

THE BOOK OF
VISUAL
STORYTELLING

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Getting Started

Our Brains Are Wired to Think in Stories

The Science of Visual Storytelling

By Jessica Klepac

Storytelling and content marketing let communications professionals talk about brands on their own terms. We use stories to create memorable experiences and to build relationships with people. But storytelling is more than a trend or a buzzword: It's a proven, centuries-old strategy and a powerful communications tool that is well documented and studied. In fact, science has shown that human beings have a neurological and physiological reaction to stories. They have power to forge meaningful connections to drive behavior change.^[i]

Stories and the Brain

Studies using functional MRI technology show that when we read a list of facts, the language processing part of our brains is activated. But when those facts are woven into a story, other parts of our brains light up, as if we were living the experience ourselves.^[ii] When we hear a story, a process called neural coupling occurs that puts us on the same mental wavelength as the storyteller and connects us on an emotional level.^[iii]

Connect Faster

We've all heard the expression that a picture is worth a thousand words. We'd much rather see a story play out in vivid colors and beautiful shapes than just read text on a page. What's more, we process information much faster when it's visual: It takes 150 milliseconds for the mind to process a symbol,

and just another 100 milliseconds to attach meaning to it. Further, when we both hear and see a story, our brain actually creates an embedded memory.^[iv] Talk about meaningful engagement!

A Good Story Helps Brands Build Connections

Brands are embracing visual storytelling to reach audiences and influence behavior. When you know whom you're talking to and how your story resonates with the audience, you can build an experience that gets to the heart of your message.

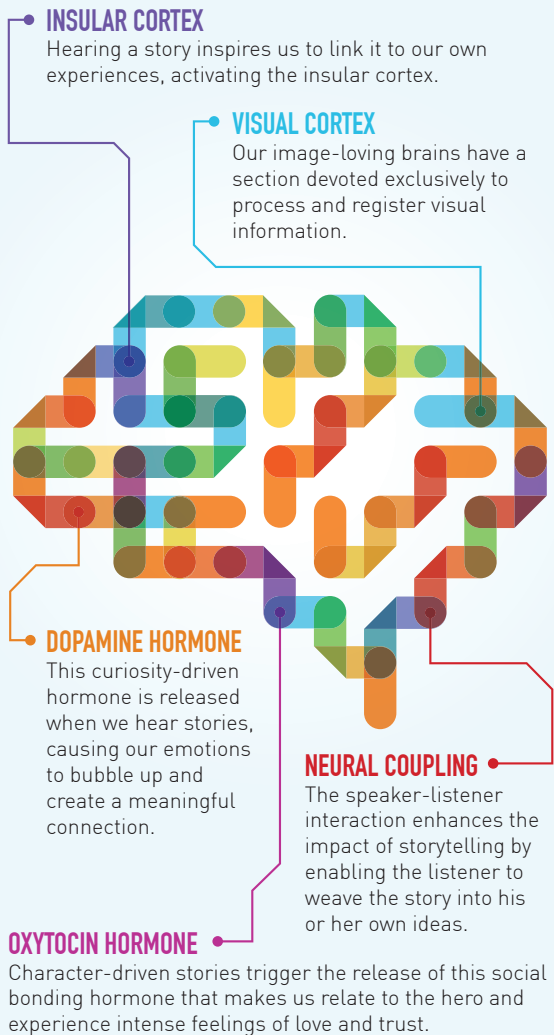
Coca-Cola has long recognized the emotional connection that stories create, and its



Images engage the brain—FAST! Take a look at these road signs. We've all been on that mountain or country road and seen the image of a jumping deer. Our brains immediately go on high alert that wildlife might unknowingly leap in front of our car. It's an immediate reaction. I bet it took you a whole second longer to read the text on the other sign, by which time you might have already had an encounter with Bambi.

WHY OUR BRAINS LOVE STORYTELLING

We are drawn to stories, as they are among the most fundamental ways to communicate. Science shows us why stories are literally fuel for the brain.



1. <http://lifehacker.com/5965703/the-science-of-storytelling-why-telling-a-story-is-the-most-powerful-way-to-activate-our-brains>
2. <https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling>
3. <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/why-abraham-lincoln-loved-infographics>
4. <http://www.pnas.org/content/107/32/14425.long>

SPECTRUM

ads and videos depict people from around the world enjoying life's special moments, all while sharing a Coke. These images ignite feelings of love, nostalgia and a sense of happiness, biologically driven by a surge of the

hormone dopamine. This chemical reaction in the brain creates an emotive memory. So every time we scan over the fountain drink options or think of Coca-Cola products in general, those lovey-dovey feelings resurface, influencing our purchasing decisions.^[v]

Plenty of professional athletes sport **Nike** athletic shoes and clothing, but Nike uses the stories of ordinary women trying to run their first marathon to connect with women who might not see themselves as regular workout material. Nike's "Better For It" campaign features video of women in the gym, at yoga class and in a race, overcoming struggles, if only in their thoughts. The stories of perseverance, sprinkled with self-deprecating humor, ring true for many women. This kind of character-driven story triggers the production of the neurochemical oxytocin, enhancing our ability to empathize and connect with the character.^[vi] Oxytocin makes us more sensitive to others, which can motivate us to act; to get up and go for a run ourselves.^[vii] We think of decision-making as a pragmatic brain function, but emotions actually exert a powerful influence. Emotional arousal organizes and coordinates the brain activity that shapes our decisions.^[viii]

Putting Storytelling Science to Work in Design

As a designer for a strategic communications firm, my audience always is top of mind. People recall 80% of what they see and do, but only 10% of what they read. To make it more complicated, these viewers, on average, will read only about 28% of what they see.^[ix] So not only must our communications be more visual, they must be engaging and interactive as well.

