

# Once upon a time...

## JON HOWARD-SPINK TALKS TO LAURA MAZUR ABOUT THE ENDURING ARCHETYPES THAT MAKE UP EVERY STORY AND HOW MARKETERS CAN USE THEM

HEARING 'ONCE UPON A TIME, in a land far, far away...' can get the hearts of even the most phlegmatic of listeners beating a bit faster. No matter who we are, we can't resist a good story. It's almost as much a part of the human condition as breathing.

Which is why, a few years ago, Jon Howard-Spink began to muse about how this applied to his chosen profession – advertising. His expertise in planning, combined with a self-professed love of comics and trashy sci-fi films, had made him increasingly interested in the role that archetypes in particular and stories in general could play in building sustainable brands.

### Archetypes

First, a definition. Archetypes are certain basic characters and storylines that appear regularly in myths, fairytales, literature and film, such as heroes, villains, outlaws and lovers. They represent core aspects of the human condition and tap into our motivations and sense of meaning. They transcend culture and demographics. Just think about the enduring appeal and success of Star Wars, Harry Potter and other iconographic stories.

Howard-Spink is now strategy director at Quiet Storm, described as an advertising agency, film production company, multi-media and viral specialist. However, he

began to develop his ideas back in the late nineties when he was in planning at Saatchi & Saatchi.

His thinking stemmed from increasing frustration with the way clients and their agencies used concepts like brand 'pyramids' and 'onions' to create brands. These models tend to rely on words to describe the essence of the brand, which he believes is patently nonsense: "A bunch of words on a page is not your brand. But we often behave as if it is and spend months worrying about which word goes where and finding nuances of what the words mean. You have to move beyond that and realise your brand is much richer and more complicated."

## TIPS

Figure out what the truths are about your business. Embracing those truths can help you decide what the company is passionate about and create your real story.

People increasingly want to do business with a company rather than just buy a product or service. So it's crucial to know who you are.

The longer-term relationship people have with you will ultimately be more important for your business than their current experience of you.

His work on archetypes has led him to his current focus on the role of storytelling in marketing.

"I began to realise that the concept of archetypes was a small piece of a bigger story," he says. "It was a new way to think about character and personality, which was useful, but it was the broader idea of stories that became more interesting and ultimately more important."

Stories engage people: "It is the emotional connection that advertising makes that stimulates people to behave or think differently, not the functional content within it," he argues. "The problem is that the marketing community can still get hung up on finding functional points of difference and communicating those in the belief that it'll make people buy."

It is recognising the 'emotional clothing' that you dress the brand up in that can make that difference, but it has to hit the right note with its audience. "This is what Stephen King was saying in the early 1970s," he says. "It's really nothing new. What's surprising is that a lot of what we think about when we build a brand is a fairly empty kind of fluffiness that doesn't bring any emotional relevance to it."

However, that approach is becoming unsustainable in a world where technology and consumer scepticism have combined to make the traditional models obsolete with breathtaking speed. "What I think has changed over the last lap, and probably starting with Enron, is people no longer trust business and realise they can find out anything about anyone," he notes.

"So there is increasingly a desire for, if not the absolute truth, then at least truth they can feel comfortable with, believing it is broadly right and not some marketing fabrication." People want the 'real' stories behind the company and the brand – consistent ones that have the ring of truth about them.

It also provides a foundation for creating communications that resonates with people: "Companies that have a sense of what their own passion is – their story – can then articulate it. If you don't have that you are back in the world of making it up."

He reckons a company like Pret a Manger gets this: "You have a real sense of the story it is telling me as a consumer and the story it is telling itself internally as a business. It's not trying to pull the wool over my eyes."

## New relationships

It is undeniable that companies can't hide what they do anymore. Any deviation from professed values is found out quickly and usually painfully. "Think about what's happening with blogging and networking online," says Howard-Spink. "That sense of brand ownership being in the mind of people is far more powerful now. That loss of control on such a large scale is, for me, an even more important reason why companies should have a clear sense of the story they are telling."

This is more about building relationships with people than trying to persuade them to buy. "It is important to understand who you are. You have to be clear and consistent about what you say, and make sure that it adds up to something."

Many companies fail to realise that this has to be a 'slow burn', which is why it can be dismissed. "The longer-term relationship people have with a business will ultimately be more important than their current experience of it," he cautions. "This is what has fundamentally changed over the last 10 years. Whereas before people didn't have any sense of whom they were doing business with, or a way to find out. And if they did find out, there was no way to disseminate that."

"If I do some advertising for product X, I might well expect sales to rise quickly. Do people care that I am sourcing it from a dodgy offshore factory? Probably most won't and my sales won't be affected in the short term. But over time enough probably will so that they can begin to influence others on a scale big enough to make it a real issue."

For the companies that have a story like that, there will rarely be happy endings. **tm**



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## Birth of a storyteller

It was hardly surprising that Jon Howard-Spink developed an interest in advertising after studying economics and statistics: his godfather and father's cousin is the eminent Geoff Howard-Spink of Lowe Howard-Spink fame. Introduced by him to the idea of planning, the younger Howard-Spink applied and got a job at the agency in 1988. As he says, cheerfully, "Slight, rampant nepotism – but who cares?"

After eight years, he moved to KHBB as head of planning. That became K-Advertising, which was rolled into Saatchi & Saatchi by parent company Cordiant. In 1999, he took a different direction and launched a UK brand consultancy for a big German company, where he worked on a complex advertising concept called Low Involvement Processing.

By 2000 he was back in advertising as planning director at Mustoe Merriman Levy. Last year he joined Quiet Storm, founded 11 years ago by Trevor Robinson, of 'You've been Tango'd' fame, as strategy director.