

A man walks into a surgery

THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING IN PHARMA MARKETING

"Call me Ishmael."¹

"In a hole in a ground there lived a hobbit."²

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."³

You may recognise these as first lines of famous stories.
But what have they got to do with pharmaceutical marketing?
Not a lot, you might argue.

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There's a lot of noise about the role of stories in consumer marketing and communication. 'Storytelling' has become almost as big a buzzword as 'disruption'. But the pharma industry is too serious for such trivial matters. We are scientists; we leave the flights of fancy to artists and creative types. In our minds, stories are associated with childhood and with fiction, whereas we are concerned with hard facts and clinical evidence. Agreed?

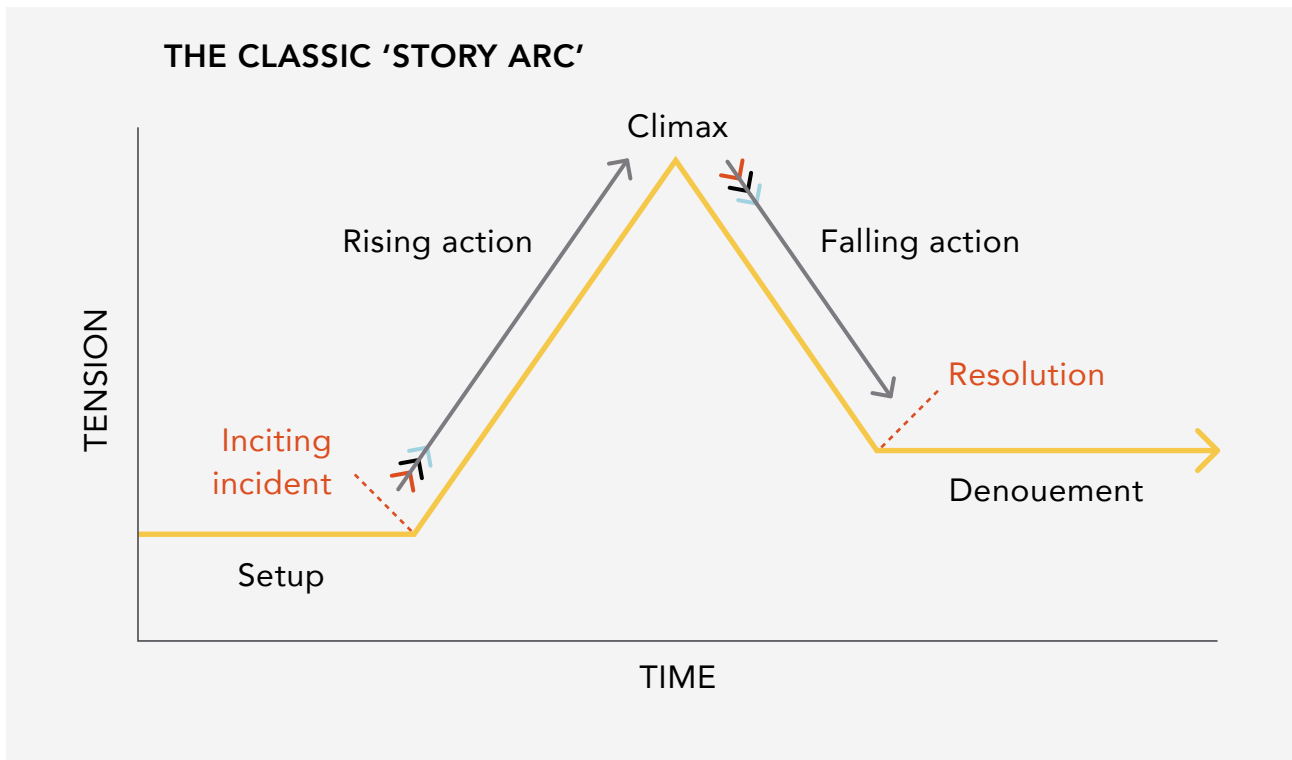
In fact, storytelling has always played a big part in medicine. The most important tool in medical education is the case study, which is simply a description of events in narrative form. A doctor taking a patient's history is actually asking them to describe their medical autobiography, highlighting key events.

The whole process of diagnosis can be viewed as a detective story: looking for clues, eliminating suspects and finally identifying whodunnit. It's no surprise that the inventor of Sherlock Holmes (Arthur Conan Doyle) was a doctor, and Holme's analytical approach was inspired by Joseph Bell, a Scottish surgeon who taught the author. The fictional diagnostic genius Dr House is based on Sherlock Holmes, who in turn was based on the real MD Joseph Bell, bringing the medical connection full circle.

