hard to create terrific video training allowing moms everywhere to finally start using that basic camera they'd placed in the junk drawer because they felt it was too complicated. Interest was decent. In his first launch, he sold \$25,000 worth of online courses. He was ecstatic. Still, it wasn't enough money for him to quit his job and pursue teaching photography full time.

When Kyle subscribed to the *Building a StoryBrand* podcast, he began to wonder whether his message was too confusing. The night before his next launch he bought our online course and edited his website using the SB7 Framework. In fact, he removed 90 percent of the text he'd previously used on his sales page, and he also stopped using inside language like "f-stop" and "depth of field." Instead he used phrases like "Take those great pictures where the background is blurry."

The next day, Kyle sent a mass e-mail to the exact same e-mail list he'd contacted only six months before and offered the course again. He wasn't expecting much because he'd already sold to this list, but to his surprise the course sold another \$103,000 worth of registrations.

The difference? He highlighted the aspects of his course that would help parents survive and thrive (build stronger tribes, strengthen family connections, and connect more deeply with life's greater meaning), and he did so in such a simple way (with fewer than three hundred words on his sales page) that people didn't have to burn calories to figure out what was in it for them. Overnight he'd gone from a cluttered mess to the clear guide in his customers' story.

Today, Kyle has quit his day job and runs shultzphotoschool.com full time. Every day he gets e-mails from parents thanking him for helping them feel great about the photographs they're taking of their children.

## WE NEED A FILTER

Alfred Hitchcock defined a good story as "life with the dull parts taken out."<sup>2</sup> Good branding is the same. Our companies are complex, for sure, but a good messaging filter will remove all the stuff that bores our customers and bear down on the aspects of our brand that will help them survive and thrive.

So how do we come up with these messages? It's simple. We use the same grid storytellers use in telling stories to map out the story of our customers, then we create clear and refined statements in the seven relevant categories of their lives to position

ourselves as their guides. When we do this, we become the people who help them overcome their challenges and achieve the life they want to live.

Once we begin filtering our message through the SB7 Framework and using it as a communication filter, we will be able to repeat powerful messages over and over that “brand” us into our customers’ story.

The SB7 Framework is simple, fun, and effective. And when you’re done, your entire brand message is going to sit on a single sheet of paper. We call this single sheet of paper (actually it’s a free digital application I’m going to introduce you to) the StoryBrand BrandScript.

Once you’ve finished the process, you’ll use your BrandScript to create all manner of improved marketing material, and you’ll be more clearly positioned in the marketplace. When customers finally understand how you can help them live a wonderful story, your company will grow.

With that, let’s take a look at the StoryBrand Framework.



---

## THREE

---

# THE SIMPLE SB7 FRAMEWORK

In the next section of this book, I'll dive deep into the elements of the SB7 Framework, showing you how each important category of messaging makes your brand inviting to customers. For now, though, let's fly over the framework so you can understand, in summary form, all that it can do to simplify your marketing and messaging.

## THE STORYBRAND FRAMEWORK

### 1. A Character



STORYBRAND PRINCIPLE ONE: THE  
CUSTOMER IS THE HERO, NOT YOUR BRAND.



A major paradigm shift in the SB7 Framework is that the customer is the hero of the story, not your brand. When we position our customer as the hero and ourselves as the guide, we will be recognized as a trusted resource to help them overcome their challenges.

Positioning the customer as the hero in the story is more than just good manners, it's also good business. Communication expert Nancy Duarte has done extensive research on how to create powerful presentations. The strategy she recommends to her clients is simple: when giving a speech, position yourself as Yoda and your audience as Luke Skywalker.<sup>1</sup> It's a small but powerful shift that honors the journey of the audience and positions us as a leader providing wisdom, products, and services our audience needs in order to thrive.

Once we identify who our customer is, we have to ask ourselves what they want as it relates to our brand. The catalyst for any story is that the hero wants something. The rest of the story is a journey about discovering whether the hero will get what they want.

Unless we identify something our customer wants, they will never feel invited into the story we are telling. As we explore the first element of the StoryBrand Framework, I'll show you why and how to invite customers into a story that makes them want to pay attention to your brand.