At the same time, we don't want to over-stimulate the viewer. People are bombarded with five times more messages than they were 20 years ago. On a typical day, we consume 34

gigabytes, or 100,500 words, outside of work.^[x] That's a lot of information to sift through and process. So designing something that simply looks good is not enough. Our design must provide just enough of a spark to pull a viewer in, so he or she wants to experience the message. A simple design that tells the story helps the viewer interact with the information and process it quickly.

Ingredients for a Powerful Visual Story

A great design starts with a solid storyline and a meeting of the minds between the designer and content experts. When all of the pieces come together, the design blooms and the visual story is born. As you build your design, ask yourself these questions:

1. Does it have an attention-grabbing headline?
2. Are you using appealing images and pops of color?
3. What emotional reaction are you seeking?
4. How it does encourage the audience to act?

When the health of a community is at stake, a visual story can educate the audience and prompt it to care about the situation, without alarming it.

Methamphetamine is a highly addictive, illicit drug. An estimated 1.1 million Americans annually abuse it. The meth problem plagues communities around the country, and is fueled in part by “meth cooks” who extract

the drug from nasal decongestant products containing pseudoephedrine. **Acura Pharmaceuticals** makes Nexafed®, an abuse-deterrent pseudoephedrine designed to impede the conversion of the drug to methamphetamine.

Through its *Join the Fight Against Meth* campaign, Acura is working to educate people about the dangers of meth production. The company is driving community pharmacists to protect the neighborhoods they serve and urging consumers to join that fight. It's been a particular concern in rural areas across the country. Bringing the facts to life through visual storytelling has helped deliver the message.

Acura has created a series of infograms that feature compelling facts about meth use, with a new infogram posted to the **Facebook** page every #MethMonday. Using simple illustrations and pops of color, each infogram gets

Join the Fight Against Meth
September 28

METH BRAIN: Over time, meth destroys dopamine receptors, making it impossible to feel pleasure, a condition known as anhedonia.
#MethMonday

#MethMonday

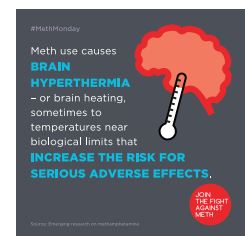
METH BRAIN:
Over time, meth destroys dopamine receptors, making it **IMPOSSIBLE TO FEEL PLEASURE**, a condition known as **ANHEDONIA**.

Source: PBS Frontline

Like Comment Share

80 people like this. Top Comments ▾

1,088 shares



to the heart of the message and adds another chapter to the story. The campaign has jump-started the conversation about meth abuse, and engagement continues to grow. Brad Rivet, Acura's vice president of marketing, says, "There are more people talking about the meth issue online than ever. Incorporating images into our social media posts has created more attention-grabbing content, more shares and a more emotional reaction from our audiences."

Facebook's statistics confirm the value of social media posts that feature visuals. It says photo posts represent 93% of its most engaging or shareable content. Photo posts get 53% more "likes," 104% more comments and 84% more click-throughs than text-based posts.^[xi]

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Emotional Stories Compel Action

A powerful story with striking images not only attracts likes and shares; it has the ability to change human hearts. The tens of millions of people following the **Humans of New York** blog on Facebook and **Instagram** clamor for Brandon Stanton's stories and photos of everyday New Yorkers and people around the world. He started the blog five years ago, and has published a bestselling book featuring his portraits and interviews.

Stanton's storytelling style sparks people's interest in his subjects and makes

them care enough to open their pocket-books. His crowd-funded charitable campaigns have raised money to help people in his stories recover from Hurricane Sandy, adopt an Ethiopian orphan and set up summer programs and scholarships for New York children.

Human beings by their very nature are hard-wired to think in stories. Visual storytelling is incredibly powerful in not only engaging people but also in influencing behavior. **PRN**

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Citations

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[ii]<http://www.fastcompany.com/3031419/hit-the-ground-running/why-our-brains-crave-storytelling-in-marketing>

[iii]<http://www.pnas.org/content/107/32/14425.long>

[iv]<http://neomam.com/interactive/13reasons/>

[v]<http://groovedigitalmarketing.com/visual-storytelling-for-business/>

[vi]http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_stories_change_brain

[vii]http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_stories_change_brain

[viii]Stets, J; Turner J.H. (Eds.) *Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions*. 2006, XIV

[ix]<http://neomam.com/interactive/13reasons/>

[x]<http://neomam.com/interactive/13reasons/>

[xi]<http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/visual-storytelling-on-facebook/>