Medical knowledge advances not just through clinical trials but through anecdotal reports, which are slices of life containing human interest.

Medical diagnosis is
a detective story





Medical stories may not include classic story elements like heroes and villains, plot twists and a neat moral message. But the essential format is the same: linking individuals and events together in a coherent pattern that helps us to understand things better.

The history of medicine is itself full of stories of serendipity, struggle against adversity, sudden insight and blind luck. Vaccination originated from Edward Jenner's observation that milkmaids rarely contracted smallpox, because their contact with cattle gave them immunity. The antibiotic era began when Alexander Fleming left a culture dish on a windowsill and realised he'd found a cure for infection. Viagra started as an unassuming angina medication, until patients reported an unexpected bonus in the trouser department.

Scratch the surface of any medicine and you will find a story relating to its discovery or lifecycle. Our agency worked on the first omega-3 treatment indicated to prevent heart attacks, which originated from the finding that eskimos have a low incidence of heart disease, despite consuming high levels of fat. We worked with the British company that invented intraocular lenses, thanks to an ophthalmologist who noted that RAF pilots whose screens had shattered in crashes were not blinded by the shards in their eyes, but their vision was altered. We also worked on a successor to thalidomide, a drug that was initially tainted with tragedy and scandal, but achieved redemption when it was found to have a lifesaving role in cancer patients. Stories like these deepen our appreciation of the brand and open our minds to creative possibilities. In fact the first question our agency asks when we receive a brief is "What's the story?"



WHY DOES STORYTELLING MATTER IN MARKETING?

It provides simplicity

Expressing information as a narrative condenses a complex situation to the essentials. Concentration adds power without necessarily taking anything away. The novelist Ernest Hemingway once won a bar-room bet about who could write the shortest short story, with an entry just 6 words long:

*For sale:
baby shoes.
Never worn.*

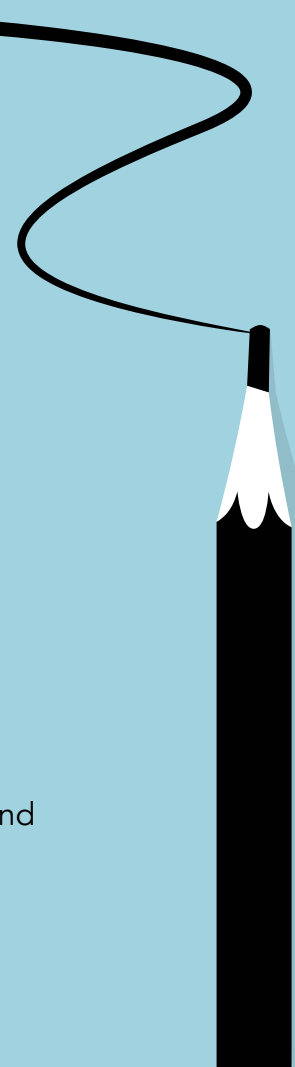
But those few words express a whole back-story and pack a big emotional punch.

It focuses on what's important

Storytelling is a lens that identifies and magnifies what really matters. This is vital in marketing, where we often struggle to select key brand attributes and market factors. Once you decide what to focus on, it's easier to organise facts and link cause and effect, which supports decision making.

It provides meaning

Searching for meaning is a fundamental human need. *The Uses of Enchantment*, a book by Bruno Bettelheim, concluded that the psychological purpose of folk tales is to help us make sense of the world. Stories can help us to understand the forces that motivate people and drive events - and to come to terms with the randomness of life.





It provides emotional engagement

Advertisers have long been aware that emotional arguments are more persuasive than rational ones, even in people who consider themselves rational. This is supported by cognitive psychology and behavioural economics, which show that most of our decisions are based on emotion, then justified with logic. Information is more effective if it is affective. Luckily, there is enormous emotional capital in healthcare brands, which can enhance or even save people's lives.

It is more memorable

When absorbing information, we are more likely to retain ideas when they are presented as stories. If you have read the Bible, you probably struggle to recall all the stuff about who begat who, but you

remember the parables and stories, like Noah's Ark, David and Goliath and Jonah and the Whale. Linking topics together as a story or journey is also a recognised mnemonic technique that helps us to embed facts in memory.

Stories are universal. They cross cultures and disciplines. *The Golden Bough* - a comprehensive study of myths and religions across the world - found that the same fundamental stories and creation myths crop up in different cultures that are widely separated geographically. This is echoed by more recent studies which conclude that in all art and literature, there are only about 9 basic storylines or plots. All other stories are variations on those themes. It seems we are all wired - perhaps hard-wired - to seek similar patterns of events and behaviour, and respond to the same ideas and themes.