## 2. Has a Problem



STORYBRAND PRINCIPLE TWO: COMPANIES  
TEND TO SELL SOLUTIONS TO EXTERNAL  
PROBLEMS, BUT CUSTOMERS BUY

## SOLUTIONS TO INTERNAL PROBLEMS.

In its purest form, a story starts with a character who lives in peace and stability. Suddenly, that stability is disrupted: a bomb goes off, someone is kidnapped, or a disaster strikes. The hero then sets out on a journey to return to the peaceful life they once enjoyed.

Customers are attracted to us for the same reason heroes are pulled into stories: they want to solve a problem that has, in big or small ways, disrupted their peaceful life. If we sell lawn care products, they're coming to us because they're embarrassed about their lawn or they simply don't have time to do the work. If we sell financial advice, they're coming to us because they're worried about their retirement plan. It may not be as dramatic or sexy as James Bond going to Q to grab the latest high-tech spy weapons, but the premise is the same: our customers are in trouble and they need help.

By talking about the problems our customers face, we deepen their interest in everything we offer.

What most brands miss, however, is that there are three levels of problems a customer encounters. In stories, heroes encounter external, internal, and philosophical problems. Why? Because these are the same three levels of problems human beings face in their everyday lives. Almost all companies try to sell solutions to external problems, but as we unfold the StoryBrand Framework, you'll see why customers are much more motivated to resolve their inner frustrations.

In the second part of the StoryBrand Framework, we'll look at the three levels of problems our customers experience and create messages offering to resolve those problems. Understanding

and addressing the three levels of problems our customers face will help us create a brand promise that will connect with customers on a primitive level and at their deepest point of need. This, in turn, will help us endear customers and create passionate brand evangelists.

### 3. And Meets a Guide



STORYBRAND PRINCIPLE THREE: CUSTOMERS  
AREN'T LOOKING FOR ANOTHER HERO,  
THEY'RE LOOKING FOR A GUIDE.

If heroes in a story could solve their own problems, they would never get into trouble in the first place. That's why storytellers, through the centuries, have created another character to help the hero win. Depending on the scholar you talk to, there are many names for this character, but the term we use at StoryBrand is *the guide*.

In Tom Hooper's Academy Award-winning film, *The King's Speech*, King George VI struggles to overcome a stutter. As Britain prepares for war against Germany, the Brits look to their leader for confidence and direction. Desperate, King George VI solicits the help of Lionel Logue, a dramatist turned speech therapist, who gives him a plan, coaches him to competency, and helps him transform into a powerful orator. This is the same service Obi-Wan (and Yoda) offers Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*, Haymitch offers Katniss in *The Hunger Games* and, to some degree, Bing Bong offers Joy in Pixar's *Inside Out*.

It's no accident that guides show up in almost every movie.

Nearly every human being is looking for a guide (or guides) to help them win the day.

Brands that position themselves as *heroes* unknowingly compete with their potential customers. Every human being wakes up each morning and sees the world through the lens of a protagonist. The world revolves around us, regardless of how altruistic, generous, and selfless a person we may be. Each day is, quite literally, about how *we* encounter our world. Potential customers feel the same way about themselves. They are the center of their world.

When a brand comes along and positions itself as the hero, customers remain distant. They hear us talking about how great our business is and start wondering if we're competing with them for scarce resources. Their subconscious thought pattern goes like this: *Oh, this is another hero, like me. I wish I had more time to hear their story, but right now I'm busy looking for a guide.*

In the third part of the StoryBrand Framework, we'll look at two mental triggers that will help customers recognize us as the guide they've been looking for.

#### 4. Who Has a Plan



STORYBRAND PRINCIPLE FOUR: CUSTOMERS  
TRUST A GUIDE WHO HAS A PLAN.

At this point we've identified what the customer wants, defined three levels of problems they're encountering, and positioned ourselves as their guide. And our customers love us for the effort. But they still aren't going to make a purchase. Why? Because we haven't laid out a simple plan of action they can take.

Making a purchase is a huge step, especially if our products or services are expensive. What customers are looking for, then, is a clear path we've laid out that takes away any confusion they might have about how to do business with us. The StoryBrand tool we will use to create this path is called *the plan*.

In almost every story, the guide gives the hero a plan, or a bit of information, or a few steps they can use to get the job done. In the *Star Wars* movies, Yoda tells Luke to trust the Force and then trains Luke on how to wield this power. People are looking for a philosophy they can embody or a series of steps they can take to solve their problems.

