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BRAIN TRAINING FOR MARKETEERS

BRANDING AND MARKETING ARE NOW AWASH WITH BOOKS AND ARTICLES IMPRESSING THE IMPORTANCE OF: HUMANIZED BRANDS; THE BRAND EXPERIENCE; EMPLOYEES THAT PERSONIFY THE BRAND; PERSONAL BRANDING; RELATIONSHIP MARKETING; CO-CREATION AND RECIPROCITY – ALL OF WHICH IN PARTICULAR SEEK TO EMPOWER THE CONSUMER. THE KEY CONCEPT UNDERPINNING THESE LIES IN THE ABILITY TO DELIVER CONSISTENT AND COORDINATED: COMPELLING, COGENT, RELEVANT, TIMELY, VALUABLE AND AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION – ACROSS INTEGRATED INTERACTIVE PLATFORMS AND FROM A RANGE OF SOURCES. THE IN VOGUE TERM FOR THIS APPROACH IS PERFECTION OF ‘THE ART OF STORYTELLING’.



Beyond these recommendations and the plethora of cited case example success stories, I've often wondered how we go about learning, relating, applying and practising such storytelling? It is worth reflecting upon the fact that professional athletes and musicians separate training, practise, rehearsal and performance – with performance being the least frequent activity. However, for practitioners and scholars, the pressures are often so great to perform, that the reverse happens. More time is spent performing and at the expense of the other stages mentioned.

In light of this observation, I aim to present a series of nine fairly straightforward activities within the following article, which may help to readdress this balance. My suggestion is that these activities can be used by academics, students and practitioners - alone, or in groups, without being too onerous. Their real value lies in viewing these tasks as necessary training activities, linked to practise - and those which should be repeated regularly over time. As with any form of valuable training, repetition leads to improvements in skill, aptitude, speed and confidence. Also, by documenting thoughts and reflections, the further benefit is that style, patterns and the ability to respond to change become easier to execute - in a critical, measured and informed way.

SO NOW FOR THE TASKS

TASK 1

Create a filing system and a slot

Whether it's a blog, a notebook, table in a Word document, or even the notepad on your smartphone – is of little importance. What works for you, you can keep up over time, and you can share, is of more importance. Now decide how **regularly** you will execute these tasks and when: weekly, fortnightly, or monthly – and at roughly the same time? Is it a Monday morning task at your desk; something you do on the way to work; or a Sunday evening warm-up in front of the television before the week ahead?

TASK 2

Create and fill up the fields

As a starting point, here are the following suggested fields:

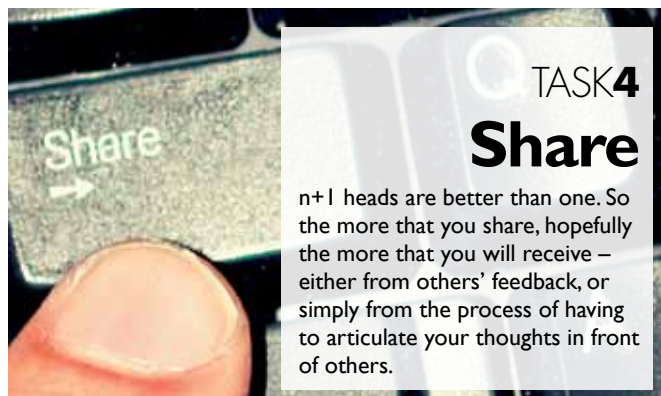
- Date
- Source/Author/Brand/Product/Service
- Key theme
- Why it caught your eye?
- What's so unique?
- What's so similar?
- Score (out of 10)
- How would you do it better?
- What would make it an impulse choice?
- What would make it go viral?
- What you could use (functional/conceptual) and where?

Now start documenting all of those adverts, flyers, promotions, emailers, products, services, and articles.

TASK 3

Revisit what you have collected

Over time, it's more than likely that you will see different things and your views may change. After all, the environment is constantly changing and so do we (hopefully). Don't delete what you have collected previously; instead add to it in the same place, or under a new date.



