

## HOW STORIES DRIVE GROWTH: SKYPE

*We weren't going to be a marketing department that took little bits of everybody's story and put it into one big 'perfect' story that tells the best of Skype. We wanted to tell real stories, stories that were authentic, stories that had some imperfections—because life isn't perfection.*

—Elisa Steele, Skype chief marketing officer, October 2, 2013.<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

When Elisa Steele became chief marketing officer at Skype in 2012, the company had 300 million global users, but most of them used Skype only for special occasions, holidays, and other “milestone moments.” Skype was the voice-over-Internet-protocol service that allowed people to make free or cheap calls to landlines or mobile phones, or to chat through instant messaging. To grow and stay relevant, the company needed customers to use Skype much more often. In 2012 Skype had no unified marketing strategy, and when Steele took over the CMO role, she helped create the company’s new mission “Build User Love.” Steele then began exploring whether promoting user stories, especially those that focused on “everyday moments,” should be the driving force of a new strategy that aligned with that mission. Focusing on stories would be a real departure for a company that relied on its massive amount of data analytics to create strategy and learn about its customers. Could everyday stories, once collected, shared, and “banked,” (stored for the company and users to return to when they wished) really grow Skype’s business? Was that the best way to spend Skype’s marketing dollars?

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from interviews with case authors unless otherwise noted.

Debra Schiffrin and Professor Jennifer Aaker prepared this case as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

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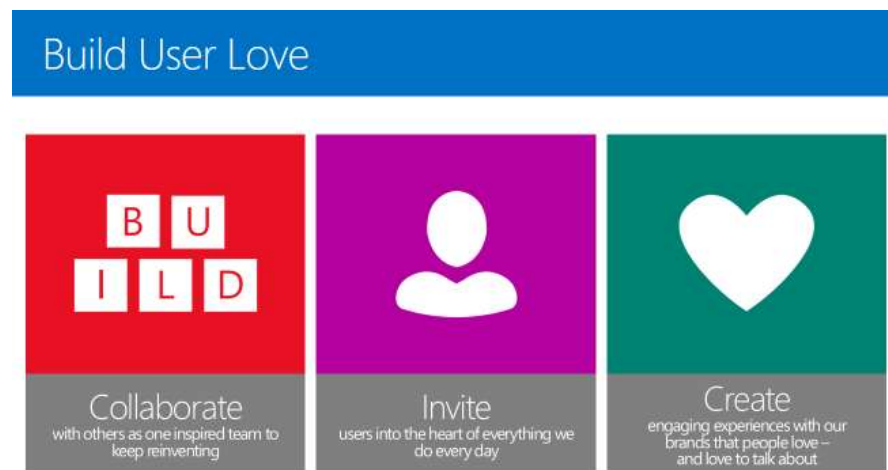
## WHY STORY?

When Steele first came to Skype, she discovered that almost everyone she talked to about the company—whether they were employees, customers, friends of hers, or strangers—had a story to tell her about how they used Skype and why they loved the brand. With that input in mind, she began a four-week journey with her team to develop a new organizational mission and came up with “Build User Love.” She explained the meaning of the three words:

Build: Working with our engineering organization and the people who develop the amazing product to make sure we are great partners.

User: It is about the people who actually use the service. It is not about our internal needs. It is not about features and functions. It is about human emotions and about our users.

Love: Skype has a treasured privilege to be a brand that is loved. So marketing needs to bear the responsibility of that and has the obligation to nurture that love and make sure it continues to be part of what Skype is about.



When the mission and the marketing organization became aligned, it became clear that Skype needed to tell stories—both inside and outside the company. With the mission “Build User Love,” users were placed at the heart of the team’s decision making:

If our users are at the center of our decisions, and our mission is to build user love, we need to understand how our users are using Skype. To understand our users, we need to turn to data, analytics, and consumer insights. We have hundreds of millions of users so we needed to know at a macro level, using big data, how they were interacting with Skype. But, we also need the consumer insights to be very personal. Therefore we created a storytelling practice that had relevance and connection with our audiences.

## CHAPTER ONE: HARNESSING STORY IN BUSINESS

Steele's first step was to reframe the way stories were considered at Skype, encouraging people to think of stories as an asset to be developed and managed. Practically, what that meant was creating a storytelling culture. To begin, her team asked the simple question: what made a good story? They considered what essential elements made the best Skype stories:

“What Skype stories are repeated, and why are they repeated? Also, are good stories only happy stories?” The answer was clearly no—not all stories end happily. Since much of what Skype stands for is emotional connection (not just happiness), the stories needed to span emotions about people's lives, and make people feel connected.

The team then generated five criteria for Skype user stories, those that would become the most important to the larger Skype strategy.

**1. *Good user stories demonstrate how Skype brings people together.***

The main reason people use Skype is to help them build and nurture relationships, so any story must have relationships at its core.

**2. *Good user stories are authentic.***

Consumers today do not want slick, fake stories. They want to see real life situations and emotions presented in a genuine way.

**3. *Good user stories embrace the everyday.***

Demonstrating how people use Skype as a regular part of their lives could serve to change viewers' behaviors and help Skype grow.

**4. *Good user stories stay flexible.***

Every story is unique and must come from the heart, so there should not be a one-size-fits-all template or formula.

**5. *Good user stories keep Skype at the core.***

The stories should come from people who already use and love Skype because those users will be most impassioned and can model behavior for others.

When all these criteria were met, the team looked for stories that “make us feel something—whether that is joy or compassion, happiness or sadness—good stories connect us to our humanity. And good stories are naturally repeated and shared with others.”

## CHAPTER TWO: GENERATING STORIES

Once the marketing team had determined what it was looking for in a story, they had to figure out how to gather stories from people who used Skype. Since Skype was a web-based product, the company asked users to create and submit their stories about using Skype online. In June 2013 Skype created a website called “Moment Makers” where users were invited to tell their stories via text, blog, pictures, or videos (skypemoments.com). Over the first five months, more

than 500 users posted their Skype stories. Skype e-mailed every user who shared a story and reviewed the stories against the larger brand narrative strategy. If the user story was a good match, Skype would ask for permission from the user to publish and share their story on the site. The best stories then got aggregated into an e-newsletter shared on Skype's social channels.

To drive users to Moment Makers, the company relied mainly on word of mouth from the online influencers (customers or interested parties who influence the market) and customer advocates (third parties that have public relations roles within social media) involved in Skype's program. But Skype also had a full Go-To-Market strategy around it.<sup>2</sup> The Moment Makers program was the first time an evergreen program (one where some content grows in value over time) was created that could be tapped into as a true asset to the company.

Skype then created a web-based Story Bank, in which the company showcased a few dozen of its favorite stories from Moment Makers (<http://skypemoments.com/story-bank>). The story bank was updated each week with new stories. The Story Bank served several purposes. It was a marketing tool by itself, as users and potential users could go to it and hear engaging stories about how other people used Skype on a regular basis. The Story Bank also created a resource for Skype to find the best user stories for its upcoming story-based campaign, the "Stay Together" Campaign.

To find the best stories for that campaign, Skype needed to find the right people. To do so, Steele's team looked at numerous factors including social influence, the rapport the storytellers had with their social audience and the quality of the content they were creating. In some cases, they also needed to be great storytellers. To find these people, Skype combined a call to action asking people to share their stories, and used social analytics and profiling tools to search for the right people with whom to co-create.

Using the five criteria listed earlier, the Skype team chose three stories it wanted to build a campaign around:

**Story One:** "The Impossible Family Portrait"—A Ugandan man named Denis had to flee to the United States because of war and leave his family behind, including his son. But he is able to keep in touch with them regularly through Skype.

**Story Two:** "The Animal Family Portrait"—Lindsay, an Australian zookeeper, moves to America and uses Skype to keep in touch with the people she had worked with at a small wildlife park in Australia and keep tabs on the animals she had cared for while there.

**Story Three:** "The Growing Up Family Portrait"—Julia, a ten-year-old from Los Angeles uses Skype to keep in touch with twelve-year-old Marina, her cousin and best friend who lives in Brazil.

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<sup>2</sup> The Go-To-Market strategy was across owned, earned, and paid channels, including e-mail, placements on Skype.com, paid media, public relations and Skype's social channels.

Once Skype selected its three user stories, the next challenge was to co-create refined versions of these stories with those users—with the goal to retain authenticity and but also improve the quality of the story. This step began by providing the production resources necessary to ensure the story was told in the most compelling way possible. Skype would carry out a treatment process for the stories, and sent a film crew to the storytellers to capture their stories professionally, and used Skype technology to demonstrate how the story came together.

In June 2013, Skype launched the story-based campaign called “Stay Together” using the three-minute short videos of Denis, Lindsay, and Julia, all featured on the microsite, <http://skypestaytogether.com>. Denis’s story depicted his life in the U.S. and his family’s lives in Uganda, showing them connecting via Skype. Lindsay’s film showed her interacting with her Australian friends and dozens of beautiful and unique animals on both continents. Julia narrated her film, which brings out the differences between her and her cousin Marina, and the deep love they share. All of these stories ended with a photographer using Skype technology to take pictures of those who were separated physically and put them together into one “impossible photo.” All videos were shareable, interactive, and true to the user’s experience.

On the website, visitors were also encouraged to submit their own story for a chance to be featured in a fourth video, get their own “impossible photo,” and win a \$10,000 travel credit. In just one month, 1,000 people submitted stories and many of them were fascinating cases of how Skype was being used. One of the chosen stories was about two girls—Sarah from Indiana and Paige from New Zealand—who had never met, but at age eight their mothers brought them together over Skype. Both girls were born without half of their left arm, and over Skype they could share their struggles, challenges, and everyday experiences. The story “The Born Again Friends Portrait” won Skype users public vote of the most powerful story. And Skype’s video of the girls told their story of friendship with a highlighted moment being Sarah sent to New Zealand so she could meet Paige for the first time. The story won several awards, including “Ad of the Week” in *Ad Age* and *Creativity*.

Most significantly, the whole campaign was highlighted by *Time* as the #4 best commercial of 2013 against big brands with big budgets. Skype was the only one on the list that actually did not use their campaign stories in an “ad campaign,” although it generated just as much attention.

## The Target Audience

Skype’s three main target audiences were: the Family Communicator, the Social Connector, and the Youthful Influencer (see **Exhibit 1** for details on the three audiences). The Stay Together campaign focused on the Family Communicator (people within families who generally were responsible for bringing people together). Steele said Skype did not subscribe to a position that the same story would resonate with multiple audiences:

We do believe that there are common characteristics or emotions that span humans such as love, pain, joy, and grief. But, when we produce stories we strive to stay true to the intended audience, and more importantly to the truth of the story. If done well, multiple audiences will be moved, and that is the benefit of keeping the story “real.” While for the Stay Together campaign, the primary focus is on the Family Communicator segment, the overarching theme of all the stories

is universal and something everyone can relate to because it centers on a basic human need: our desire to be close with loved ones even when we are apart.

She added that the theme was also central to the Skype brand truth “to be together whenever you are apart,” which is also the essence of the product experience. This ensured that the campaign message was genuine and authentic.

### **CHAPTER THREE: MEASURING STORY IMPACT**

The Stay Together campaign’s impact could be measured across multiple key performance indicators (KPIs) and audience-specific focus groups. Steele said the three key business metrics were: Reputation and brand image, Reach, and Engagement.

#### **1) Reputation**

Skype’s reputation and brand image was already quite high, but the campaign itself received almost universal favorable reaction. Campaign impact measurements of reputation included:

- 96 percent positive sentiment
- Amongst the Family Communicator audience: 9.5 percent increase in brand favorability (telecom industry standard is 1.4 percent)

#### ***Connection to Mission***

Love: The better the reputation and brand image, the more Skype succeeded in its mission to get users to love and be loyal to the brand.