In the fourth part of the StoryBrand Framework, we'll look at two kinds of plans: the agreement plan and the process plan. Each of these plans will earn trust and offer our customers a clear path to stability, greatly increasing the chance they will make a purchase.

## 5. And Calls Them to Action



STORYBRAND PRINCIPLE FIVE: CUSTOMERS  
DO NOT TAKE ACTION UNLESS THEY  
ARE CHALLENGED TO TAKE ACTION.

In stories, characters don't take action on their own. They must be challenged. If we're telling a story about a man who needs to lose thirty pounds and suddenly decides to do it of his own volition, the audience will check out. Why? Because that's not how life works. There needs to be a reason. Our character has to run into a high school sweetheart who is now a yoga instructor, or he needs to lose a bet, forcing him to run a

marathon. Characters only take action after they are challenged by an outside force.

This principle is true in story because it's true in life. Human beings take action when their story challenges them to do so.

You would be surprised how many companies don't create obvious calls to action for their customers. A call to action involves communicating a clear and direct step our customer can take to overcome their challenge and return to a peaceful life. Without clear calls to action, people will not engage our brand.

In the fifth part of the StoryBrand Framework, I'll show you two calls to action that have worked for thousands of our clients. One call to action is direct, asking the customer for a purchase or to schedule an appointment. The other is a transitional call to action, furthering our relationship with the customer. Once we begin using both kinds of calls to action in our messaging, customers will understand exactly what we want them to do and decide whether to let us play a role in their story. Until we call our customers to action, they simply watch us, but when we call them to action (the right way), they will engage.

## 6. That Helps Them Avoid Failure



STORYBRAND PRINCIPLE SIX: EVERY HUMAN BEING IS TRYING TO AVOID A TRAGIC ENDING.

Stories live and die on a single question: *What's at stake?* If nothing can be gained or lost, nobody cares. Will the hero disarm the bomb, or will people be killed? Will the guy get the girl, or will he be lonely and filled with self-doubt? These are the kinds of questions in the minds of a story-hungry audience.

If there is nothing at stake in a story, there is no story. Likewise, if there's nothing at stake in whether or not I buy your product, I'm not going to buy your product. After all, why should I?

Simply put, we must show people the cost of *not* doing business with us.

In the eighties, the fast-food chain Wendy's effectively asked America, "Where's the beef?" The implication was that their competitors weren't using enough meat. So what's at stake for choosing another brand over Wendy's? We might get stuck with a wimpy sandwich. Likewise, Whole Foods has built an enormous industry helping customers avoid the consequences of overly processed foods, and more recently Trader Joe's has come along to help customers avoid the consequences of Whole Foods' prices.

Brands that help customers avoid some kind of negativity in life (and let their customers know what that negativity is) engage customers for the same reason good stories captivate an audience: they define what's at stake.

In the sixth part of the StoryBrand Framework, I'll help you identify what's at stake in your customers' story as it relates to your brand. Before we move on, though, it's important to note that not all of the seven elements should be used evenly in your communication. Think of the StoryBrand Framework as a recipe for a loaf of bread. Failure is like salt: use too much and you'll ruin the flavor; leave it out and the recipe will taste bland. Regardless, the point is this: your story needs stakes.

## 7. And Ends in a Success



STORYBRAND PRINCIPLE SEVEN: SHOW  
PEOPLE HOW YOUR PRODUCTS CAN  
POSITIVELY AFFECT THEIR LIVES.

We must tell our customers how great their life can look if they buy our products and services. Ronald Reagan painted a picture of “a shining city on a hill.”<sup>2</sup> Bill Clinton offered to help us “build a bridge to the twenty-first century.”<sup>3</sup> During the dark and dreary Depression, Franklin Roosevelt used the song “Happy Days Are Here Again” as his official campaign song.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Apple provides tools that allow us to express ourselves and be heard, Weight Watchers helps us lose weight and feel great, and Men’s Wearhouse guarantees we will like the way we look.

Everybody wants to be taken somewhere. If we don’t tell people where we’re taking them, they’ll engage another brand.

