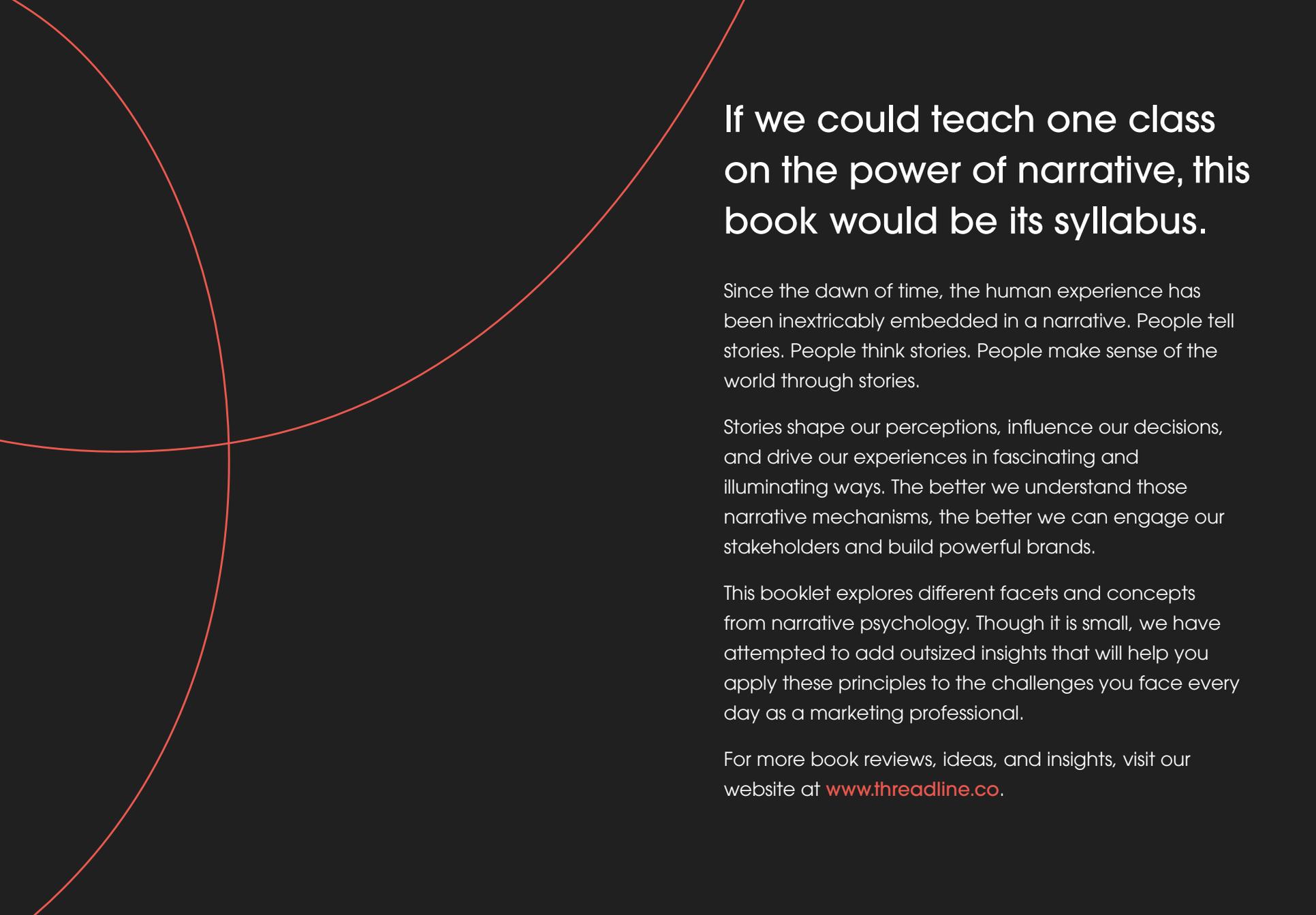


Pocket Insights

# 13 Ways Narrative Psychology Can Transform Your Brand





## If we could teach one class on the power of narrative, this book would be its syllabus.

Since the dawn of time, the human experience has been inextricably embedded in a narrative. People tell stories. People think stories. People make sense of the world through stories.