#### **2) Reach**

With the same amount of investment as the previous campaign, the Stay Together campaign was much more successful in reach. Campaign impact measurements of reach included:

- Reach of over 53 million unique U.S. web users (three times the previous monthly frequency)
- +40 million video views (63 percent more than the previous marketing campaign)
- Over 2 million visitors to the microsite
- Over 3,000 print, online radio and broadcast placements
- More than 816 percent more PR mentions than in the previous campaign

#### ***Connection to Mission***

User: The more people Skype reached, the more the company succeeded in its mission to get more users and put the emphasis on those who use the service rather than on features.

### 3) Engagement

One of the most important metrics of Skype's marketing success was the number of actions on Skype.com, and the Stay Together campaign brought 300,000 more Skype.com actions. According to Steele, "Skype.com is everything to us. That's where users register and download the product. Those 300,000 actions included purchases where you buy phone calls, so we increased our revenue and download of the product, which means we get a new registered user, which goes to our reachable." The campaign also led to five million social media engagements. Campaign impact measurements of engagement included:

- Lower cost of engagement than previous campaigns.
- Among the Family Communicator audience:
  - 7.8 percent increase in use intent
  - 6.8 percent increase in recommendation intent
  - 5 percent increase in "seeing Skype as an everyday communication tool"

Further, engagement could be measured across the original mission "Build User Love":

Build: More engagement meant Skype could activate to a greater extent the talents of its engineers and those who develop the product.

User: More engagement meant more users were committing to being more frequent and valued customers by taking action and making payments.

Love: 6.5 million social media engagements stemming from this campaign was an indicator of people's emotional connection to the brand and willingness to be an evangelist for it.

(See **Exhibit 2** for pictorial summary of key metrics.)

## CHAPTER FOUR: AMPLIFYING STORIES

Once Skype had developed a campaign built around stories, it still had to figure out how to best amplify or market these stories and how do so in a way that best served its business goals. Steele said Skype was committed to keeping its marketing digital since Skype is a digital brand, living in the digital world.

We wanted to create stories that were highly shareable in today's world and set a bar to have as much impact as if we had a big TV budget! The better and more impactful the stories, the more likely the stories would get picked up by other media outlets and provide Skype with new marketing funds. Even better, it would provide Skype with social marketing that has inherently more value due to the credibility of reference marketing.

But even with this plan, Skype had to make hard decisions about much of its resources to devote to storytelling as a marketing tool. Skype's overall business goal was to monetize its technology, so the team had to not only change strategy, but deliver hard core results—which started to show within about nine months.

**STEP 5: BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE STORYTELLING CULTURE**

Steele said she wanted her marketing team to lead the rest of the company by example when it came to storytelling, and to be involved in creating and nurturing the new storytelling practice. She sent her marketers to classes on storytelling, and picked employees who were good at storytelling to stand in front of groups. She said these efforts to make storytelling part of the Skype culture created visible changes within the company:

There is absolutely no question that this approach of putting the user at the heart and then telling stories about those users drove the team to be more aligned and more committed than ever. We even had staff meetings that started with “story time,” where we would take the first 10 minutes of a business staff meeting and we would go around and say, “who has a story to tell today?” It might be an employee story, it might be a story in someone’s family, or it might be a story that someone saw on social media. We would share these stories so that people really felt close to the storytelling approach on a regular, everyday basis.

Steele added that she saw different and positive behaviors start to emerge in the organization, for example, people would stand up at an internal meeting or a big presentation and start off with “I’d like to start with a story.”

Skype maximized all of its internal channels (internal chats, e-mails, the corporate Yammer site, etc.) to create a place for stories to be created and spread, and to ignite conversations and encourage comments from employees. The company used Skype extensively to communicate across multiple teams with photo sharing, links to stories, video uploads, and employees expressing themselves with Skype’s emoticons (images that translate feelings, such as a smiley face). The channels encouraged employees to “retweet,” “like,” and “comment” on stories and to provide honest dialogue.

Internally, the adoption of the story approach also had to get over challenges as well, before it could become part of the culture.

Stories can be viewed as fluff, or fictitious, or both. Also, executive business reviews are not structured to tell stories, but to show business results and look at numbers and trends. You have to be prepared to do that, and do it well. Reviews are not a place that you are going to share a big story. You are actually going to drive the business conversation. But the method to get there and be able to talk about those results depends on being able create and share the right stories. Knowing when and how to share (or listen) to stories is very important.

Stepping back, Steele added that it was useful to compare the impact of this story-based approach relative to a more traditional approach used in the past. She speculated that:

If we had not taken this story-based approach, we would have done traditional demand generation. Such an approach had been used in the past and focused on product releases, technical enhancement, and key revenue generating features. However, this more traditional approach never produced sustainable, long-term results. And, it did not elevate



the marketing execution engine to be aligned with the brand purpose. In the approach we took, it was a purposeful integrated marketing approach—one that brought all the pieces together into one larger, more meaningful effort.

What is also important to know is that using data does not mean you cannot tell stories at an emotional level. In fact, it's quite the opposite. If data is used well to create key insights on audiences, it can enable marketing (and the whole organization) to work at a higher purpose together. That's what Build User Love did for us at Skype—gave us a common purpose. And, we backed that up with data—measuring out success with four key metrics across the board: Reputation, Reach, Engagement, and Revenue. If we were lifting these four metrics, we are driving high business value.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

Steele said the results of the Staying Together campaign were very powerful for her and her team because people around the world saw the stories, and then wanted to stay engaged and sign up at scale:

We are still analyzing the impact and trying to understand why—truly why. We think our content is more interesting because they are human-interest stories that tug at what you believe in people and family. But we actually need to know more. We need to know why we have had so much interest in these sign ups—more than in the history of the company.

She added that Skype's future goals for storytelling included working with influential people in news and entertainment who were interested in using Skype as a way to connect people in major venues who might not be able to be there in person.: "I think the stories that those moments will create will be very big culturally. And that is where Skype can take it to the next level and become part of the cultural fabric of how people share and contribute with each other at a bigger scale—not just one to one." One example was the Skype scavenger hunt that Jimmy Kimmel was doing on his late night TV show. In a running segment, Kimmel brought a couple of people together on a Skype video call and sent them off to do funny tasks. While Skype as a company had some input on how the technology was used, Steele said Kimmel and the show's producers made most of the decision on how Skype was integrated into the program. They found the connection to meet their show's goals and embraced Skype as part of the fabric of how they operate.

## **Exhibit 1**

### **Skype Target Audiences**

#### **Youthful Influencers**

- The smartphone is the center of their private universe
- Efficient - they look for low cost, low effort tools to connect and share: one-to-one or many
- Emotional - rich bursts of emotive engagement are used to build "always on" relationships
- Engaging - gain social currency from access to free, bite size 'entertaining' content and frictionless ways to share it

#### **Social connectors**

- Empowered by the thrill of the now - in a world of endless possibilities. Enabled to act by being globally connected
- Neither expect, not want, to learn or work traditionally. They play many roles
- No longer beholden to the cult of the individual, they form multiple, intimate and changing networks of friends, old and new
- For them, collaboration is the new conversation: always on connections, frictionless flitting & holistic sharing

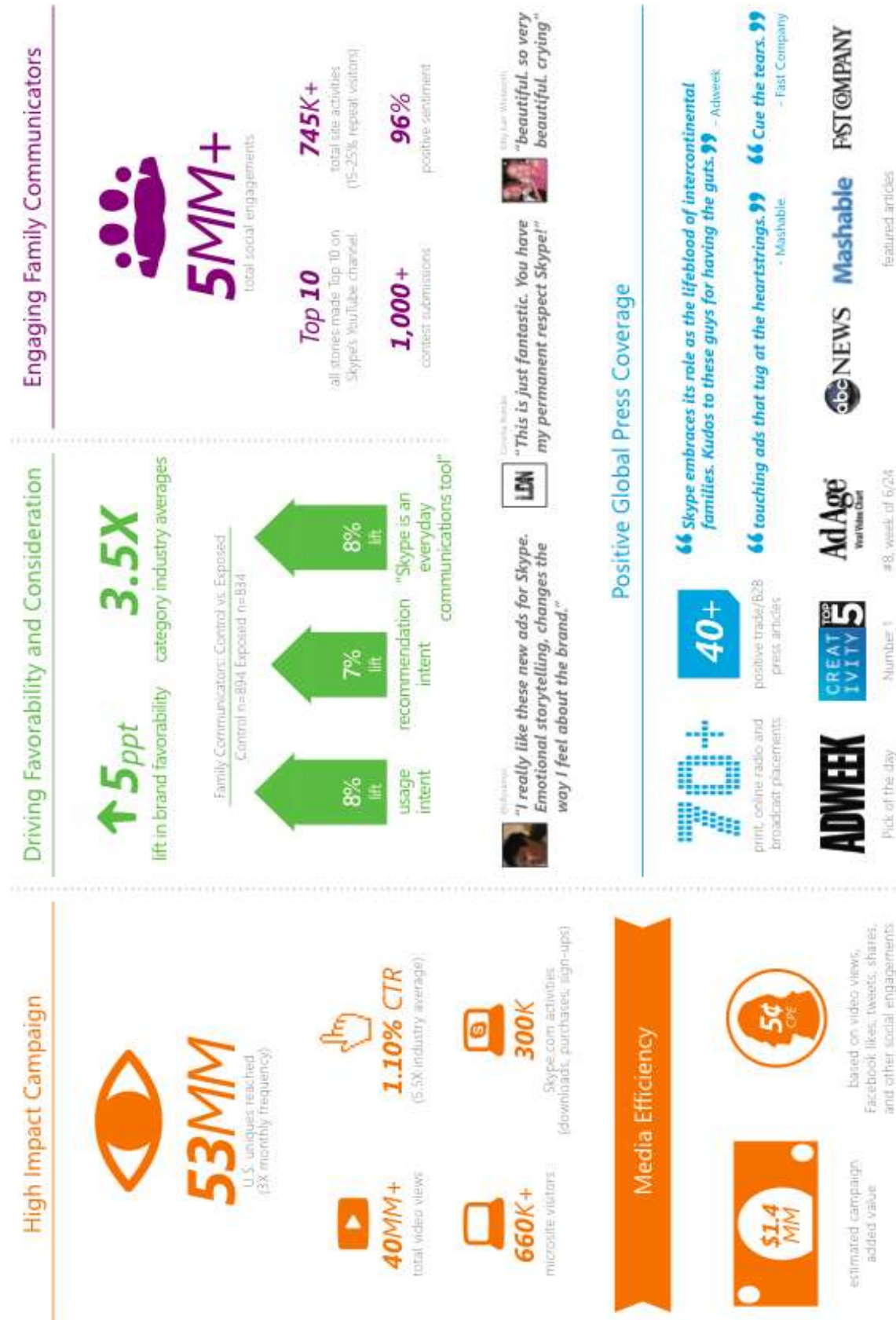
#### **Family Communicators**

- In a fragmented world they yearn to create moments of everyday closeness
- Two modes - moments between me & friends and moment for family members, together or individually
- Creating big, emotional moments from small occasions - ones that create memories
- Be part of everyday by enabling efficient spontaneity, using rich tools and flitting

Source: Skype.

## Exhibit 2

### Skype Stay Together Campaign Impact



## Appendix 1

### The Storytelling Framework: Skype's Stay Together Campaign

We can use a 4-part framework to analyze the Stay Together campaign:

Single Focused Goal, Grab Attention, Engage, and Enable Action.

#### Single Focused Goal

For the Stay Together campaign, Skype wanted to focus on “everyday moments.” Therefore, Skype chose three user stories that focused on everyday moments.

The concept of Single Focused Goal can be broken down into HATCH:

***Humanistic, Actionable, Testable, Clarity, Happiness***

***Humanistic:*** Collecting stories from users without giving them any rules or regulations enabled Skype to gain unfiltered, real information about its users before it launched the actual campaign.

***Actionable:*** A tactical, measurable micro goal of the Stay Together campaign was to have users view the short films. This could later lead to long-term macro goals of driving usage and increasing revenue through Skype.com purchases.

***Testable:*** Before the Stay Together campaign launched (or resources were allocated for its marketing), Skype could use the number and quality of stories contributed to Moment Makers as a metric to help evaluate its progress and inform its actions.

