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Storytelling in Social Marketing



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Keywords

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Definition

Storytelling involves using various methods or media to relate a detailed narration of a character's struggles to overcome obstacles and reach an important goal (Haven 2007). This approach is also sometimes referred to as “narrative,” which is defined as any cohesive and coherent story with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end that provides information about scene, characters, and conflict; raises unanswered questions or unresolved conflict; and provides resolution (Hinyard and Kreuter 2007).

While these definitions focus on the story itself, the act of storytelling can be defined as the “vivid description of ideas, beliefs, personal experiences, and life-lessons through stories or narratives that evoke powerful emotions and insights” (Serrat 2017).

For stories with a purpose beyond mere entertainment, such as behavior change, Lugmayr et al. (2017) propose the term “serious storytelling” (similar to the field of serious games), where “the narration progresses as a sequence of patterns impressive in quality, relates to a serious context, and is a matter of thoughtful process.” The term “entertainment education” is often used to describe story-based behavior change interventions but can also include approaches without a formal storytelling component like games, popular music, and radio call-in shows (Singhal et al. 2017).

Story and narrative can be contrasted with other forms of communication, such as expository or argumentative communication, or with other types of explanations, such as descriptive, deductive, or statistical (Dahlstrom 2014). This approach also differs from the standard logical, solely fact-focused communication favored by most of the sciences.

Introduction

Telling stories is an integral part of being human. Stories are at the fundamental core of human memory, knowledge, and social communication (Schank and Abelson 1995). Our brains are hard-wired for storytelling, so much so that we even tell ourselves stories at night while we are sleeping (Pace-Schott 2013). This universal human activity is used by a wide variety of professions for

different purposes—by entertainers, politicians, educators, and commercial businesses. Stories can serve to preserve the history and values of a culture, being passed down through generations to help form identity and share social norms (Scroggie 2009). And storytelling also anchors many social marketing programs, providing strategic leverage to facilitate behavior change.

Type of Intervention Approach

Storytelling is a versatile approach that can be combined with other social marketing intervention methods and used to address nearly any type of problem. This approach has been applied to a wide range of topics including health issues, mental health, substance use, environmental protection, climate change, international development, civic participation, and many other subjects.

Description of Storytelling

Stories and the act of storytelling come in many forms. Humans told the first stories through cave drawings 30,000 years ago, later passing down information and culture via oral storytelling traditions around the world (Boyd 2009). Today, storytelling vehicles range from more traditional formats such as theatrical performances, books, and journalism to visual narratives using video, photography, or illustrations, as well as digital storytelling that allows anyone with basic access to technology to share their story (Sundin et al. 2018).

Stories can lie anywhere along the continuum of factual to fictional, and fiction often has some elements of real people's stories included within it. Types of narrative communication can include individual testimonies, case studies, literature, journalism, and entertainment (Kreuter et al. 2007). Stories can be classified into five types, each of which is used for a different purpose in communication: official stories that convey a version of events or the position of a group, invented stories (i.e., fiction), firsthand experiential stories, secondhand stories of other people that are retold

and culturally common stories that are more general (Schank and Berman 2002).

Storytelling is often used in marketing campaigns to build engagement with the product and to drive purchasing behavior (Butcher 2018). The categories of components necessary for conveying a compelling story for marketing purposes include audience indices, or experiential touch points, that help the audience to relate to the story's emotions or characters; a value-add that keeps the audience's attention; an emotional drive; an incentive to share the story with others; authenticity with the brand; and identification of the story with the customer.

Many models exist describing the necessary elements of a story. Some narrative theorists claim a universal story structure exists, in a dramatic arc which every engaging story follows (Zak 2013). This narrative starts with a new and surprising development, increasing tension as characters must overcome external and internal challenges, leading to a climax in which the characters must draw on their inner resources to overcome an imminent crisis. Once this transformation is achieved, the story resolves itself with a "new normal."

The most well-known storytelling model is the "Hero's Journey," a narrative cycle with 17 different stages, popularized by Joseph Campbell (Campbell 1949). In this framework, the story's hero sets out on an adventure, receives help from a mentor, faces trials and tribulations, and is ultimately victorious, coming back transformed by the process.

Another model, the "Pixar Pitch," is based on the animation studio's approach to building a narrative (Pink 2013). The model requires the storyteller to fill in the blanks of a story structure: "Once upon a time there was _____. Every day, _____. One day, _____. Because of that, _____. Because of that, _____. Until finally, _____."

Randy Olson's "ABT Framework" is often used in science-focused storytelling to communicate problems and solutions (Olson 2019). This approach boils down the narrative structure into a single sentence: "____ AND ____ BUT ____ THEREFORE _____."

In the entertainment education realm, many programs use the Sabido Method to design story-based behavior change interventions—often radio or television serial dramas (Barker and Sabido 2005). This approach, grounded in media and behavior change theories, follows a unique methodology to design plotlines and characters based on formative research with members of the audience.