Stories shape our perceptions, influence our decisions, and drive our experiences in fascinating and illuminating ways. The better we understand those narrative mechanisms, the better we can engage our stakeholders and build powerful brands.

This booklet explores different facets and concepts from narrative psychology. Though it is small, we have attempted to add outsized insights that will help you apply these principles to the challenges you face every day as a marketing professional.

For more book reviews, ideas, and insights, visit our website at [www.threadline.co](http://www.threadline.co).

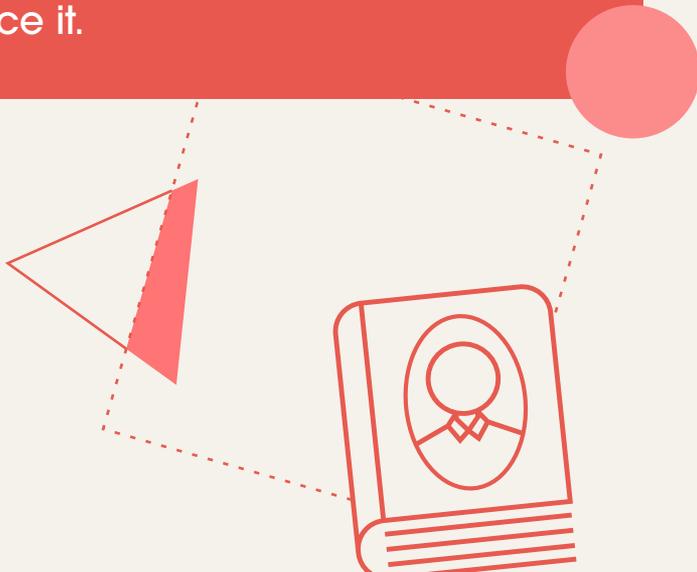
# You are what you tell stories about

## TAKEAWAY

Don't think of your organization, product, or service as a tool for a job. Find a role for your brand in your customer's story and look for ways to enhance it.

Narrative psychology is built on the premise that people understand themselves and their role in the world through story. Where it was once thought that human thinking could be broken down into complex but codified formulas, we now understand that people are narrative machines who create stories about their lived experience constantly. And the most important story we hold is the story that helps us to understand ourselves.

Narrative psychologists call this mental practice "narrative identity" – it's the way our minds use story to help us form a sense of self. Starting early in life and continuing over time, we take experiences – understood and organized in memory through story – and make meaning out of them. This defines who we are. While this process happens in the mind, it's actually a social process built from our connections with family, friends, teachers, co-workers, and yes, even organizations and brands. Everything we encounter has the potential to influence the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.



# The mind is like a Netflix of memories

## TAKEAWAY

If you want to understand a person, don't ask them questions. Elicit stories that reveal their experiences, how they make sense of them, and how they think about who they are.

In 1995, psychologists Roger Schank and Robert Abelson published a study that revolutionized the way we understand how our brains do the work of memory. For some time, academia had become aware that our brains leverage story to help us learn. But Schank and Abelson took this knowledge to the next level when they identified that all human memory is episodic –organized and experienced in story form.

- Their study offered three insights that impacted the development of narrative psychology as a field.
- Human knowledge is based on stories constructed around past experiences.
- New experiences are filed into memory based on how we integrate them with previous stories.

The content of our memories is heavily influenced by if and how we share our stories with others and these reconstituted memories form the foundations of our remembered selves – also known as our identity.

Insight into the relationship between memory, story, and identity unlocked a new world of understanding that has had an exciting impact on how brands and organizations can engage people in more meaningful ways.