In the seventh part of the StoryBrand Framework, I’ll elaborate on what is perhaps the most important element of your messaging strategy: offering a vision for how great a customer’s life could be if they engage your products or services.

### WHEN YOU FEEL CONFUSED, CLARIFY YOUR MESSAGE

Right about now your head may be spinning. Even though there are only seven parts to the framework, how do we narrow down our message so our marketing material starts working again?



We’ve created a tool to simplify the process. This tool is going to reduce the hassle of creating a clear message, save you time, entertain you as you use it, and motivate you to create marketing material that works. As I mentioned earlier, this tool is called the StoryBrand BrandScript, and it’s going to become your new best friend.

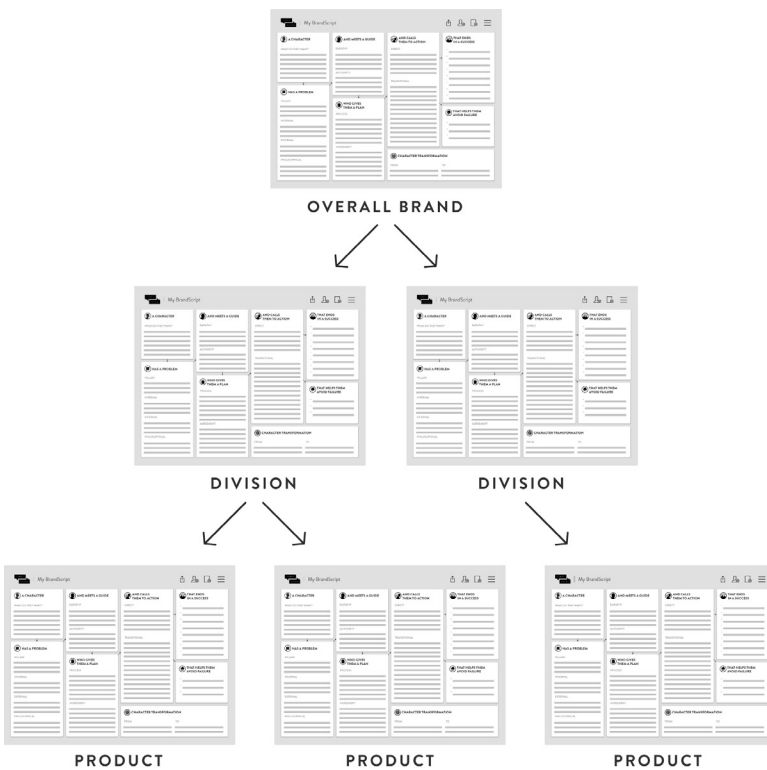
You can create your StoryBrand BrandScript for free at [my-storybrand.com](https://my-storybrand.com), and it looks like this:

In the next seven chapters, I’m going to walk you through these seven elements and help you create your BrandScript. Once you’re done, you’ll no longer feel confused about how to talk about your products and services, and you’ll have messages that powerfully engage potential customers.

The screenshot shows the 'My BrandScript' interface. At the top, there's a header with the StoryBrand logo and the title 'My BrandScript'. On the right, there are icons for sharing, adding a user, a document, and a menu. The main area contains seven cards arranged in a flow: 1. 'A CHARACTER' (WHAT DO THEY WANT?), 2. 'AND MEETS A GUIDE' (EMPATHY, AUTHORITY), 3. 'AND CALLS THEM TO ACTION' (DIRECT, TRANSITIONAL), 4. 'THAT ENDS IN A SUCCESS', 5. 'HAS A PROBLEM' (VILLAIN, INTERNAL, EXTERNAL, PHILOSOPHICAL), 6. 'WHO GIVES THEM A PLAN' (PROCESS, AGREEMENT), and 7. 'THAT HELPS THEM AVOID FAILURE'. Arrows indicate a sequence from 1 to 2, 2 to 3, 3 to 4, 5 to 6, and 6 to 7. A separate card at the bottom is 'CHARACTER TRANSFORMATION' (FROM, TO).

The first project I'd like you to BrandScript is the one that represents your overall brand. Next, you'll want to create a BrandScript for each division of your company, and after that, each product within each division. If you like, you can even create a BrandScript for each segment of your customer base. The uses of a StoryBrand BrandScript are endless.