Transmedia storytelling is a relatively recent approach to narrative design, building on the participatory possibilities brought by digital media (Jenkins 2006). This approach tells different parts of a story across multiple media platforms to create a coordinated experience and encourages audience participation within the story world. The Immersive Engagement Model brings the transmedia approach into social marketing and specifies the necessary elements for behavior change: a behavior change model, good storytelling, ubiquitous media, a participatory experience, and real-world action (Weinreich 2014).

Rationale and Appropriate Application of Storytelling

Storytelling has been the focus of extensive research to determine its effects on people's thinking and behavior. To achieve its positive impact, the approach has been applied to bring about a wide variety of outcomes.

Rationale

Stories activate the information processing systems of the brain. Information is more easily received, stored, and retrieved in the brain in the form of stories, making human memories story-based (Schank 1999). A coherent narrative helps with four main steps of knowledge acquisition: interest, attention, elaboration, and representation (Glaser et al. 2009).

Storytelling helps to place knowledge into context, making it easier to process, thereby generating more attention and engagement than more traditional fact-based communication (Sundin et al. 2018). In scientific communication, storytelling can give evidence more meaning and

relevance to the audience's reality. For nonexpert audiences especially who get most of their science-related information from the mass media, a narrative approach in news or entertainment increases the likelihood of comprehension and action based on that communication (Dahlstrom 2014).

Stories told well can trigger both physical and emotional empathy. When someone reads a story, it triggers the same area of the brain as when they experience an event. For example, when a character engages in a physical action, the motor cortex that corresponds to that part of the body is engaged in the reader (Boulenger and Nazir 2010). Movies have been found to trigger the empathy networks in the brain, with people experiencing the same emotions as the characters they are watching (Raz et al. 2014). Character-driven stories that sustain our attention through tension cause oxytocin synthesis in the brain; levels of this neurochemical, responsible for empathy and social connection, have been shown to influence the willingness of story viewers to help others (Zak 2013, 2014).

Stories offer a vicarious learning experience. Fiction creates an immersive simulation of social interactions for readers, helping them learn how to act in a particular situation through "experience" (Mar and Oatley 2008; Oatley 2012). The brain interprets interactions among fictional characters similarly to real-life social encounters, with overlap between the brain networks used to understand stories and those used to navigate real interactions with other people (Mar 2011). Many narrative-based behavior change projects are based on Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura 1977), which states that behavioral modeling leads to observational learning. By seeing role models—whether real or fictional—perform a behavior with positive consequences, viewers are more likely to learn and engage in the behavior themselves (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007).

Narrative transportation is the term for the phenomenon when someone gets "lost in a story" and plays a large role in the effectiveness of stories for persuasion and decision-making (Green and Brock 2000). Transportation into the narrative world comes about through an integration of

attention, imagery, and feelings. As someone becomes immersed in the story world, they become less aware of real-world facts that contradict what's happening in the narrative. Strong emotions also contribute to people returning to the "real world" changed by the transportation experience. A meta-analysis of the extended transportation-imagery model has found that the elements of a story that most affect transportation are identifiable story characters, an imaginable story plot, and verisimilitude, or the realism of the story (van Laer et al. 2012). On the story receiver's end, narrative transportation is more likely to occur with those who have knowledge or personal experience with the topic or genre, focused attention, a higher education level, a younger age, or are female.

The persuasiveness of a narrative may also depend upon whether the recipient of the message is aware of the persuasive intent of the communication and their level of involvement with the topic. The elaboration likelihood model posits two routes through which people process messages: (1) central processing, which occurs when people are involved with the issue and/or have a high motivation and ability to process the message, and (2) peripheral processing, which is based on superficial cues and heuristics, and occurs when the motivation and/or ability to process the messages are low (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). The extended elaboration likelihood model brings this concept to explain narrative processing and gauging level of involvement as transportation into the story (Slater and Rouner 2002). When people are engaged in the storyline and identify with the characters, they are less likely to counterargue with the message and more open to persuasive messages contained in the narrative.

The act of storytelling can also have positive effects on the storytellers themselves. When someone living with a chronic disease shares their story, the process helps them find meaning in their lived experience and provides them with more of a sense of personal control (Gucciardi et al. 2016). Writing about stressful life experiences can improve objective ratings of disease severity in chronically ill patients (Smyth et al. 1999). Digital storytelling, in which individuals

engage in a process of self-reflection, writing and digital production, can provide a deepened sense of self and a feeling of empowerment when sharing messages of hope through their personal story (Paterno et al. 2018).

Despite the preceding evidence of the power of stories, embedding facts in stories are not always the best way to persuade and inform and in some cases can reduce the effectiveness of a particular communication vehicle. When the facts presented are weak (less compelling), a story can help make them more persuasive; however, when the facts are strong, they can stand on their own, and their effectiveness may be diminished by a story-focused presentation (Krause and Rucker 2020). In an emergency situation, facts that are presented in an question/answer format can be more effective than stories at persuading people to take action (Bekalu et al. 2018).