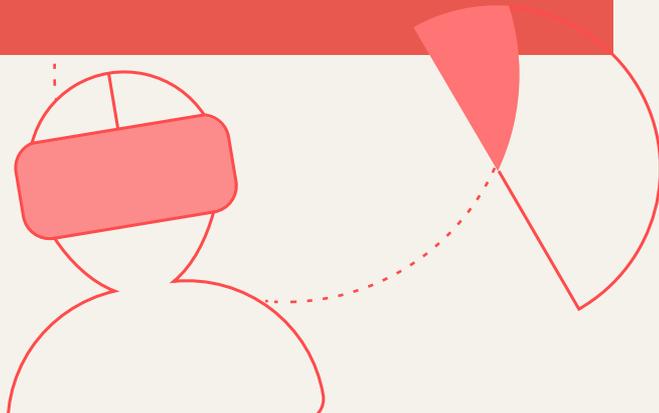
# Stories are the original virtual reality

## TAKEAWAY

Stories can become spaces of influence. Rather than employing hard sells, bring your audience into stories where soft sells will be even more effective.

Have you ever finished a movie or binged a series only to realize that what felt like an hour was actually three and now it's dark outside? If so, you've experienced a concept called narrative transportation. This means that when people encounter meaningful or engaging stories, they are drawn into the world of that story. The more powerful the story, the deeper in we go, and the more difficult it becomes to separate our true reality from that of the story.

But feeling like Middle-earth or Mordor is real isn't the only benefit. Academics have discovered that when people are transported to a story, they often leave their objections to new ideas behind and are more likely to be influenced by these new ideas. We are more likely to engage in a behavior because we are swept out of our rational thinking and swept into the emotional mind where memory, story, and identity take charge of decision-making.



# The strongest stories are built like 3-sided pyramids

## TAKEAWAY

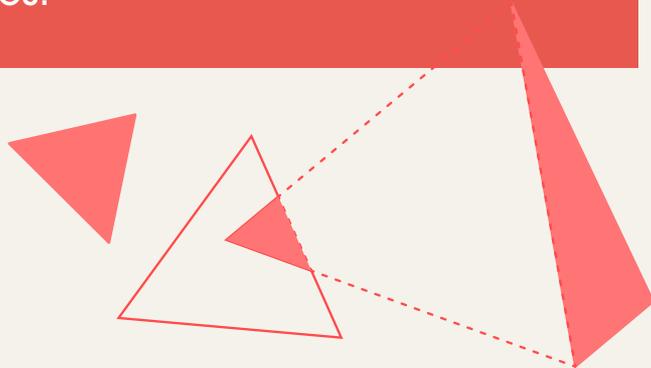
Be sure your stories include a hero, a conflict, and a transformation so that your audience can find themselves in it, recognize their own needs, and see how you might transform their lives.

Have you ever heard a bad story? It's hard to follow. There's no clear plot. And by the end of it, you're not sure anything has really happened. If you've ever listened to a toddler, you know the experience. That's because toddlers – and some adults – don't always recognize the importance of three key elements every story needs – a hero, a conflict, and a transformation. Without these core elements, stories feel broken. With them, they become the launch pad to stories that stick in the minds of their audiences.

**Hero:** Every story needs a central character who is experiencing the events of the narrative. It's critical because when an audience hears a story, they will most likely gravitate towards identifying with this hero.

**Conflict:** The conflict or tension of a story is the source of its energy. Whether it's saving the world, finding true love, or launching a business, conflicts give the audience a sense of what is – and what could be.

**Transformation:** Whether the ending is happy or sad, an audience wants to witness the hero go through a transformation. The change or shift that occurs helps people recognize whether that shift or change is something they might experience as well. It is ultimately the value of the narrative overall.