***Clarity:*** Skype kept its goal of increasing regular usage of Skype at the core of the campaign, as opposed to showing short films of different types of Skype usage. For example, Skype chose not to use a story about a peak moment, like a wedding or birth, even though those types of stories are very dramatic.

***Happiness:*** The campaign goal of getting users to use Skype on a regular basis was meaningful to Skype employees, who believed that Skype was a tool that brought people together; the more often it was used, the richer personal relationships would be. The goal could also bring happiness and meaning to users' lives if they got in the habit of connecting with loved ones through Skype more often.

#### Grab Attention

Rather than a campaign focusing on Skype's latest features in the voice of a Skype marketer or actor, the Stay Together campaign used stories in the voices of real people. People trusted the voice of a passionate advocate more than that of a marketer. Viewers also cared about the stories and related to them as dramatic versions of their own lives, needs, and wants.

#### Engage

To engage its users and potential new users, Skype produced highly emotional short films of real people using Skype.

Characteristics of highly engaging campaign include:

**Interactivity:** Skype used Moment Makers and the campaign story contest as ways to communicate with users and enable information to flow both ways.

**Facilitation:** In the campaign, Skype acted as a caretaker of brand development, rather than trying to control it. The stories had to come from actual Skype users, so the brand promotion had to come from them not from the company.

**Collaboration:** Skype and users worked together to develop the brand and achieve the goal of increasing the number of users who use Skype on a regular basis. People submitted stories to Moment Makers and for the campaign contest, which created a story bank from which Skype could pull stories that best demonstrated the ideal user behavior.

**Experience:** The Stay Together campaign did not promote Skype features or technology, but rather the experience of using the brand.

### **Enable Action**

Skype's Stay Together campaign enabled users to take action in the form of submitting and viewing stories.

Four design principles to enable others to take action are:

**Easy:** Submitting stories to the campaign contest was a very easy one-step process: upload a video, blog, or photo and optionally write a sentence or two to describe it.

**Fun:** Entering contests creates healthy competition, which many people enjoy. Creating a time limit to submit stories also creates energy (similar to a scavenger hunt). In addition, many of the stories in the Story Bank were humorous and had a sense of play.

**Tailored:** The campaign encouraged people to submit their own stories—each of which was unique. Also, users knew that their personal story could have a disproportionate impact if it won the campaign story contest and was promoted across Skype's 300 million users and beyond. Even if a story did not win the contest, all of the submitted stories were posted on a Skype site.

**Open:** People who wanted to submit stories did not have to ask Skype for permission, and they were not locked into a certain format.

Source: Case authors.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Storytelling Analysis Checklist**

*Analyze each of the three co-created stories in the Stay Together campaign*

1. What title would you give it?
2. Who is the protagonist?
3. What is the point of view?
4. What is the core tension?
5. What is the story arc?
6. What is the theme?
7. What is the hook? / How did the story grab your attention?
8. What keeps the story interesting?
9. How could the elements listed above have been strengthened to create greater story impact?

### Appendix 3 Elisa Steele Blog on Storytelling

## Storytelling – The Key to Great Marketing

<http://blogs.skype.com/2013/11/15/storytelling-the-key-to-great-marketing/>

11/15/2013 in Big Blog by Elisa Steele

In the tech industry, and here in Silicon Valley where I live and work, we talk a lot about innovation. Usually innovation is associated with technology advancement. But there's actually a lot of innovation going on in marketing as a profession. There are many examples of it—Chipotle's recent Scarecrow campaign<sup>3</sup> and Coca-Cola's Happiness Vending Machines<sup>4</sup> are just two that come to mind right now. The most innovative marketing I see today has one connection in common: great old-fashioned storytelling coupled with modern technology to help create, tell and share the story. Stories hit us at a very primal and emotional level while technology has never been more advanced to help us engage and participate.

Traditionally, emotion has not been something we've been trained to seek out in business. Sometimes, business has even been the enemy of emotion. We're taught to be efficient, effective and results oriented. But, what gets us to those important goals in a sustainable way always starts with a story that is meaningful to your purpose, your brand, your company and your customers.

The Skype marketing team takes these storytelling principles to heart. We've just released a whitepaper on the subject<sup>5</sup> sharing our learnings in Skype Marketing over the past year. In the paper we talk about some of the key elements of modern storytelling:

- Co-creation: working with users to create avenues to tell their authentic stories,
- Aggregation: building community where people can share and participate in stories that matter to them, and
- Amplification: sharing the best examples of those stories with even broader audiences.

This month, we had a chance to amplify one of our user stories in a segment on the Katie Couric show.<sup>6</sup> The story is about two girls, Sarah and Paige<sup>7</sup> who were brought together at a young age because they were each born with the same rare condition. Though they lived 8,000 miles apart –

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scarecrowgame.com/facts.html> (accessed January 21, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qI\\_L7dF3OdY&list=TLlInqsD0ReLAvg6kcEsfvNQL3opE4g\\_o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qI_L7dF3OdY&list=TLlInqsD0ReLAvg6kcEsfvNQL3opE4g_o) (accessed January 21, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.slideshare.net/SkypeSupport/skype-marketing-essentials-storytelling> (accessed January 21, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> <http://katiecouric.com/videos/heart-warming-reunion-caught-on-camera/> (accessed January 21, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> <http://skypestaytogether.com/sarahpaige/> (accessed January 21, 2014).

one in Indiana and one in New Zealand – and had never actually met in person, they forged a lifelong friendship over Skype.<sup>8</sup>

The story is part of the Skype Stay Together campaign,<sup>9</sup> which features real people telling real stories about how Skype has helped them connect in meaningful ways with friends and family even when they are physically apart. We had a principle for this campaign that could not be broken: these stories had to come from our users to be authentic. They had to be stories users were already telling because the stories were meaningful to them – Skype’s marketing team was just there to amplify and share.

The results of the campaign, which was multi-channel but centered in the digital world, were encouraging for us. One thing that is quite important for us in marketing is that our strategic brand metrics were impacted positively at the same time we saw significant tactical metrics with ROI we hadn’t reached in any prior approaches.

At Skype, storytelling is natural because we’re the purveyors of technology that allows people to create connections and memories. The product itself is built with the vision to keep people together, whenever they’re apart. That’s not a marketing tagline, it’s a daily truth for us – people are sharing their personal stories on Skype every day!

But what if you have a brand that doesn’t naturally lend itself to storytelling? I would say, there is no such thing. Every company starts with a vision. A story. A purpose. Even when it’s not obvious, it’s there. Look at what Nabisco has been doing with Oreos.<sup>10</sup> I mean, talk about a tough challenge, making a cookie that has been around for more than a hundred years come to life! But that’s exactly what the team at Oreos has done in a relevant, modern way.

I look forward to hearing what you think of our storytelling work at [skype.staytogether.com](http://skype.staytogether.com)<sup>11</sup> and staying in touch about marketing trends at @elisasteele.<sup>12</sup>

Source: Skype blog, <http://blogs.skype.com/2013/11/15/storytelling-the-key-to-great-marketing>.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://blogs.skype.com/2013/11/08/born-friends-the-story-of-sarah-and-paige/> (accessed January 21, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> <http://skypestaytogether.com/> (accessed January 21, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/200289/oreo-unveils-animated-wonderfilled-campaign.html> (accessed January 21, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> <http://skypestaytogether.com/> (accessed January 21, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/elisasteele> (accessed January 21, 2014).



## **Appendix 4: Skype White Paper: Storytelling in Action**



Skype Marketing Essentials | Storytelling  
Elisa Steele and the Skype Marketing Team

# Prologue

Once upon a time,  
there was a man called Denis.

Denis lived in a beautiful country called Uganda, which was rich with color and sunshine, but in the grip of a terrible war. One day Denis said goodbye to his family and embarked on a journey to a faraway land called Pennsylvania, to seek out a brighter future for them all. But although he had begun a promising new chapter in his life, Denis found himself constantly haunted by the memory of the young son he had left behind.

## Chapter One

# Human Stories

"After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world"

— Philip Pullman CBE  
British novelist



Each one of us is a story. Every concept that gives meaning to our lives - time, science, art, love - is a brilliant trick of the brain, the result of a hundred billion neurons making connections that help us survive in the world. Whether we're crouching in a dripping cave drawing deer on the walls, or sitting in a SoHo deli uploading photos of venison burgers onto Instagram, our urge to turn the chaotic world into a coherent narrative is a deep and consistent human drive.

Storytelling helps us build our individual identities, but it also acts like social glue.

In 2011, Canadian psychologist Raymond Mar published an analysis of 86 fMRI scans. His study found that there was substantial overlap in the brain networks we use to understand stories and those we use to navigate interactions with others.

In short, good storytelling makes for good relationships.

Nowadays, thanks to social media, we can share more stories and build more relationships than ever before. But with the average person producing [six newspapers worth of information](#) every day and the average Facebook user [laying claim to 130 friends](#), we can sometimes feel isolated by the very technology that claims to unite us.



Sometimes, but not always. When social technology really works, when it helps us connect in a truly authentic way, it feels like the most powerful sort of magic. And when it helps us to share meaningful stories – stories from across the world, stories that find common ground, stories that cut through the baby panda Vines and hit us squarely in the ancient heart – we remember why we crawled out of our caves in the first place, and gathered around the campfire instead.

## Chapter Two

# Brand Stories

"Stories are the single most powerful tool in a leader's toolkit"

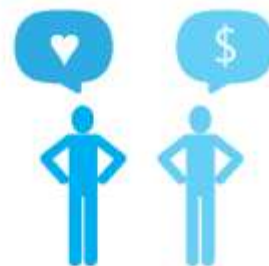
— Howard Gardner

Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

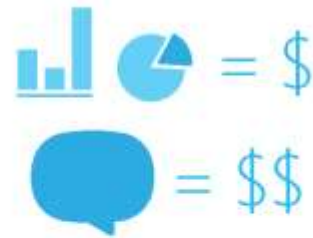
Traditionally, businesses have been the enemies of emotion.

Businesses are supposed to be efficient machines, powered by reliable processes and logical minds, but emotions are messy. They're unpredictable and difficult to control and they prevent both employees and consumers from thinking rationally.

Unfortunately, in the words of cognitive psychologist Robert Schank, "humans are not ideally set up to understand logic; they're set up to understand stories." [fMRI neuro-imagery shows](#) that when evaluating brands, consumers primarily use emotions rather than information to make their decisions.



Thankfully, brands love emotions.



"Storytelling succeeds," says organisational theorist and branding guru David Aaker, "Stories are more attended to, more memorable and more impactful than any other type of communication." He cites a Wharton study which found that when people were told stories, they donated twice as much to charity as when they were simply presented facts and figures. And brands are what happen when businesses become stories.



A business becomes a brand when it has a creation myth that people can rally behind – like the success of Chipotle's recent [Scarecrow campaign](#), which tells a powerful story about Chipotle's long-standing commitment to ethical farming. A business becomes a brand when it instantly evokes emotion in our minds – like Coca-Cola 'owning' happiness, through uplifting, story-focused advertising and experimental initiatives such as the [Happiness Vending Machine](#). And a business becomes a brand when people talk less about the features of its products, and more about the way those products change their lives.

Like Skype.

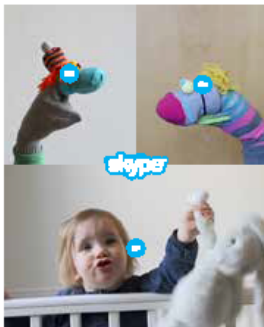


## Chapter Three

# Skype's Stories

"Because the stories we tell spark emotion, span time (and even geography), create meaning and inspire, they are perhaps the most powerful vehicle to move people"

— Jennifer Aaker  
Stanford Professor of Marketing,  
social psychologist and author



Skype is a purveyor of storytelling technology. For years, we have been "keeping people together, whenever apart" and that isn't just a slick marketing tagline, it's a daily truth. Whenever people find out that we work at Skype, they want to tell us their stories. Whether [classrooms from across the world learning together](#), grandparents connecting with their grandchildren or entrepreneurs [swapping advice](#), the hidden stories of how Skype connects its users are everywhere.