TASK 4

Share

n+1 heads are better than one. So the more that you share, hopefully the more that you will receive – either from others' feedback, or simply from the process of having to articulate your thoughts in front of others.

TASK 5

Build your own Brand Scorecard

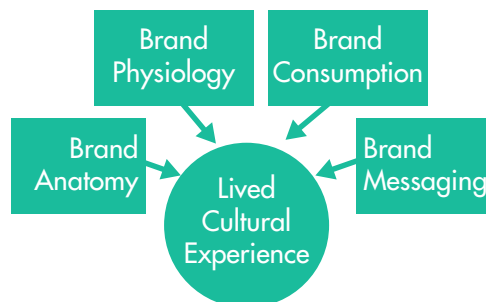
Pick:

1. Brands that you like
2. Brands that you hate
3. Brands that you are indifferent to (which is a little more difficult, but equally as important)

Then rank them along the same scale. The argument being that even if you dislike a brand or feel indifferent to it, nevertheless that brand has caught your eye – and there is a reason for that worth exploring. You never know, one day these brands may have the potential to shift. Often, brand indexes only list successful brands, or case studies cite unsuccessful brands, according to revenue or even negative PR – but seldom is consideration given to the in-between. By viewing things in this way, there is a real risk that brand building follows the replication of a trend, which is already on the decline.

Now, using the fields in *Task Two*, assess the following four elements, using the same criteria for each:

1. **Brand Anatomy:** The overall brand linked to its products/ services and employees – its structure
2. **Brand Physiology:** The aesthetics and design of the brand and its promotional activities – its function
3. **Brand Consumption:** The consumers who consume or feel that they embody the brand – its position, status, and relationships
4. **Brand Messaging:** The brand stories – its resonance, meaning, emotional aptitude, ability to mindshare, and inform.



Having mapped out your personal brand scorecard, can you see any patterns? Also, within the four categorized brand elements, are there any gaps or disconnects? For example, did:

- *BlackBerry* foresee how pivotal BlackBerry Messenger (BBM), designed initially for businesses, would be in the Arab Spring amongst urban activists?
- *Burberry* contemplate that it would embody 'Chav chic' for some, or that its tartan would become a popular Muslim headscarf?
- *Timberland* believe that it would end up appealing to Hip-hop youth, who would spray their boots different colours, before the company eventually responded?

The beauty of this task is that it will give you a wealth of case examples to draw from – for creating new brands and campaigns; pitching ideas; giving talks; or writing papers. Furthermore, the added value of this exercise is that it will add an extra level of structure and criticality to your discussions – allowing you to draw comparisons and highlight gaps. It's often the case that you will only see people present one or two examples, which in many ways provide a weak basis for analysis and justification. Wouldn't it be better to share with your audience that you've been trend spotting and collecting 'x' number of examples over a period of time?

TASK 6

Your personal storytelling source material

As before, using the same fields from *Task Two*, document your thoughts and feelings on the following 'things', using the same criteria for each:

- Books
- Films/TV shows
- Albums/Songs/Sounds
- Food/Restaurants
- Personal objects
- Smells
- Places
- Real People (be careful if they are people that you know personally!)
- Fictitious Characters
- Animals
- Tattoos (even if you wouldn't get one)
- YouTube clips/online user generated content
- **Stories**

Again, you will be picking things that you like, dislike, feel indifferent to; and then ranking them. I've placed stories at the end for a reason. It is likely, that the more you engage in this activity the more immersed you will become; and this will lead to more creative, in-depth, detailed and critical thinking – which ultimately is the purpose of this task. We are trying to become better brand storytellers.

Now you also may be thinking, "why tattoos?" I'm going to argue that tattoos and emotive branding share some similarities in a modern cultural context, amongst the most engaged. Each in their own right, they are modern phenomena, which act as striking visual cues and modes of tribal communication - that people ascribe meaning to, and are linked to multi-layered levels of culture. Furthermore, they signal a desire for realism in response to an increasingly sanitized world. Anecdotally, Naomi Klein in her book 'No Logo' cites the Nike swoosh as being one of the most requested tattoos in the US.