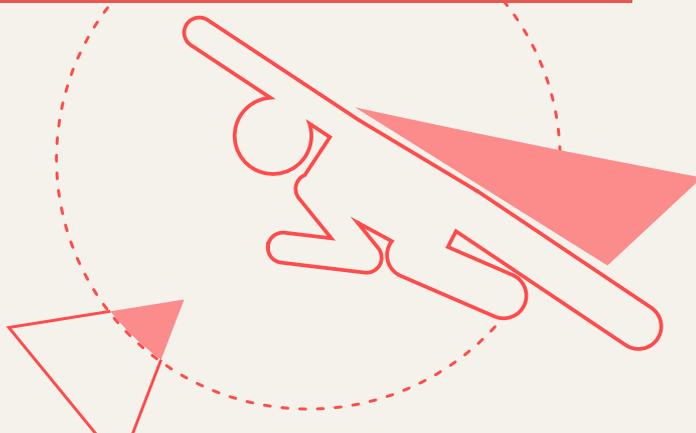
# Stories need a hero – but it shouldn't be the brand.

## TAKEAWAY

Focus on the stakeholder as the hero when building your brand. You're more likely to become a hero to them when you do.

In order to improve the engagement with a brand story, the audience must find space in the story for them to play the role of hero. In fact, the most effective brand stories are those that actively center the stakeholder in the story. The reason is that the narratives people craft about their experiences inherently position them at the center of it. Their memories are of their experiences. They are making sense of their behavior. And they are telling themselves stories about their place in the world. Brands that assume the role of hero leave no space for the consumer to be the hero. These types of stories are known as stories to borrow – things a customer can tell someone else, but not one they integrate into their identity.

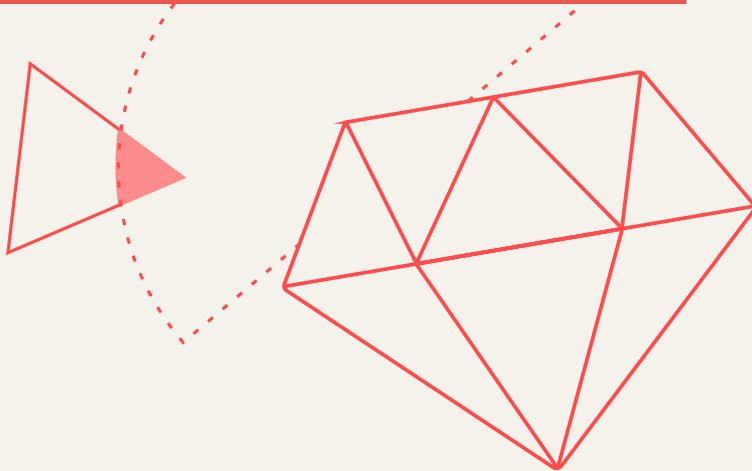
The ideal story is one the stakeholder can own. This happens by creating stories that position them as the hero. Rather than emphasizing the things your product or service does, focus on how it transforms the hero. Describe the glorious future the consumer can achieve with your business by their side. When brands successfully position the stakeholder as the hero, something paradoxical happens. The organization becomes a hero to the consumer.



# Metaphors are narrative diamonds.

## TAKEAWAY

Even for the best stories, build a central metaphor that becomes the shortcut to your ideas.



Some ideas can be complex and may be difficult to explain to others. Even some of the best stories can be drawn out in order to capture key details or facets. This is where metaphors shine. Metaphors pack an immense power in such a small package. They can be bridges to new ideas. They can be illuminating – bringing clarity to something that was obscure or confusing. And they can turn the complex into something that feels simple and familiar. Metaphors are symbols of complete stories that are easier to carry by your audience and easy to recall in the future.

The power of metaphors is how they borrow from stories the audience already knows. Rather than trying to explain something new, a good metaphor uses an existing idea and connects it to the new one in the story. Your strategic plan might be like Hercules. The new service will be like a magic wand for busy parents. Your audiences already house a library of stories inside of them. Metaphors allow you to tap into that wealth to build greater connections.