But with new competitors fighting for our users' attention, we couldn't take this advocacy for granted. We needed to put the people that love our product at the center of everything



we do. Of course, innovation in technology has always been central to Skype's success; we continually invest in evolving our product. But it is the people who use Skype, not the technology, that make the difference in the world. It was time for Skype to stop being the 'silent hero', and time for us to uncover and celebrate the incredible stories that Skype enables for ordinary people around the world every day.

So this year we decided it was time to embed the principles of storytelling into the heart of the business: our people, our culture and our strategy. Like all change, it wasn't easy. We invested a lot of time and energy. We studied our users' patterns, our competition and our history. We sought out people with a natural talent for storytelling, and brought in experts and creative agencies to challenge our thinking.



Our first priority was to get our basic storytelling philosophy nailed. And together, we created a clear vision of what great Skype storytelling looks like.



## 1. It brings people together:

Skype is inherently social. It helps people all over the world to be together, even when they are apart, so our stories should demonstrate how Skype enables those individuals and their relationships.



## 2. It's authentic:

As we've seen, human beings have deeply ingrained instincts when it comes to stories. We can smell a fake instantly. This is our chance to spread real life situations and sentiments in a genuine and unfiltered way. Forget old marketing messages – we're embracing our users and creating engagement that is relevant, personal and meaningful.





### 3. It embraces the everyday:

Some people still consider Skype a 'special occasion' tool for holidays or events, but the real miracle of Skype is the way it touches ordinary lives, every day. Skype stories should reflect that reality.



### 4. It stays flexible:

Stories cannot be made from formulas or rules; they have to come from the heart. Yes, we can help spread the principles of good storytelling, but we must also free our stories to be unique, to react and to evolve. Our stories are about people's lives, so they don't really ever end.



### 5. It keeps Skype at the core:

We were only interested in stories from people who already use and love Skype – whether celebrities or everyday users. We want our advocates to tell their stories from a place of passion about the experience of our product.

## Chapter Four

# User Stories

"You hear the best stories from ordinary people"

— Chuck Palahniuk  
American novelist and journalist



Once we'd defined our own story philosophy, it was time to think about how we would help surface and spread the stories of our users.



According to [Nielsen's latest Global Trust in Advertising Survey](#), 84% of consumers trust recommendations



from people they know, while only 65% trust branded websites, and 62% trust ads on TV. It was clear that, if our

strategy was to be effective, circulating our users' independent, organic stories had to be a high priority. We didn't just have to practice the old laws of marketing; we had to create some new ones too.

As we listened to our users, we realized that their experiences with Skype were driven by moments and memories. Moments and memories are different kinds of stories; one instant, the



other lasting. If we could help families capture memories in creative ways that retained the emotional impact of the moments they recalled, we could help them create seriously powerful and relatable tales.

This also helped fuel our belief that all content is shareable, and that, with a little investment, the best will spread far and wide. With that in mind, we defined three routes for sharing and inspiring outstanding content:

## 1. Co-creation:

This is where we work closely with actual Skype users to help them tell their story. Co-creation takes a host of different forms, from working with scriptwriters around the world to



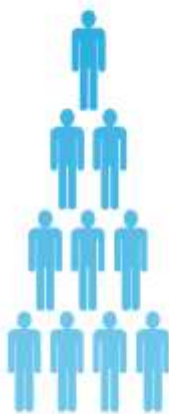
produce a [short film](#), to bringing global superstars together with [servicemen overseas](#). The stories still belong to our users; our role is to capture them in the most vibrant way possible and use our network to share them with thousands (or even millions) more people than they might otherwise reach. Co-created stories have become the central assets in many of our campaigns, in both digital and traditional marketing – they are living examples of the real experiences and emotions channeled through Skype.



## 2. Aggregation:

We knew there were thousands of user stories already being shared across multiple platforms. We'd read them in social media, heard them in conversations, watched them featured on the news. How could we nurture and collate them on a

grand scale? How could we make them last longer than a moment on a Twitter stream or a Facebook feed? We started to focus our marketing efforts on encouraging users to share their stories, across the media mix. We used the co-created stories we'd produced through programs such as [Moment Makers](#) and [Stay Together](#) to inspire them to create their own. So far, over a thousand previously unearthed user stories have been submitted. It's a great start.



### 3. Amplification:

Once we had aggregated more user stories, we wanted to be sure that the best examples would be shared as widely as possible. Sometimes this simply meant amplifying them across Skype's social media channels. Sometimes, it meant employing some major integrated heft, such as turning the winning Stay Together story into a video show reel, then targeting it at thousands of relevant people across paid, owned and earned media.

## Chapter Five

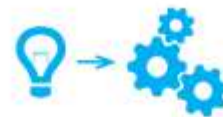
# Strategic Stories

“Great stories succeed because they are able to capture the imagination of large or important audiences”

— Seth Godin

Entrepreneur and author of *All Marketers Are Liars: The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low-Trust World*

We now had our storytelling heart beating strongly, but we still needed to adapt our wider marketing strategy around it. For our new approach to have a future in Skype, it was critical that we instilled a larger go-to-market framework that drove better efficiencies across the organization.



We knew what good stories looked like, both from Skype and from our users. We knew how we wanted to inspire more and better content. But we now needed to define how we would cultivate, manage and distribute our users' stories in a way that was relevant to the business, and that worked within our whole marketing spectrum. How would we reallocate our budgets? What would realistic timings look like? What changes did we need to make to our content? And how would we measure our success?

Again, this took a lot of listening, deep thought, a good dose of courage, and some difficult conversations. We needed to change our way of thinking from:

- Feature-based marketing to **value-based marketing**
- Push and tell marketing to **experiential engagement**
- Random acts of content to **purposeful storytelling**
- Siloed messaging to **integrated communications**
- Giving away our technology to **monetizing the value of our technology**



One example of the way this worked in action was the shift within our media mix. Each campaign requires a unique balance of paid (such as traditional print or TV placements and partnerships), owned (such as our website and social presences) and earned (independent content created by users, as well as content written by journalists and bloggers leveraging Skype stories). As we started to focus on storytelling, we understood that we would have to increasingly weight our overall efforts towards earned media in order to best serve our users' content, and achieve the full impact for our campaigns.

Another example was the way we adapted in order to harness the multiple revenue streams we already had at our disposal. How could we use storytelling in branded content partnerships? To create value-added offers and premium downloadable content? Or to shape live events? Skype is already the most recognized verb on TV for video chat. Major networks, news outlets, movies and cable TV all use Skype to enhance their programming. Our new marketing strategy used emotive Skype stories to drive these integrations. It enabled more cross-marketing opportunities, and in turn increased efficiencies, created larger reach for our campaigns, and provided us with an economical outlet for distributing content.





## Chapter Six

# Specific Stories

"It takes a thousand voices to tell  
a single story"

— Native American proverb



Stay Together is a good case study to show how this integrated strategy works in action, as it was our first major campaign with Skype storytelling at its core. Stay Together demonstrated how, for the first time, we tailored audience insight, cross-channel deployment, and numerous digital and traditional tactics, around a central storytelling approach.

### Informed targeting:

Having conducted wide-reaching behavioral research, we decided to target our Family Communicator and Full Nester audiences for the first time. We knew that emotional, independent stories of how family and friends come together on a daily basis would resonate with them, so this seemed an ideal chance to reach out to a new user group.



## Extraordinary co-created content:

After listening to our users' stories, we chose three hero 'Staying Together' tales:

- Lindsay, an Australian zookeeper who moved to America and uses Skype to stay in touch with the animals she loves,
- Julia, a ten-year-old from LA who uses Skype to keep up with her cousin and best friend in Brazil, and
- Denis, a Ugandan refugee who uses Skype to stay connected with his friends, family and young son back home.

These stories were then filmed in collaboration with celebrated New York artist John Clang, who uses Skype technology to create unique family portraits of people who are physically apart.



## Bespoke digital hub and map:

We featured our hero stories on a Staying Together microsite, which was designed with our Family Communicator audience in mind. Here users could access complementary content for each story, alongside 'staying together' tips and how-tos. Visitors were also encouraged to submit their own stories and vote for their favorites, with a chance to win their very own John Clang portrait and a travel credit. An interactive Bing map allowed users to pin their stories by location, giving them a visual overview of the global Skype connections being made, this also became a distributable asset across other channels.



## Surfacing incredible stories:

One submission to the site was from Sarah. Sarah and Paige are best friends who met before they were even born. When Sarah's mom was pregnant, she found out from the doctor that Sarah would be born without a left arm. Sarah's mom, who lives in Indiana, searched online to find other mothers whose children had the same condition, and found Paige's mother, living in New Zealand. After years of essential early support the busy moms gradually lost contact, but when the two girls were eight they reconnected via email, and then discovered Skype. Through Skype, Sarah and Paige were able to work through the struggles of their unique condition together, sharing their experiences every day although they had never physically met. We turned Sarah's submission into an inspiring film, flying Sarah out to New Zealand so that she and Paige could meet in person for the first time. The power of their story, surfaced through our new approach, blew us away. As we helped it spread across social, digital and traditional channels, people responded with an authenticity, intimacy and enthusiasm that no 'marketing message' could ever emulate.



## Responsive social media:



In social media, we also got creative with the campaign theme in other ways. For example, research told us that seasonal 'special days' are the most popular times for family and friends to tell stories using Skype. So, piggybacking off of the countless weird and wacky 'special days' that circulate in social media (think of Talk Like A Pirate Day), we created content that promoted our 'everyday special moments' storytelling message instead. Each day, we created images and videos

showing several special moments families could share over Skype each day – from licking a lollipop to eating a watermelon – and used them spread across Twitter, Pinterest and Facebook.

### Relevant paid media:

We used our hero stories as marketing collateral across pre-roll, email and digital display. We created partnerships with audience-relevant TV properties and personalities such as Oprah Winfrey where the storytelling content is a real asset.



## Chapter Seven

# Success Stories

"The highest-paid person in the first half of the next century will be the storyteller"


— Rolf Jensen, futurist and author of The Dream Society

Having made such a large investment in our storytelling approach, we now had to justify its value. Measurement becomes notoriously tricky when concepts such as emotion and word of mouth get involved, but we combined traditional KPIs with a series of audience-specific user focus groups, which helped us to evaluate the behavioral impact of the campaign.

 **53**  
million  
unique users

 **40**  
million  
video views

Here are some highlights from the Stay Together campaign, with comparative data to help put them in context. Ninety percent of our activity was digital, but we also encouraged distribution of the stories across targeted audience specific channels.

 **600K**  
microsite visitors

 **300K**  
skype.com actions

Reach of over 53 million unique US web users (100% of our target audience in the US saw our campaign at least twice, and we reached the equivalent of everyone in the UK, 3 times over)

- 40 million video views (63% more than our previous marketing campaign)
- 660,000 visitors to the microsite (15% more than our previous campaign)
- 300,000 Skype.com actions, including purchases, downloads and sign-ups

"This is just fantastic.  
You have my permanent  
respect Skype!"

— Concha Romão of Crianalandia Tumblr

5 million  
engagements  
in social me- 

96%  
positive  
sentiment 

- 5 million engagements in social media
- 96% positive sentiment
- Over 1,000 submissions to the contest
- \$0.05 cost per engagement (most engagements are sold online for at least \$1+ each, so we can fairly say this beat industry standards by 20%)

over 1,000  
contest submissions 

\$0.05   
cost per engagement



"Cue the tears"

— Fast Company



- Over 70 print, online radio and broadcast placements
- Over 40 positive trade articles from the likes of Mashable and ABC News
- We achieved 816% more PR mentions than in our previous campaign

↑816%

"Skype embraces its role as the lifeblood of intercontinental families. Kudos to these guys for having the guts"

— AdWeek

Among our target Family Communicators audience, we saw:



"I really like these new ads for Skype. Emotional storytelling, changes the way I feel about the brand"

— @sillisampi, Jakarta, 10,995 followers

That sounds like a happy ending, right?