Again, to create a BrandScript you can save, edit, and come back to over and over, go to [mystorybrand.com](http://mystorybrand.com). Because you bought this book, you get free access. Your StoryBrand BrandScript will be a powerful resource helping you organize and simplify your message, and you'll use it again and again. With the StoryBrand BrandScript tool, you will be able to see your brand narrative on a single page, which, again, will translate into a clear message you can use to grow your business.



## CLARIFY YOUR MESSAGE SO CUSTOMERS LISTEN

As you walk through the seven parts of the StoryBrand Framework, simply follow these three steps:

1. Read each of the next seven chapters.
2. After you read each chapter, brainstorm potential messages you might use to populate your BrandScript.
3. Carefully look at your brainstorm and then decide on a specific message to use in each section of your BrandScript.

Once you complete your BrandScript at [mystorybrand.com](http://mystorybrand.com), you will have the basic messages to employ the SB7 Framework on your websites, in keynotes, in elevator pitches, and in all manner of marketing and messaging collateral. This means your messages will be simple, relevant, and repeatable. And remember, simple, clear messages that are relevant to our customers result in sales.

Every human being is already speaking the language of story, so when you begin using the SB7 Framework, you'll finally be speaking their language.

## THE STAKES ARE HIGH

You're going to be tempted to move ahead and skip thinking deliberately about each of the seven parts of the framework.

You've already got the BrandScript, after all, so why not just fill it out?

Amateur screenwriters make the same mistake. They think they know how a story works, so they start typing and a couple months later can't figure out why their story is boring and unrelatable. I'll tell you why. They had an overview of the process but never bothered to learn the actual rules.

Each module of the SB7 Framework has set-in-stone rules you cannot break or else customers won't find themselves in the story you're telling and will be much less likely to engage your brand.

Thousands of companies shut their doors every year, not because they don't have a great product, but because potential customers can't figure out how that product will make their lives better. If we don't closely analyze each element of our customer's story, they'll sense we don't care and move on to a competing brand that took the time to do the work.

Some of you are probably thinking it's too late. I mean if it's printed in a book, everybody else is probably doing it. But are they? How many people read the first twenty pages of a book and then stop reading? I'd say most, which means you're already passing them. What would happen if you committed to executing this process and your competitor didn't? You'd win, wouldn't you? And how many people are actually going to put in the work even if they do read the book? Believe me, human nature tends toward complacency. Finish this process. Beat the competition. Clarify your message. Grow your company. The competition may be more talented than you are, but they will never outwork you if you don't let them. That's the one thing you get to control.

In the next seven chapters, I'll show you how to create a

## BUILDING A STORYBRAND

clear and compelling message that will organize your thoughts, simplify your marketing, and grow your company.

STORY

BRAND

# CLARIFY YOUR MESSAGE USING OUR FREE, POWERFUL ONLINE TOOL

CREATE YOUR BRANDSCRIPT AT

[MYSTORYBRAND.COM](https://mystorybrand.com)

The image shows a hand holding a pen over a laptop keyboard, with a tablet and smartphone displaying the StoryBrand tool interface. The background is a blurred image of a desk with a laptop, a cup, and some papers.

**STORY BRAND**

# CLARIFY YOUR MESSAGE USING OUR FREE, POWERFUL ONLINE TOOL

CREATE YOUR BRANDSCRIPT AT

[MYSTORYBRAND.COM](https://mystorybrand.com)

**STORYBRAND ALUMNI**

**A CHARACTER**

WHAT DO THEY DO?  
What do your customers want as it relates to your product or service?

**HAS A PROBLEM**

VILLAIN

EXTERNAL

INTERNAL

PHILOSOPHICAL

**AND MEETS A GUIDE**

EMPATHY

AUTHORITY

**WHO GIVES THEM A PLAN**

PROCESS

AGREEMENT

**AND CALLS THEM TO ACTION**

DIRECT

TRANSITIONAL

**THAT ENDS IN A SUCCESS**

**THAT HELPS THEM AVOID FAILURE**

**CHARACTER TRANSFORMATION**

FROM

TO

**GET UNLIMITED BRANDSCRIPTS**

**GO PRO**

**ONLINE COURSE**

**ATTEND THE STORYBRAND LIVE WORKSHOP**

**GET STORYBRAND CERTIFIED**