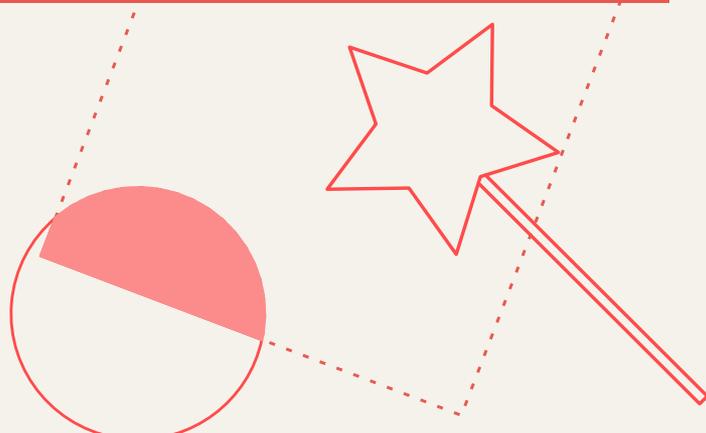
# The happier the ending, the better the brand story.

## TAKEAWAY

Don't just offer benefits; describe a transformative outcome in your stories. The more dramatic and emotional, the better.

Stories that inspire action tend to have one thing in common – the ending they promise is far better and greater than the way they begin. That's because one of the key elements of a good story is transformation. The unwilling hero starts as an ordinary person. But through the story, they acquire tools, skills, and powers that make them truly magical. This transformation is what keeps an audience engaged and what keeps the story moving. The more emotional and transformative, the better.

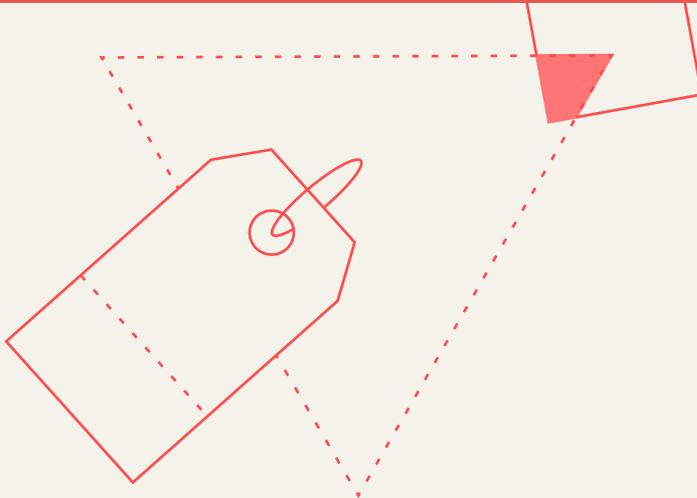
Brand narratives are no different. To inspire behavior change, the benefit you promise should be more than incremental. It should be so transformative that the audience runs to acquire that new future. The more emotional and transformative, the better. That means describing your rational benefits but also emphasizing the impact on the individual. Will they feel like better parents? Will they gain a new sense of confidence? Will they be more capable of reaching their goals? Push your marketing to deliver emotional transformation and you'll notice your customers engaging more deeply than ever before.



# Stories are the best sales tools.

## TAKEAWAY

Lead with stories! Your customers will best learn about the benefits of your business or organization by losing themselves in its stories.



In 2021, a group of researchers from The Ohio State University and the University of Oregon published a study conducted with avid Game of Thrones fans that demonstrated the impact that stories, and the characters in them, can have on our identities. This study showed through fMRI scans that when viewers connect with a character, the same part of the brain becomes active as it does when we think about ourselves. In essence, this study showed biological evidence that our brains engage in something called trait identification – the process by which we imagine ourselves transposed into the feelings and experiences of another.

The power of identifying with the hero in the story? It allows the audience to temporarily explore an identity distinct from their own. Clinically, this can lead to meaningful outcomes such as patients seeing themselves as stronger as they face difficult treatments. For businesses and organizations, the same process allows prospective customers and donors to borrow the identity of those who are loyal and satisfied, giving them insight into what it might be like to purchase that service or support that cause.