I'd also like to highlight the importance of all of the human senses - and taste and smell are often overlooked outside of food categories. Imagine for example an Islamic bank that burned sweet smelling musk incense from the East in their branches; had smooth counters and smooth writing pens; and bowls of melt in the mouth sweets. Here is where the storytelling begins and the lived cultural brand experience grows.

Another added benefit of this exercise is that now you have some great source material for storyboarding, planning, and brand embedding - when deciding: what music to use in your advertising campaign; what models promoting your commodities could look like and what will they be doing; where to place your advert; what to sponsor; what programmes might be good product placement targets; and what cool or funny things could be linked to your product to send it viral.

TASK 7

Story spotting and spreading

Whilst you're with your family and friends, at a party, reading books, watching TV, earwiggling in a coffee shop or on the subway – listen... Think for one minute what makes the story you've just heard so good, or even so bad or boring. Then (and here's the important bit) make a note somewhere. Now think about:

- If it was you that had to tell the same story, could you pull it off in exactly the same way?
- What you would change and why?
- Whom that story would resonate with – where, when and why?

Now, if you are feeling really creative and adventurous, get into Science Fiction. The significance of technology is massive and if we are going to go beyond simply keeping up and move into setting the agenda, then practising being able to predict phenomena is a must. Try dipping into books like *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* [remember 'babel fish']; watching *Inception*, *Total Recall*, *The Matrix*, *Minority Report* [remember that advertising scene] – look at them again with a critical marketing eye. Also, seek out futurist and Transhumanism (H+) forums. Whether art is influencing life, or life is influencing art is not so important – but looking beyond the here and now and deeper is.





TASK 8

Get yourself a creative hobby

From my perspective, I have a very broad view as to what constitutes being creative. However, the important thing is that these activities aren't part of your occupation and they require participation. Whether you like cooking, doing Sudoku, jamming the blues, playing football, aim to sign up to pottery classes, or just play with your child's *Lego* – it doesn't matter. The important thing is the brain training involved in problem solving, performing a task, refining skills competences, and escapism - away from your daily core tasks.

Then, the challenge is to think how you can bring them into the sphere of your working life. They could be a source of inspiration that you can then attempt to integrate into the augmented elements of your brands; a networking platform; or a vehicle for storytelling as part of your own personal brand, or research rationale. I remember going to the launch party of *Seiko's 'Ananta'* timepiece, which is inspired by the Japanese katana sword. Along with the usual refreshments at the party, they had Japanese swordsmen demonstrating katas in full samurai dress, and a calligrapher ready to write your name in Japanese. Now it was an amazing experience, but imagine how much richer the story would have been if the swordsmen and calligrapher were actually employees of *Seiko*?

TASK 9

Travel and practice your storytelling far and wide

This is the hard bit, but perhaps the most important. Just as musicians have warm up gigs and go on tour, your storytelling will become better the more you are able to do the same. The reason for travelling is to give you exposure to different environments and audiences. Also, it means that you can practise telling the same story! There's no point telling the same story to the same people (unless that is of course they want you to), but realistically you need to tell the same story often. That way you have chance to reflect, refine and improve on it, so that it becomes more rich and authentic – and hopefully cogent, succinct and compelling. Also, wherever you go, don't forget to take photos of everything and anything with your smartphone. The good thing is that they are date and location stamped. Those pictures may serve as further inspiration or a helpful memory jogger.

NOW OFF TO WORK!

I hope that this take on brand storytelling gets you thinking - even if you have to brand dull paper clips and web server packages, or turn in an assignment on quantifying consumer behavioural perspectives. My thinking is that even a little more storytelling makes for the sacred, profane and the mundane being brought more to the top of the mind and resonating more – for potential gains. Furthermore, it is the person behind the communication (namely, us) that also has to be perfected - as instruments and encoders. At the very least, perhaps it won't make you feel too guilty about surfing the net when you feel that you should be 'working'. Or work and study might feel a little more like a facet of you. My argument is that if you wish to be creative, productive and critical, it's very hard to switch your brain off – so it's better to think of these processes in a more holistic sense as being part of a far wider journey of discovery.

Happy storytelling