Application of Storytelling

Storytelling can be used for many different purposes within a social marketing program. Some of these potential objectives include:

- Delivering information (Hartling et al. 2010).
- Shaping social norms (CARE Nederland 2020)
- Supporting disease self-management (Gucciardi et al. 2016).
- Providing peer support (Berkley-Patton et al. 2009).
- Fighting stigma (Nycyk and Mack 2019)
- Conducting research (Rieger et al. 2018).
- Serving a therapeutic role for the storytellers (Paterno et al. 2018).
- Changing behaviors (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Perrier and Martin Ginis 2018)
- Simulating learning scenarios (Cole 1997)
- Modeling behaviors (Fishbein et al. 1999).
- Reaching specific subgroups (Houston et al. 2011).
- Preserving traditional culture, identity, and values (Williams et al. 2003).

Using story-based interventions requires an awareness of potential ethical issues to ensure that no harm is done to the storytellers, story

audience, or story subjects (Kreuter et al. 2007). The storytellers or subjects must provide consent for the use and dissemination of their stories, especially if the content is sensitive or could be potentially harmful to their relationships. Inaccurate information may be unintentionally conveyed via first-person real stories and should be checked. Even when all information is technically correct, care must be taken to avoid misleading people into thinking a story is typical of all people in that situation, if it depicts a less common scenario. Also, when constructing fictional stories, even if based on a composite of real people, the narrative should portray realities in a sensitive and nonstigmatizing way.

Relevance and Examples of Storytelling in Social Marketing Programs

Social marketing programs incorporate storytelling into their interventions in many different ways. Some examples of how programs have used narrative approaches for behavior change follow.

The *Community Healthy Lifestyles* program, a social marketing intervention in Edinburgh, Scotland, incorporated storytelling into its community-led intervention to prevent obesity among children and parents. One of the elements of the campaign was the creation of a children's picture storybook that encouraged neighborhood pride and normalized healthy activities like playing outdoors and eating fruits and vegetables. The character and story were developed by local children, who were involved in all aspects of creating the book, building their ownership over the final product and its messages. Two thousand copies were printed and distributed for free to local children (Stead et al. 2013).

Energy Plus Illawarra, an Australian social marketing program addressing behavior change related to energy efficiency, used a "collective video storytelling" approach with older low-income residents. Based on qualitative research with the priority audience, the project created a series of videos that combined lay energy narratives with technical knowledge on how to be

energy efficient. Project participants from the audience acted out the stories being narrated in realistic settings, with each video focusing on one of ten energy use practices. The videos were distributed via the project website, YouTube, and through other community outreach channels. The overall program showed significant changes in energy-related knowledge, attitudes, values, and behaviors (Gordon et al. 2018).

East Los High was a transmedia entertainment education series that ran on online network Hulu, addressing health and social issues affecting Latino teens like reproductive health, pregnancy, nutrition, fitness, and domestic violence. The series was built on a foundation of research with the audience and advised by a coalition of public health organizations. The show included a series of half-hour video episodes, with additional transmedia elements extending the storyline, character development, and audience participation. The evaluation of the first season found significant increases in knowledge and behavioral intentions related to contraception, as well as hundreds of thousands of visits to the websites of partners like Planned Parenthood and Stayteen.org (Wang and Singhal 2016).

Make the Connection, a project of the US Veterans Administration, was designed to motivate military veterans with mental health needs to seek help. The campaign centered around personal testimonials from veterans describing their help-seeking experiences, with an emphasis on recovery and positive outcomes. With a website featuring more than 600 video testimonials, the audience could filter the selections to find stories of those most like themselves—by branch of service, gender, era, combat experience, and more (Acosta et al. 2020).

Learning Points

- Storytelling comes in many forms, which makes it a versatile tool to use in different types of social marketing interventions.
- Using stories in a social marketing program increases the likelihood of information retention and retrieval, attention, and engagement.

- Stories can trigger empathy, which can lead to increased connection and desire to help other people.
- The vicarious social learning that occurs via stories increases the likelihood that the audience will be willing and able to engage in the behavior themselves.
- The extent of narrative transportation that occurs while engaging with a story influences persuasion and decision-making, especially when the characters and story plotline are realistic and relatable.
- Storytelling can be used to achieve many different types of objectives in a social marketing program, from its use as a research method to providing motivation and support for change, as well as improving the lives of the storytellers themselves.
- The use of storytelling in a program must always be done in an ethical manner, to protect the subjects of the stories, as well as the storytellers.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Anthropology and SM](#)
- ▶ [Cross-cultural Considerations](#)
- ▶ [Psychological Theories and SM](#)
- ▶ [Community development, Engagement and Facilitation](#)
- ▶ [Creativity/Innovation in SM](#)
- ▶ [Documentaries](#)
- ▶ [Entertainment Education](#)
- ▶ [Mixed Media Approaches](#)
- ▶ [Social Media Marketing and SM](#)
- ▶ [Traditional Mass Media](#)
- ▶ [Using Digital Technologies in Social Marketing](#)

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