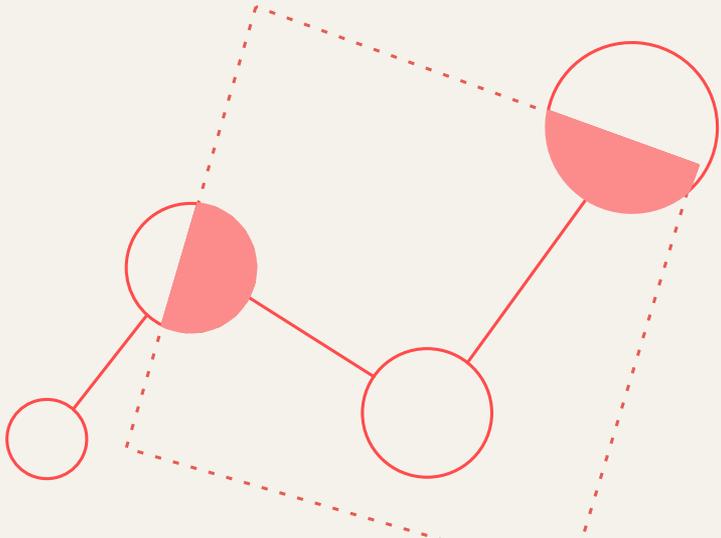
# Stories make sense out of data.

## TAKEAWAY

If your data doesn't have a story, it's only a fact. Frame your information in narrative form to make it meaningful and motivating.

Research repeatedly demonstrates that people are rarely convinced by data. Features? Benefits? Attributes? These lists are most often ignored or quickly forgotten. The research also demonstrates that the most effective way to present data is to wrap the data in story. This is because data on its own lacks context. Facts and figures may communicate information, but they don't communicate meaning. This is where stories come in.

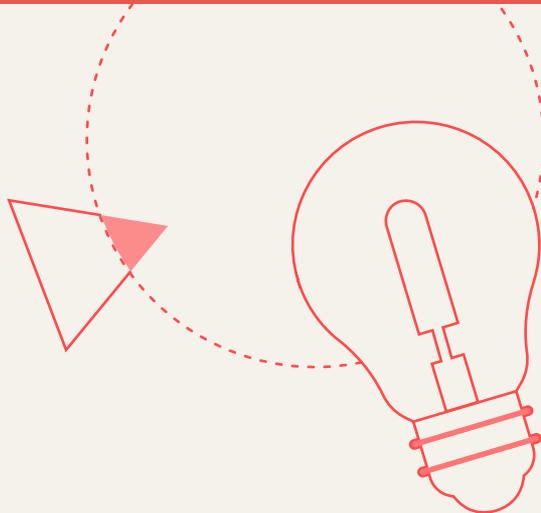
The language of the mind is story. Yet, so often data can feel like it's written in Latin. Instead, stories connect data points to each other and to the audience. By adding context, relationships, the before and after, stories bring data to life in the minds of your audience. They give data meaning in a way that is unlike any other approach to sharing data. For the average person, reading data is like reading a foreign language. Stories are the best way to translate data into their native tongue.



# Stories are loaded with insight.

## TAKEAWAY

Stop asking questions! When customers tell stories, they reveal more data and more useful insights for your business.