# Epilogue

Back in Pennsylvania, one lonely evening, Denis discovered something called Skype. It allowed him to see his family's smiles every day; to swap experiences and recipes, to offer advice and words of support, all from eight thousand miles away. But then something even more extraordinary happened. The people who work at Skype met Denis, and they had an idea. They enlisted a renowned artist and got on a plane with a bag full of cameras, and [the story they made together](#) was powerful. Very powerful indeed.

But this wasn't a happy ending. It was just the beginning.

**— The Start**



## Paid, Owned and Earned Media

PAID is particularly powerful for reaching out to new audiences: people who aren't searching for you or don't know about your services.



- Combine digital, print and broadcast channels, depending on where your target audience is spending most of their time
- Have a clear call to action sending people to owned or earned content for deeper and more personal background and context

OWNED is often the next destination for people who find you through paid – and somewhere for your current customers to learn from and engage with you.

- Sure, educate customers about your product, but build a real community too, surfacing the stories your users really want to hear and share
- Have a point of view, and not just about your brand – be bold, unique and have personality, letting the passion of your team shine through



EARNED is when you become part of the wider world, facilitating and inspiring other people's stories and participating in wider cultural narratives.



- Find ways to become relevant to existing communities, trends, industry debates or lifestyles, in an organic, authentic way
- Embrace the loss of control – you're not the hero here; the storyteller is – but by connecting with their passions, your impact and influence is huge

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## HOW STORIES DRIVE GROWTH: HSN

*Storytelling creates meaning. Anybody can interface with a product or a person, but storytelling is what people remember and what they take away—it is the transfer of emotion and knowledge. At HSN, if you can close your eyes and dream it, we can probably create it, if the story is powerful enough.*

—Mindy Grossman, CEO, HSN Inc., February 25, 2014<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

When Mindy Grossman became CEO of HSN Inc. in 2006, she had a dual challenge: create a new story for the then 30-year-old company and tell new stories about the products it sold across various platforms (television, online, social networking media, and mobile). At the time HSN had a reputation for, as the *Wall Street Journal* described it, “C-list celebrities selling rhinestone jewelry and miracle skin cream to couch potatoes.”<sup>2</sup> Grossman was HSN’s eighth CEO in 10 years and the company’s first female CEO. She said if she had visited HSN’s headquarters before she became CEO, she might not have taken the job. “The place was dirty, the people seemed downtrodden, and I had a sense that the company was frozen in time.”<sup>3</sup>

In creating a new story for the company, “Chapter One” was reinvention, rebuilding, and being a disruptive force in the industry. It was also about bringing a storytelling mindset to the company. “Chapter Two” was about expanding and leveraging, rebranding, providing experiences to customers, and making online sales a critical component of its strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with case authors on February 25, 2014. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations come from author interviews.

<sup>2</sup> Shelly Banjo, “HSN Enjoys a Mobile-Shopping Rebirth in the Digital Era,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 4, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Mindy Grossman, “HSN’s CEO On Fixing the Shopping Network’s Culture,” *Harvard Business Review*, December 2011.

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Debra Schiffrin and Professor Jennifer Aaker prepared this case as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

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Grossman made some big bets on stories and storytellers she believed in. For example, she launched one of HSN's largest campaigns ever to tell the story of singer Mary J. Blige and sell her perfume "My Life." It was the first time HSN had sold a fragrance at any type of scale. HSN also bet big on country music star Keith Urban to launch his new URBAN™ Guitar Collection in November 2013. Through telling his story and engaging the audience in his love of music, Urban sold more than 20,000 guitars (\$6 million in retail value) in less than five hours at HSN.

## **WHY STORY?**

The imperative to tell great stories was not something that Grossman discovered when she came to HSN; it was why she took the job as CEO. She explained, "I joined the company because I was so passionate about having this vast storytelling platform to tell brand stories, to share content and other types of stories in an undiluted way.... We can create our own stories. We don't have any kind of artificial barriers. I don't have four walls."

Grossman said that the storytelling platform was what made brands choose to partner with HSN, whether it was a product, an experience, a movie, or an event. She said, "Because if it is just about how much of something you can sell, that is a no-win proposition today. And it gives us the ability to get proprietary products that nobody else could have because we are creating it in partnership with many different people. It gives them a marketing partner, not just a commercial partner." As the company got better at storytelling, it attracted more desirable brands and celebrities.

With every brand story it told, HSN had the opportunity and the challenge of telling its own story at the same time. That meant that each brand story would also connect to the bigger message of HSN—"It's Fun Here"—and that would help HSN grow.

## **CHAPTER ONE: HSN'S COMEBACK STORY**

When Grossman came to HSN, she began the reinvention and rebuilding of the company, the thrust of which was to elevate customer experience and gain more authority and credibility. It was time to energize and make HSN exciting. She and the senior staff changed the vision statement for the company to be a disruptive force on the retail and consumer landscape: "When we were first starting, the idea was to completely transform our business and vision statement because we needed a rallying cry that was incredibly different than what the company had been led to believe. They had been stuck. So coming out with a bold statement was very important, it was about being disruptive." Internally, that rallying cry meant reigniting the culture and talent. Grossman pushed to have more great storytellers on HSN; she brought new guests to the network and was very involved in deciding which guests to put on the air based on their storytelling ability and their connection to HSN's overall brand.

Grossman began overhauling the company from a branding and creativity perspective as well. Creative director Jonathan Johnson said Grossman came in and put a stake in the ground, "There was not really a branded HSN look and feel, and when Mindy [Grossmann] came in, she really focused on the brand image, product, and getting the right assortment of people together." For

two years, HSN worked on its branding and tried to tell its customers why “There is no place like HSN.”

In Chapter One, HSN had to articulate how it would evolve from a TV and catalog centric company into a digital company. Online sales were growing dramatically, including mobile, but HSN had underinvested in mobile, and Grossman had to reverse that trend.

## CHAPTER TWO: HSN’S GROWTH STORY

Chapter Two for HSN was moving from disrupting its model and playing catch up to leading and being agile. Grossman said the company’s new mantra became “Agile is the new smart.” A key component in this was focusing on what she called the future of boundaryless retail and creating 360-degree experiences for their customers: “You will never hear anyone in my company talk about channels or omni-channel or multi-channel. We have abolished the word because it means siloed behavior. Hence, we talk about network and boundaryless and 360-degree experiences.” She defined boundaryless retail as leading with innovation, collaboration, and using technology to create experiences for the customer. HSN’s goal was to have a consistent story and message across all of its platforms: TV, online, social networking media, and mobile.

In fact, HSN redefined itself as a digital company and used significant marketing vehicles to reinforce and help accelerate growth through digital platforms, which was a very different mindset. HSN also wanted to elevate engagement through social networks. The company’s biggest growth vehicle was mobile. More than half of all new customers came to HSN through their mobile phones, and over 50 percent of its overall traffic was coming through mobile in one of three ways: through the tablet, the handheld smartphone, and the app (both on tablet and handheld). Ryan Ross, senior vice president for HSN digital, said that at the end of 2013 desktop had become the smallest piece of HSN’s business: “Not even six months ago, we were really planning the experience from the desktop down. And now we are planning from the handheld up, because it is a very different philosophy.”

Another part of Grossman’s vision was to grow the company through providing experiences to customers, which she broke down into four key elements:

*Insights:* How do you use insights and data to create meaning and personalization and relationships?

*Engagement.* How are you keeping people engaged with your brand, whether it’s through products or content or other ways?

*Generosity:* Why does somebody want to come and experience your brand? What is a reason for them to come and interface with your brand every day, not just because you’re trying to sell them something? What are you providing them?

*Trust:* how do you create trust through providing high quality and relevant products and through the authenticity of your stories and storytellers?

One of the ways HSN connected the digital platform with experiences was by investing heavily in gamification. In 2011 the company launched an online arcade where customers could play games, win badges, and get prizes while watching HSN. Within the first year and half, HSN had 100 million game plays and 700,000 registered users. Grossman said those registered users spent four times as much time on the site as average visitor, visited HSN twice as often, and were more likely to convert.<sup>4</sup>

Another example of a way HSN put customers in the story was in the collaboration with Sony Pictures when it was releasing the movie “Eat Pray Love” starring actress Julia Roberts. It did not fit the model of selling actual products because HSN did not think it made sense to sell the products Julia Roberts wore in the movie. But HSN was inspired by the venues in the movie and created a 72-hour live programming event—one day to explore designers and products from Italy, one day those from Bali, and one day those from India. The company created a digital passport, and customers could go online and navigate country by country and fill their passports.

In January 2013, HSN launched a new website, and in April 2013 it rebranded from “There is no place like HSN” to “It’s Fun Here.” Grossman said the new branding better reflected the new HSN. It was about engagement, getting customers to return to HSN again and again and attracting new customers.

### **Leveraging sub brands: Mary J Blige**

A prime example of HSN’s Chapter Two was the 360-degree, multi-platform campaign to sell a perfume created by singer Mary J. Blige called “My Life.” The journey began with a conversation within HSN about how to compete in the beauty business against a lot of bigger competitors and brands. Grossman said she proposed that HSN pursue the fragrance business; she realized the opportunity and understood that many people did not like the experience of buying perfume in a traditional store. She said, “Of course everyone told me I was crazy and we could not do it.” It would require customers to buy a fragrance without being able to smell it. But Grossman looked at the brand Gucci, which had just presented the advertising they were doing for their fragrance launch, and it was all about immersing oneself in the story. “And unless the product really did not smell good, which was probably not going to happen, you just wanted to be in that story, right? You wanted to be that woman.” She believed HSN could do the same thing with perfume. “And we went after that business talking less about olfactory notes and more about the emotion behind it and how it was conceived and what it meant. That is what I think is really powerful about storytelling, but only if it is authentic.”

HSN partnered with singer Mary J. Blige, who had sold 50 million albums and had eight multi-platinum albums and nine Grammy awards. The company would be selling her perfume “My Life” through the most comprehensive, 360-degree marketing campaign in HSN’s history, including television, online, mobile, print advertising, public relations, events, and direct mail.

HSN and Blige decided to tell her life in two chapters. The first chapter was about her past, her struggles to get where she was, and the transition that would later lead to chapter two—a happier

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Siwicki, “HSN Breaks Boundaries,” *Internet Retailer*, June 6, 2013, <http://www.internetretailer.com/2013/06/06/hsn-breaks-boundaries>.

and more fulfilled time in her life. Chapter one was a darker chapter, and the fragrance “My Life” mirrored that stage in her life, as did the marketing around the perfume. A centerpiece of the marketing campaign was a documentary of her life split into an introductory 30-second video shot in black and white,<sup>5</sup> and then four mini-chapters. The first mini-chapter “My Life: Survivor” began with Blige saying, “I was 7 years old and it was the worst situation that a 7-year-old could be brought to. There was negativity everywhere at all times. But we had some sort of hope in us as children because we had things we love to do. I loved to sing.”<sup>6</sup> The subsequent three mini-chapters were “My Life: Artist,”<sup>7</sup> “My Life: Philanthropist,”<sup>8</sup> and “My Life: Entrepreneur.”<sup>9</sup>

HSN wanted not only to tell the story, but to build the story and with crescendos. It began the campaign by starting to tell the story before the perfume was sold. The idea was to create evangelists and dialogue and people would tell the story. The “My Life” campaign was launched at the Essence Music Festival, where HSN created a sensorium where people could come in and smell the fragrance, and Blige was there telling her story. The company also distributed 50,000 snap bracelets embedded with the My Life fragrance at the festival.

The company released the documentary mini-chapters of Blige’s life one at a time. It also starting building a storytelling network of people who were going to expand on that and talk about what “My Life” meant. HSN distributed 100,000 direct mail brochures and 300,000 targeted inserts to its customers, as well as putting ads in major magazines.

Grossman said that by that time people were waiting to hear Blige’s story firsthand.