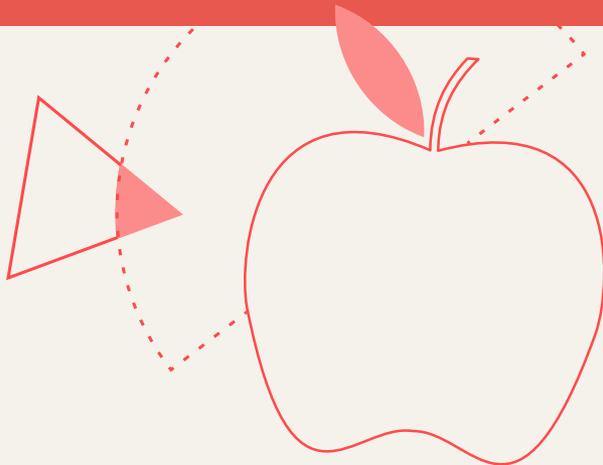
To conduct meaningful research, we first must reckon with the fact that the mind isn't designed to know itself. Behavioral economics attributes this to a dual-system model for cognition. System 1 is the part of the brain that processes emotion. It's quick and instinctive. System 2 is the part that focuses on the complex. It's slow and deliberate. The challenge is that when we ask someone a question in research, System 2 responds. But if you don't activate System 1, System 2 will just think up an answer that seems right but almost never accurately describes how a decision gets made. It's called the say-feel gap and it plagues the market research industry.

A more effective approach is to ask for a story – the heart of a methodology we call psychobiographical research. Rather than making up a quick answer to a question, stories can be replayed by participants like an episode on Netflix. And storytellers describe what happened, who was there, how it felt, the problems they faced, and how it all ended. The richness of this data allows insights professionals to more clearly understand their audience – and it's a far more enjoyable approach for the participant as well.

# Stories are the best teachers.

## TAKEAWAY

Anecdotes have more power than you think. Share stories within your organization to increase the learning and development opportunities for everyone.



Culturally, stories have served many purposes. They preserve histories and socialize cultures. One additional benefit to stories is that they teach groups how to act and respond to a variety of situations. This is critical for organizations that have customer-facing staff such as sales reps, call center employees, or even physicians. Rather than distributing painful training manuals or forcing everyone to sit through a slide show on customer complaints, stories create evocative scenarios that people can engage with and explore to understand how different behaviors may lead to different outcomes.

Researchers call these realistic previews. They are narrative tools that explain situations to an audience in an effort to teach them how to respond to similar situations in their future. For example, one study compared two sets of medical students – one that practiced a procedure on a cadaver (the control) while the other listened to an expert physician tell stories about performing the procedure on numerous patients (the story group). While you should still see an experienced physician, the story group was able to perform the procedure nearly as well on a test as those who practiced on cadavers. The same holds true for sales staff facing different objections, support staff responding to different customer issues, and fundraisers stewarding a donor relationship.

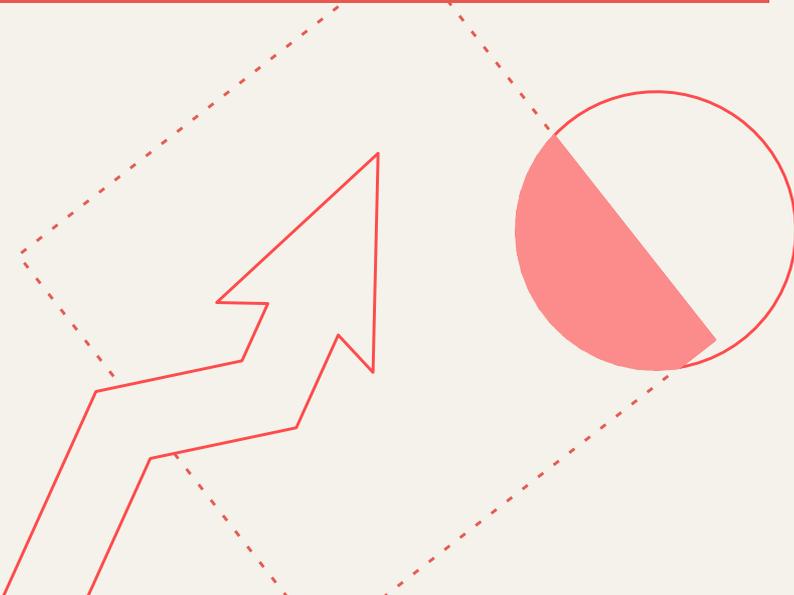
# Stories add value.

## TAKEAWAY

When evaluating the value of your product or service, consider the stories attached to it – either its own history, the story it enables customers to tell, or both.

“Added value” is a common phrase in most marketing departments. It’s most often followed by conversations about features, attributes, and cost. It’s a formula most of us have had to evaluate yet none of us has ever really figured out. That’s because the traditional value equation has been missing a variable: the power of story. When people purchase a product or service, they are buying what it does. But they’re also buying the stories they can tell as a result of it. Whether it’s a story about themselves or a story they can share with others.

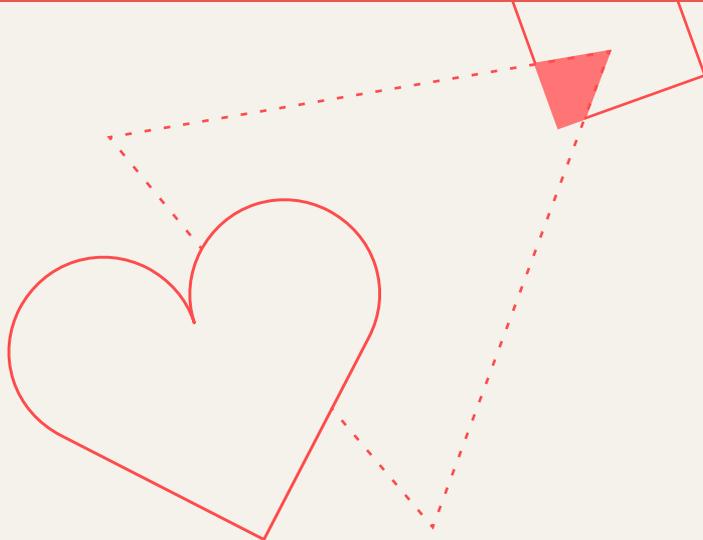
In the book *Significant Objects*, Joshua Glenn and Rob Walker explore – and essentially quantify – the value of story. The pair acquired inexpensive objects from yard sales, trinkets worth a few dollars at most. They then re-posted the objects on eBay along with a story – most often fictional – about the object. Where it has been. What it has seen. How it came to be a treasured item for its previous family. Rather than selling for a few dollars, the items sometimes sold for hundreds. The value of the item wasn’t in the item itself but in the story the buyers could tell and enjoy about it instead.



# Stories lead to loyalty.

## TAKEAWAY

Real loyalty comes from embedding your product or service in the customers' stories.



In interpersonal relationship research, we often observe that as people become closer to one another, the nature of the stories they share changes. People in new relationships often share stories about themselves with the other person – a “getting to know you” phase. This is expressed in a concept known as the Inclusion of the Other in the Self and it represents how much someone else is integrated into our own sense of self. And the same thing happens with companies and their customers.

When companies focus on the stories of their customers, they become more than a job to be done. They become part of the stories to be told. Through frequency of interaction with the product or service and the depth of impact it has on the customers' lives, brands become part of their identity.

When the relationship reaches this level, threats to the brand become threats to the customer. The result is a level of loyalty that sees customers defending their preferred product or service even in the face of rational differences. They'll pay more to protect the relationship. Stay in the relationship longer. And tell more people about its role in their lives. You're unlikely to find a better form of loyalty than that.

# Thank you

We hope this little pocket insights guide will be valuable to you as you continue the work of bringing your brand to the world. Narrative psychology is a powerful framework and we're excited to leverage it to gain a deeper understanding into how people think about and relate to others, including the products and services that make the world go round.

If you've found this resource helpful, visit our website at [www.threadline.co](http://www.threadline.co) and subscribe to our newsletter to get more insights like these delivered to your inbox.

In pursuit of wisdom,  
The Threadline Team