On July 31, 2010, HSN launched “My Life.” When Blige came on the set to tell her story, HSN augmented that story visually on the set. Blige wore black, the hosts wore dark colors, and Jen Cotter, EVP of Television & Content, described the set as “mysterious and warm.” The hosts showed the documentaries and asked Blige questions that would elicit her connection to this fragrance. In six hours of airtime, HSN sold more than 60,000 units of the perfume, breaking all records in the prestige fragrance industry. “My Life” attracted nearly 20 percent new customers for HSN and almost 10,000 customers signed up to receive shipments of the new fragrance on a regular basis. Social media drove millions of advertisement impressions. HSN sold 100,000 units of the perfume in 2010.

Cotter said that wherever the HSN customer or the Mary J. Blige customer was, they found a different iteration of the channel they saw before. “So the live show would have her live, but we would also show the chapters digitally and then you could chat with her live across mobile. So we got a lot of positive feedback from the documentary that also, from a production perspective, was the first time we got to show people what our talent set is, and we could tell stories in a way

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHNoNHjw5JU>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWB29s0vh5E>.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation\\_id=annotation\\_770738&feature=iv&src\\_vid=BWB29s0vh5E&v=SxoE v78vJP0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_770738&feature=iv&src_vid=BWB29s0vh5E&v=SxoE v78vJP0).

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation\\_id=annotation\\_942937&feature=iv&src\\_vid=SxoEv78vJP0&v=-rpLzug4ZRc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_942937&feature=iv&src_vid=SxoEv78vJP0&v=-rpLzug4ZRc).

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation\\_id=annotation\\_586543&feature=iv&src\\_vid=-rpLzug4ZRc&v=VSC-CY-68RA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_586543&feature=iv&src_vid=-rpLzug4ZRc&v=VSC-CY-68RA).

that rivaled VH1 or MTV, and I don't think people would have expected that kind of storytelling from us. And we used that model for many of our later partnerships."

A year and a half later, Blige and HSN launched a new wave of the fragrance called "My Life Blossom"—which mirrored a "chapter two" in Blige's life, a happier more fulfilled time for her.<sup>10</sup> HSN launched the Blossom campaign at midnight and teased the fact that Blige would be doing a performance in the evening. Grossman said that during the one-hour performance HSN sold more fragrance than it did when it was actually directly selling the fragrance on the air.

Because now customers were marrying the story to her personal performance, to the passion that they wanted to feel around that. And to me that is when it becomes powerful—when it spills over and the story becomes the message. The documentaries lived online and the community could talk about it. We had women telling their own personal stories of how they went through trials and tribulations in their life.

When Blige came back on the set to launch "My Life: Blossom," HSN used lighter and more neutral tones, with both Blige and the hosts wearing colors from the light gold palette. Jen Cotter said everyone was upbeat and the music was upbeat, "Mary was talking about this new phase of her life where she found love and was feeling so grateful and really recognized what her place in the world was. It was a celebration of that phase of her life."

### CHAPTER THREE: FIND THE STORY

As with Mary J. Blige's perfume, HSN's first task was finding a great brand and product. Once that was done, it was time to find and create a story around it. HSN had a tremendous amount of quantitative and qualitative information about its customers, which allowed it to tell good stories. Grossman said it was very important "to know yourself and your brand and your customers in such an intimate way that you know what that right storytelling is and what is going to resonate."

#### Criteria

Grossman defined three overarching criteria for a finding and creating a great story: *Authenticity*, *Purposeful*, and *Fits with the Category*.

#### 1. *Good stories are authentic.*

The story has to resonate and feel real. It has to have meaning for the customer in some way.

Mindy Grossman noted:

"When making it authentic, it was critical to know what the story was about. Is that story about giving her [the customer] ideas that are going to enrich her family's life? Is it a fantasy story? But it has to be something that's going to have meaning to her

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5PVja34Sh8>.

[the customer] in some way. So, even if we're selling Nest, which is a home thermostat, that's a great story for her and her family and being intuitive. And it's going to save her money and it's going to really give her peace of mind. You know, obviously that story is going to be told differently than a piece of jewelry that's been inspired by cameo carvers who are three centuries old."

## ***2. Good stories are purposeful.***

The story has to be the right one to inspire or empower the customers.

HSN's mission is to deliver the joy and excitement of new discoveries each day to its customers and focus on what it calls the Four Core Elements of Experience:

- **Insights:** Can you use data to personalize the experience for the customer? At HSN, customers can receive e-mail alerts when their favorite personality comes on air.
- **Engagement:** How can you create a unique and engaging experience with your customer? HSN provides entertainment to its customers and offers more than 50,000 videos across its hsn.com site.
- **Generosity:** What are you giving your customers beyond merchandise? Are they being informed, educated, and inspired? It's about giving back to the customer in a generous way.
- **Trust:** It's about creating a community where conversations take place. A destination where people seek ideas and recommendations. Customers need to trust the company and brands you carry.

## ***3. Good stories fit in with the category.***

The story has to be appropriate for the category of product that HSN sells.

HSN had five main categories of products: Health & Beauty, Jewelry, Home/Lifestyle, Fashion/Accessories, and Electronics. Its stories had to fit into those categories. For example, Mary J. Blige's "My Life" perfume story fit well into HSN's beauty category. The Nest story fit in with HSN's electronics category.

### **HSN's Process for Developing Stories**

1. Evaluate the brand and how it fits with HSN
2. Develop and evaluate the high-quality product
  - It is important that this product connects with the HSN customer.
3. Develop a launch plan across all platforms
  - What is the story? How can HSN capture the point of view of the brand? Who is the right storyteller?
4. Bringing the brand to life on HSN
  - HSN works with several departments to create the look and feel of the brand.
5. Production
  - HSN starts filming the promotions and creating original video content for the brand across all of its platforms.

#### 6. Execution of the Launch/ Go Live

- HSN showcases the story across all its platforms TV, online, social networking media, and mobile.

### Connecting the Brand Story to HSN's Story

With every brand story it told, HSN told its own story at the same time. It was a top-down approach that started with the product and how to weave the product story together. Then it looked at how to make that story part of HSN's story. The questions it asked were: Is it about the customer? Does it feel personal and connected to the bigger message of HSN: "It's Fun Here?" With so many different products, HSN found telling dual stories challenging at times. For example, for its spring fashion event, HSN had to tell an overarching organizational story along with the story of each item of clothing, jewelry, or bag. In another example, the company was aggressively going after selling electronics, and it had to make sure the story of those products were tailored for its mostly female customers. To assist with that, HSN creative director Jonathan Johnson created mood boards to help define HSN's visual and emotional story. (See **Exhibits 1 and 2** for mood boards from HSN's 2014 fashion week and summer birthday event).

Another complexity was that the big brands that HSN worked with had very strict brand guidelines, and HSN had to figure out how to weave those into its storytelling so that it made sense. Additionally, the company had brands within its brand. For example, HSN sold items from the brand HGTV, and according to Johnson, "we want to bring it to life in a fun way at HSN. There has to be a reason for her [the customer] to tune in to see HGTV on HSN versus picking up the magazine and watching their network."

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANCHOR THE STORY TO A GREAT STORYTELLER

Grossman said HSN had to engage and entertain its audience, and finding great storytellers was the best way to do that. She elaborated, "That doesn't mean somebody has to be a Barnum & Bailey pitchman. It has to be genuine and it has to be real, and there has to be an authentic connection between the storyteller, the story, and the product. And we are very clear about that."

At HSN, great stories, great products, and great storytellers were essential. Without all three, the story would not be compelling enough for its customers

### Hosts

HSN's hosts were its main storytellers; they went on the air and talked about the product features and told stories about them to the customers to make an engaging experience for them. Hosts did not have teleprompters; they learned about the product and were expected to talk about it without notes for hours. New hosts sometimes found they told all the stories they had planned in the first eight minutes, and then had to come up with new stories on the fly for the duration of the show. Many times the hosts also had to switch storylines in mid-stream if one was not engaging to their customers. Producers in the control room were armed with minute-to-minute feedback about whether customers were buying the product, and the producers spoke to the hosts through earpieces to tell them if they needed to try a new story or repeat the current one in a different

format. Jen Cotter, EVP of Television & Content, gave the example of a host going out on the show to sell a giant TV before the Superbowl:

The host is saying “you want a big-screen TV in your house and next week is the Superbowl.” And this approach doesn’t work. So now they have to adjust the story to say, “Okay, maybe it is about the fact that it is a plasma TV and discuss the features of the product. Then they try that approach and, hey, they sold 20 units and that storytelling works.” And so they really do almost fish for the right approach when they are on HSN. They have a roadmap in their head, but based on the customers’ response, they hone and change their story live on air.

Hosts also needed to tell distinct stories about the products they were selling. For example, if every host sold the iPad, each of them would have their own story about the product and why it mattered to them. They brought the story to life in a unique way.

Under Grossman’s guidance, and with the rebranding of “It’s Fun Here,” HSN’s allowed its hosts to tell more authentic stories which highlighted the element of surprise. Cotter said that five years previously, if someone on set dropped a product, the cameras would have cut away from it, because HSN wanted customers to have a perfect view of them. “But now, if someone drops an ornament on the set and it breaks and they start laughing, we take a shot of the broken ornament. We let it play out for a little bit, so the customer can feel like, ‘Oh my gosh, something could happen at any minute.’ So it just allowed us to have a little more fun with who we are in the business.”

## **Partners**

Joining the hosts to tell stories were HSN’s Partners who came on to the show to talk about their brands and products. The criteria of authenticity in stories was applied to HSN’s Partners as well; there had to be a real connection between the special guest, the story, and the product. Grossman said she and the company were very clear about that:

We really try and go through the filter, and one of my filters is that I don’t care how big a personality is, how much they could sell, if they don’t fit our culture, if they are not going to be respectful to our customers and our brands, then they shouldn’t be part of HSN. And we’ve turned down people who you would be surprised [we did] because they weren’t the right fit for the business.

She added that any new personality or brand that is going to be on HSN went through extensive training. “I don’t care if they are the biggest celebrity in the world. This is a different venue and a different way of communicating to the world. To this day nobody goes on air unless I meet him or her. In the beginning it was every single guest. Now I have great people to help me.”

## ***Keith Urban Sells Guitars***

An example of finding a great storyteller guest was bringing in country music star Keith Urban to sell guitars. Grossman was excited about the story of learning to play guitar and bringing families together around music, but that story needed a good storyteller. She said many years ago HSN had a guitar business “with no one you ever heard of—trust me,” so it had the



manufacturing expertise and capability to create well-made guitars. As the company began looking for the right person who would be credible, it settled on the country music genre because it saw country musicians as natural storytellers. At the time Keith Urban was selling a fragrance, but Grossman told his manager that selling guitars was a better fit because Urban was passionate about kids having the experience of music that he had. “He said that too many kids think playing Guitar Hero is playing guitar.” It took two years from the time Grossman flew down to Nashville to meet Urban until he went on the air to sell his URBAN™ Guitar Collection. HSN had experience in the category before, but Grossman said the company took a big leap of faith because of how strongly it felt about the product, the story, and the storyteller. Grossman said she committed and made 20,000 guitars at a retail price point of about \$300 which included a “Phoenix Edition” electric/acoustic guitar, custom amplifier, coated guitar strings, embroidered guitar strap, guitar picks, instructional DVDs featuring one-on-one lessons from Urban for the first time ever.

Urban came to the studio and the program launched at midnight on November 3, 2013. Grossman knew the critical time to sell the guitars was the first 24 hours.

Keith just told his story. And yes, he did play a bit, but it was very conversational and very casual. After about three minutes, people started calling in and telling their stories, and one story built on top of the other story. There were stories of grandmothers who were buying it for their kids. There were stories of moms who just wanted to learn to play themselves their whole lives.

HSN sold all 20,000 guitars in five hours and had to cancel all his later shows.

Grossman added, “When you tell the story on HSN...It’s about having someone who is truly passionate about their brand, they are authentic and engage our customers. You basically use storytelling as the vehicle to create momentum, and you tell that story across all the platforms you have, whether it was streaming or whether you were watching it live.”

## **CHAPTER FIVE: 360-DEGREE STORYTELLING**

Storytelling was the underpinning of every one of HSN’s brands, and the company was figuring out the best way to tell those stories across many more platforms and many more touch points than ever before. It also had to determine how to keep the message focused, while recognizing the varied way people would interface with HSN and its brands. Grossman said since she joined the company she had been focusing on breaking down the barriers and keeping storytelling across the platforms in a seamless way or as she called it “boundaryless retail.”

### **Digital Storytelling**

Grossman said HSN did not want to follow the examples of many retailers who kept their core legacy and business and made digital and mobile a third leg. She said the retail business had become exactly the opposite; it was about mobility and technology and social networking. “That is where you are starting from, so it is a complete change in how you even think of your starting point.”

Ryan Ross, SVP of Digital Commerce, worked closely with SVP, Creative Director Jonathan Johnson and EVP of Television & Content, Jen Cotter. Ross said the first part of telling the story was clearly articulating the story for the brand, and then figuring out how to implement those stories across the different platforms.

In all of our work meetings we'll say, "Okay, this looks great from a mobile or a desktop perspective. What are we going to do more of or less of based on the different platforms that we're using? So where do we need to edit the copy? Where do we need to use different imagery?" And it's really an ongoing dialog. It's a hands-on conversation, and we really hand hold with each other to say, "How are we going to make sure this experience is perfect for all these different platforms?"

Ross said the relationships and the processes that HSN was building in 2014 to have the platforms work together were not really in existence before. "We are getting into a territory of storytelling where we haven't been in the past. And that is coming about because of the consistency of the relationship that we are building between TV and Digital."

Ross said when he chose which stories to amplify, the biggest criteria was the size of the prize, and HSN had to determine how to measure that, for example through sales volume, customer acquisition, or click-throughs. The next piece was deciding how to bring the story to life, which platform to launch on, how to coordinate TV and digital, and figure out the assets that were required. Then Creative Director Jonathan Johnson would come in and say, "These are the assets we need across the brand, and this is how we are going to leverage them."

Once HSN determined the size of the prize and found stories that reinforced both HSN and the brand, would resonate well, and would be applicable and relevant to its customer base, then Ross, Johnson, and Cotter would decide what type of video assets they need to tell the story well.

For example, an area that HSN was telling new stories about was "Connected Home" or "Smart Home." Electronics was an important business to HSN, and it wanted its customers to understand why it was important to them to have products with Bluetooth or Wi-Fi functionality. The company curated the assortment of products it thought would work the best for its customers and told that story. Ross said HSN was getting very aggressive in telling those stories, and he and Cotter thought video was the best way to tell the story.

Telling a story on mobile platforms required new skills. Said Ross, "Bringing the story to life on mobile means telling it in a very succinct way, because people absorb and take in content on mobile platform very differently than on a desktop platform." HSN's mobile customers tended to be younger: 48-years-old, compared with 52- years-old for the company's web shoppers and 58-years-old for phone shoppers. They also tended to be better off: 29 percent of mobile shoppers made more than \$100,000 a year, compared with 27 percent of web shoppers and 23 percent for phone customers.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Shelly Banjo, "HSN Enjoys a Mobile-Shopping Rebirth in the Digital Era," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 4, 2013.

Similar to the way HSN used other platforms, Ross used digital to tell the HSN story and the brand story at the same time. He explained that it was about leveraging not only the brand that HSN brought into the fold, but talking about why it was appropriate for its customers and why they needed to know this brand was great for them.

One of HSN's four big annual events was Fashion Week every February. In 2014, a lot of effort was put into telling a consistent story across the platforms and referencing the story consistently, whether it be a host telling the story or the story being read online. Ross said he, Cotter, and Johnson worked with the fashion team to articulate the HSN story on top of the brand stories. We talked about "What is your vision? How do you feel like this needs to come to life? What are the key points that we need to say? What are the things that are really differentiators for our spring fashion versus someone else's spring fashion, and how do we leverage that?"

There were four things in particular that they wanted to make sure they clearly articulated and built stories and experiences around: 1) What are the top trends? 2) What are the top categories? 3) What are the top items? 4) What are the top brands?

For example, HSN partnered with fashion designer Byron Lars, who was showcasing his multi-color shirts. HSN specifically wrote copy, used imagery, and the product itself reflected how the company thought its customers could relate to Lars. The company also used video to tell and amplify his story.

Also for Fashion Week, HSN introduced "The List with Colleen Lopez," which had real time interaction through blogs. The company created "HSN Lounge," a studio where there were live meeting and chats online. It served as another medium for continuing the conversation, and there was also real time interaction on the digital platform across desktop and mobile.

## **CHAPTER SIX: MEASUREMENT TOOLS**

HSN had multiple measurement tools to see how effective its stories and storytelling were. As a baseline, HSN had a very robust dashboard with functional and financial metrics, and measured new customer acquisition for every brand that it had. While stories were being told on the air and online, HSN gauged their effectiveness in real-time by tracking minute to minute how a product was selling. This real time data allowed a producer to tell a host during the show that they needed to change tactics and tell a different story to get people engaged and inspired enough to buy the product. For the real-time tracking HSN used a four-box matrix that measured viewership versus conversation, similar to how it would measure traffic. HSN could see whether it was getting qualified traffic and if it was converting—meaning was the customer responding not just by "coming in," but were they inspired enough to want the product. After the stories were told, HSN did a detailed diagnostic of its content and evaluated their hosts. Grossman explained, "It was not just what were their sales numbers, but did they represent our brand the way we wanted it represented? Or were they heartfelt or not? So, we have both the qualitative and quantitative skills."

## **MOVING FORWARD**

In 2013, HSN collaborated with Disney to create an exclusive collection of fashions, jewelry, beauty and home accessories based on the Disney movie *Oz The Great and Powerful*, which imagined the origins of L. Frank Baum's Wizard of Oz character. HSN would be telling stories through its products about the story of Oz. To promote the collection and the film, HSN developed a comprehensive 360-degree marketing campaign that included a special two-day live event that could be viewed across all of its platforms: TV, HSN.com, and HSN Mobile. HSN designers created a curated assortment of exclusive products reflecting the spirit of the film. According to HSN, “The apparel, accessories, jewelry, and beauty pieces reflect the essence of the movie's three witches, Theodora, Evanora and Glinda, drawing inspiration from their sense of style, personality, and unique color palettes. The home and culinary items mirror the discovery the viewer feels while traveling through the world of Oz.” Another collaboration with Disney was on the horizon, and HSN saw these large scale collaborations as a new way to tell the HSN story and engage its customers.

Exhibit 1  
Fashion Week Mood Board



Source: HSN.

Source: HSN.



## HOW STORIES DRIVE GROWTH: BRIT + CO.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2011 Brit Morin, dubbed by the press as “Silicon Valley’s Martha Stewart,” founded Brit + Co. The online platform and e-commerce company combined the digital world and the maker movement in one place. Used by millions of people, the site shared information about the latest trends as well as ideas for how to make a wide variety of things—ranging from the latest innovations to domestic products to technology. Eye-catching visuals on the website said things like: “32 ways to make your own leather jewelry,” “Have you ever seen a robot decorate an Easter egg?” and “The latest 3D printing news to spark your creativity.” Morin described the company as “putting a fresh spin on the intersection of Do it Yourself and technology.”

Each product or “how-to” on the site told a story through highly stylized words and visuals, whether it was about the company, a brand Brit + Co. was featuring, or a user story. The company also told stories about people in its community of makers, artisans, and inventors of all kinds. Brit + Co. employees mirrored the company’s target audience (women 18-35 who were amateur or professional makers), and decisions about which stories to tell came from an authentic place. Would Brit + Co. employees find value in the product or project they were promoting? This practice helped Brit + Co. build an organization that aligned its brand value proposition with its internal culture.

Morin’s personal story was important to the brand; she was the face of the company. She described herself as “a girl who is not unlike many other girls and women across the world. I grew up with technology and few homemaking skills, but the two can actually be used in tandem

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Debra Schiffrin and Professor Jennifer Aaker prepared this case as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

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these days.”<sup>1</sup> She believed her story touched a chord with many women, and the rapid growth of the three-year old company was proving her correct. Having rich stories originating from multiple places acted as an accelerant and engine for growth for the new company.

## **WHY STORY?**

A prevalent phrase at Brit + Co. was “let’s create content worth sharing.” And Morin said that once that content was shared, it was the stories that then inspired people and connected them emotionally to the brand. “Native advertising” was 98 percent of Brit + Co.’s sales business because brands wanted the company to use their products in some new or interesting way and tell a story about them. Morin said this was especially true with technology brands. “I realized that not many consumer audiences relate to tech brands and tech companies because those brand don’t tell stories about their products often and don’t create a personal connection to their brand—the human aspect is important. If you can relate to the story of a person using the brand, maybe you will relate to that brand.”

Stories helped bring more customers to Brit + Co. Customers and potential customers were on a spectrum of makers from amateur to professional. Morin said the majority of its audience were amateurs “who do not think they are creative, but I believe they are.” For the amateurs, the storytelling of how to make a project should be as easy as possible to follow, so they would feel that they could do it—or at least wanted to try. On the other side of the spectrum, the professional makers had really honed their skills in a particular area. Brit + Co. wanted to spotlight their stories frequently to attract them, but also to give the amateurs a sense of what they could become one day and see that they were not unlike the professionals who “followed their passion and kept trying, practicing, and ultimately living a life and career that they loved.”

In addition, Brit + Co. had begun implementing e-commerce, starting with selling DIY (do it yourself) kits for projects on its site. If customers bought a DIY kit, they could make projects and share their story with the community—creating new content and new stories, and the whole cycle would repeat.

## **CHAPTER ONE: STARTING WITH THE PERSONAL STORY**

The personal story that Brit Morin told begins when she was young. Both her parents were working long hours, and she became involved in a lot of self-taught making. Growing up, her family did not often cook, and Morin had to learn to make the basics on her own: microwaved eggs, pasta, and frozen dinners. Without tools such as Google to look up tutorials online on how make things she was interested in, she experimented with different projects until she got them right. For example, at age nine she spent weeks teaching herself how to French braid her hair. She taught herself how to sew at age 16 via trial and error, “nearly breaking the machine in the process.” Her first project was making a purse out of empty Carpi Sun drink cartons, which she described as “one of my biggest teenage accomplishments.”

During and after college she became interested in technology, and after graduation she moved to

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with case author on February 21, 2014. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations come from author interviews.

Silicon Valley, where she worked for Apple and Google and then joined a place called TechShop, which she described as a gym for making things. She said she became fascinated with the fact that technology was enabling people to make and create in much easier ways.

And I felt like no one really understood what this meant for us as a society, and no one was translating this specifically for women and how it could impact their lives. Even though technology as a whole has now become much more accessible for women, they still often don't want to go to tech-specific sites to read about the new apps or features or cooking gadgets. They want it to be translated and told to them in a way that inspires them to use those types of products or new techniques. I just found my personal passion—knowing that this huge category was emerging that is really going to change the way people are making.

Morin decided that it was not only a personal passion but was a business opportunity as well. She became the name and face of the company online to its users, and on TV as the tech correspondent for Katie Couric's daily TV talk show "Katie."

Morin's personal story continually fostered growth for the company. Although the story started with her, it evolved to be all the people within Brit + Co.'s community whom the company spotlighted on a regular basis. Morin elaborated:

Because it started as a human story, it is so much more relatable for the millions of people who come to our site and our app every month as a path they can follow. It is not just a brand that was invented overnight. It was a story that unfolded organically in my own life and turned into a brand. Because of that I think it is something that others can adapt and follow within their own lifestyles. It also keeps the brand authentic as to why we started the company and the emotion behind why we exist.

## **CHAPTER TWO: DEVELOPING THE BRAND STORY**

Whether Brit + Co. was telling its own stories, or those of its brands or users, there were criteria and tools that it employed.

### **Criteria**

#### ***1. Good stories use great visuals.***

Brit + Co.'s visual images had to be high quality. Morin said that people were attracted to beautiful images, so over the company's short life, its images had become distinctly higher quality in terms of lighting, the styling, and the detailed shots. Brit + Co. had recently created a style guide that was about the brand and the visual style. Morin said "We want people to ultimately see a photo from Brit + Co. and know it is a Brit + Co. project—wherever it might be floating around on the web. So we are continuing to refine our visual style, using the same types of colors with a white background and distinct angles of photography whenever we are shooting photos."

Brit. + Co. visual identity's 11 elements were: "Sunny, Cheerful, Bright, Airy, Tasteful, Quirky, Geometric, Colorful (but also) Clean, Edited, Deliberate." (See **Appendix 1** for Brit + Co. style guide excerpt).

## ***2. Good stories have a distinct voice.***

Brit + Co. had a distinct voice made up of eight different values: fun, curiosity, color, simplicity, utility, authenticity, community and Do It Yourself. It was a combination of those things that made up the tone of the company. Those words were strung through everything that Brit + Co. did as a brand. Morin said the stories should treat users like they are smart, but not talk too far over their heads: "We want to explain it like you would explain it to your girlfriend."

## ***3. Good stories are authentic.***

The stories should be authentic to what Brit + Co. is as a company. Most of the people in the Brit + Co. office were the same demographic as its core audience—women 18-35 based in the United States. Brit + Co. employees would ask themselves: "Do we love this? Would we make this or do this? Would we use this?" If the answer was yes and it was on-brand, they would run through a set of 10 questions for every story to make sure it was authentic, including: Is this new or innovative in some way? Does it showcase design in new or useful ways? Does it help it users save money or time? (See **Exhibit 1** for the 10 questions.)

In the telling of the stories, Morin said Brit + Co. showed both its successes and its failures in making the projects. "We will show things that were made and failed sometimes. We will be authentic about what not to do because we messed up. At the same time, if we are showing off a new type of product or app, we will be truthful in how we used it and if it was actually useful for us. So we believe in being authentic and truthful in that type of way as well."

Morin said the second and third criteria could come together: "We have had some brands that do not want to use our voice. They want to use their language instead, and it just doesn't work for our audience. It seems forced and inauthentic."

## ***4. Good stories are simple.***

The story should show how a product, project, or idea will make a user's life easier, or else the project is easy to do. The process cannot be "super intimidating." Brit + Co. focused on projects that took 30 minutes or less and had less than five to ten materials. It was even better if the materials were something that users already had lying around the house. Keeping it simple made the barrier to creativity low. In telling the stories, Morin thought that using photos and visuals was the best way to keep it simple. "We include text because some people do read that, but the photos and headline of the project should explain it well enough for the user to be able to make the project."

## **Tools**

The Brit + Co. team used various tactics for developing stories. Many of them were traditional

tools like sketchbooks and mind maps. But the team also used other more creative and technology-based tactics. For example, the design team made mock-ups and posted ideas they were generating all over the walls. The concept team used Pinterest boards to begin to visualize what the content would look like. The team would pull in different images for that—sometimes products or similar images to the type of photography it wanted to shoot for a particular piece of content. The goal was to help the team feature the kind of stories they wanted to tell or the stories they were inspired by and wanted to make bigger and better.

The company had a big design audit at the end of 2013, in which the team printed out every single page of design that was a live asset for Brit + Co.—anything that someone could see that reflected Brit + Co. on and off the web. The hundreds of pages of print outs included consumer products and tips, etc. Morin said the pages were covering all the walls and tables:

We went though and looked at everything from fonts to designs, to colors, to buttons. We were able to instantly spot inaccuracies in terms of fonts and colors and shapes, and things that needed to be updated. On the flip side, we are able to get a sense of the visuals that we really love and really stick out for us. So we could hone in on and refine and do more of them. We really used that to develop one style guide that we could use to help us scale up more quickly when we are designing new products online or new consumer packaging.

Brit + Co. was preparing to launch into e-commerce in May 2014, so it was creating storyboards of its product collection on big pieces of foam board and displaying those on the walls of the office. Morin said from a storytelling perspective that was important. “If we are ultimately going to tell the story of why we are creating this new shopping experience and who are the makers whose products we are selling, and why we are selling them, it really needs to feel consistent with our current brand and what our users know about us so far.”

### **Leverage the differentiation story through technology**

From a business perspective, Brit + Co.’s differentiation story was that it combined several businesses into one. It was a media company, an e-commerce company, a personality, it had a retail presence, and had an event program with festivals that it did across the country. Morin said it was unique for a company to have all those sectors moving at the same time. The foundational element behind all of it was the technology the company was building and the ways it was connecting with its audience and letting them connect with one another. Morin called it “the core of who we are and what we stand for in all facets of our business.” The company was extremely active on social media with 3.5 million followers across all of its networks. Dozens of times a day Brit + Co. employees had conversations with users on different networks using digital technologies. To do that, it used the website and the mobile apps it had on all mobile platforms. Brit + Co. also used digital technologies for the product and projects it made—from 3D printers and laser cutters to all kinds of smart cooking gadgets to digital cameras to capture how it was making things.

Beyond that, Morin said one of the company’s big differentiators was that its employees believed that technology and Do It Yourself went hand in hand and tried to make that applicable for women in modern ways. She said for the most part those two categories only came together

for men or more technical people, “But this new generation of women are very technical and also care about creativity in all aspects of their lives. We are trying to combine those two categories in new and different ways.”

### **Create a storytelling culture**

Brit + Co.’s workspace in San Francisco had previously been the Museum of Craft and Design. The first ever Williams-Sonoma was next door. Morin said “There are all these interesting stories about companies in a similar space that were born where we are now, which is a nice kind of physical story to tell.” The workspace itself was open, collaborative, and had Brit + Co. projects all along the wall, floors, and ceiling, “So we have all of our stories that we have shared with our users around us all the time.” Morin also encouraged her team to live the same lifestyle that they were encouraging their users to live. At the All Hands every Friday, the company usually brought in a guest speaker who was an entrepreneur or inventor. The guests told their stories about how they formed their business and how they saw making for their specific category. Afterwards, the team would learn something about that category and do a making project such as photography or pasta making or canvas art. Morin explained, “We definitely try to incorporate storytelling [into] our whole team as an operational and educational component as well.”

### **Sharing their stories: MakeShop**

Brit + Co. had a pop-up MakeShop in San Francisco where customers could buy products and see demonstrations of making projects featured on the company’s site. Brit + Co. also provided classes where customers could make the projects right there in the shop. Using those shops, Brit + Co. told a few stories in one. First, it told the story of Brit + Co. in a real world way; people came into the store who may never have heard of Brit + Co., so the company’s story got told through the physical space. Second, Brit + Co. told stories about the making itself—all the products and “how to”s in the shops had a story behind them. For example, a piece of jewelry would have a story attached about its designer and maker, and also about the product itself, such as how it was funded, when it starting shipping, and how many people had bought it.

## **CHAPTER THREE: CULTIVATING THE USER STORY**

When stakeholders, including users, become part of the story they are more likely to act, and Brit + Co. leveraged that by creating a participatory environment. Brit + Co. discovered early on that its users wanted to tell their own stories and were constantly e-mailing those stories to the company or posting stories on their blogs. In mid-2012 the company launched a tool that let anyone create content on Brit + Co. Through this tool, people could create their own projects and share them with the whole content ecosystem. From there, the company would feature certain user projects and stories. In choosing which stories to feature, it looked at stories that a Brit + Co. team member might write.

Morin said the company started helping its users become storytellers by teaching them to recognize and create the types of stories that other people would want to hear.

First and foremost, if they're engaged with Brit + Co., then they see the types of

stories we're telling and hopefully understand the brand value they should be recreating. Secondly, we communicate back and forth with them. So, if we want to feature somebody, but one of their photos didn't seem to work for us or there was not a great or clear explanation of how to make X, Y, or Z, we would have a community team member reach out to them and basically help them adapt that voice to tell that story a little bit better and more clearly. That way we can feature it and help promote them as a storyteller.

Brit + Co. showcased the end result of user projects on Brit + Co. or on other social channels, which Morin said helped the company grow because it helped customers take a leap of creative confidence and try to make something. She said it did not matter what the end result looked like—it mattered that users were having fun with their projects, “We want to unlock that childhood creativity you once had inside you as an adult.”

## **MOVING FORWARD**

Morin was writing a book called “Homemakers” that talked about what the term “homemakers” meant in the past, what it meant in 2014, and what it could mean in the future when machines that help people make, create, and self-manufacture could become common. Morin said there was something exciting about telling people stories about things they have never seen and probably will not see for years.

I think the maker movement has really just begun. It wasn't really coined a term until just a few years ago. And over the next three to five years, I really think people are going to start understanding more and more about what that means. So as a brand, we're trying to start telling that story now—even though most people don't understand it—with the intent that in a couple years something will click and they'll realize everything we've been talking about all this time makes sense.

Morin gave the example of talking about how 3D printers for clothes would be a common household item in five to ten years. “In most people’s heads, they are saying ‘that sounds like the Jetsons.’ But for us, we have seen the future and we want people to know it is coming. It is about painting these examples of why you would use it, how you would use it, and the data behind the fact that we are not lying to you. This is happening in the world.”

**Exhibit 1**  
**10 Questions Brit + Co. Asked to Ensure Stories Were Authentic**

1. Is this a new or innovative way to make something (e.g., a recipe or DIY)?
2. Does this product, app, or gadget showcase innovative design?
3. Will this tip, trick, or hack save our readers money in a unique way?
4. Is this a novel or unexpected take on something our readers already love? Has this never been done before?
5. Will this tip, trick, or hack save time or keep life simple?
6. Is this product, gadget, or idea smart, witty and engaging (i.e., writing about it won't insult our readers' intelligence)?
7. Does this say, "We don't take ourselves too seriously" without crossing the boundary of novelty, egregious, or inappropriate?
8. Does this tell a meaningful story about a maker, inventor, or designer, and the importance of creativity in the world?
9. Does this product, idea, app or content show our readers how to live a more beautiful life?
10. Would a Brit girl make, own, use, do or wear this?



## Appendix 1 Brit + Co. Style Guide Excerpt

INSPIRE WOMEN  
TO BE CREATIVE  
+ ENABLE THEM  
TO MAKE.



### WHO IS A BRIT GIRL?

She's a **DREAMER**, an **EXPLORER**, a **DABBLER**. A calendar overloaded with meetings and plans doesn't stop her from being **CREATIVELY AMBITIOUS**; work makes her feel alive, but play is no less important.

Her free time is limited, so she craves **SIMPLICITY**, especially when that means spending more time with the people she loves. She can **QUOTE 90s MOVIES** and TV shows and she's not afraid to admit it.

Her recipe box, personal trainer, and camera are all apps on her phone. She has a soft spot for **GADGETS THAT ENABLE HER CREATIVITY**, from immersion blenders to 3D printers.

Cake mix, or cake from scratch? Both are fine with her; she can turn either into something **CONVERSATION-WORTHY** and **BEAUTIFUL**.

She has her favorite brands, but she loves to **SHOP SMALL**. What matters to her is feeling **INSPIRED** by and **CONNECTED** to the **PEOPLE AND STORIES** behind the products she buys.

She loves to **LAUGH**. She's always looking for new ways to express her creativity, online and off. And while she accepts that her **BUSY SCHEDULE** is just part of today's **HYPER-CONNECTED** world, she also knows how important it is to turn off her devices and **MAKE TIME FOR REAL LIFE**.

Who is she? **SHE'S A BRIT GIRL—SHE'S YOU AND SHE'S ME.**

BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO.

Source: Brit + Co.

**Appendix 1**  
**Brit + Co. Style Guide Excerpt (continued)**

WE BELIEVE IN



BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO. BRIT+CO.

Source: Brit + Co.

## Appendix 1

### Brit + Co. Style Guide Excerpt (continued)



Source: Brit + Co.