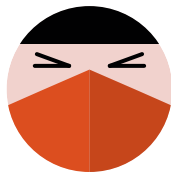
SO HOW CAN MARKETERS HARNESS THE POWER OF STORYTELLING?

As the previous examples demonstrate, every brand has a story. A brand development workshop can help to explore different options. A good starting point is to identify your brand's 'personality archetype'. This involves thinking about it as a human protagonist or story character. Not every brand is a Leader or Pioneer, but describing your brand as a Maverick, a Rebel or a Magician opens up a wider range of possibilities, because these are more complex characters.

Brand archetypes



MAGICIAN



OUTLAW



JESTER



LOVER



EVERYMAN



CAREGIVER



RULER



CREATOR



INNOCENT



SAGE



EXPLORER



HERO

Then you need to consider what story fits your brand. You should not just bolt on an existing story, but develop one that is unique to your brand. There are many possible trajectories - a journey, a struggle against adversity, a tale of discovery or an intellectual puzzle. You can take the viewpoint of any stakeholder: the company, like the lens manufacturer; a doctor struggling to find a solution, like Fleming; a patient story rooted in tragedy, like thalidomide; a patient story with a happy ending, like Viagra; or the story of the brand itself. And you can use any genre - epic, sci fi, thriller, mystery, whodunnit, tragedy, love story, road trip, drama-doc, biography or cautionary tale.

Once you have a story that resonates with you and your stakeholders, you can think about how to use it in your marketing.



The story does not have to be explicitly communicated to customers in advertising and sales materials. It may be internal and implicit - a way for internal stakeholders to think about the brand - or a springboard for creative or strategic ideas. It may simply be a rallying point that defines your brand and expresses its values.

However, there is an obvious role for storytelling in the selling process, which is often described as a 'sales story'. In truth, there is little variation in the sales structure adopted by different brands and companies. They nearly always follow the same pattern of setting out the problem, presenting the brand as the solution, providing supporting evidence, and finishing with a summary and call to action. There is rarely any deviation or dialogue, even though digital detail aids allow a non-linear and interactive structure.

So why not change the sales story?

Start from the perspective of a different stakeholder. Change the order of events. Add a twist to the story flow. This can be refreshing for both the salesperson and the customer (who rarely sees anything different) and may result in more productive sales calls. If you are nervous about this approach, trial different options and compare them by A/B testing.

Stories can also be used in patient literature to explain risk and benefit to people who are not statistically literate, and to help patients and carers make informed decisions.

If you are unconvinced about the role of storytelling in our business, consider how widely we use anecdote and personal experience to get a point across. The reason TED talks are more popular than slide shows is that they are conversational narratives delivered by human beings. And think how many sales conferences and business presentations start with a story to break the ice and gain rapport.



You don't have to be a master storyteller or orator to benefit from these techniques. Just using vivid words and images makes communications more powerful. We all use rhetorical devices like metaphor and allusion to bring our messages to life. Sales and marketing theory is full of military metaphors (attack, defend, outflank). When talking about customers we use the language of relationships (loyalty, support, commitment). When talking about market conditions we borrow terms from biology and ecology (landscapes, niches, ecosystems).

At a pharma sales conference we attended, the sales director presented a slide showing a pie chart with a large bite taken out of it. He could have said "Our chief competitors have taken 20% of our market share by selectively targeting our customers". What he actually said was "Our enemies are eating our lunch. What are you going to do about it?" The salesforce left the meeting well

informed, and more importantly, raring to go. This demonstrates that the goal of storytelling in our field is not to entertain, it is to inspire action. To quote David Ogilvy: "When Aeschines spoke, they said, 'How well he speaks.' But when Demosthenes spoke, they said, 'Let us march against Philip'"⁴.

If you still don't buy the idea of storytelling - if you think it is just the latest brand of marketing BS - don't think of it as storytelling. Think of it as a working tool to stimulate lateral, insightful ideas, or a different way of thinking about the challenges you face.

So next time you are facing a marketing problem, ask yourself what every journalist asks when confronted by a mass of unorganised facts: What's the story? Once you start seeing a problem as a thread of connected events, it's easier to visualise the solution.

References

1. Moby Dick. Herman Melville.
2. The Hobbit. JRR Tolkien.
3. A Tale of Two Cities. Charles Dickens.
4. Ogilvy on Advertising. David Ogilvy.
[According to other sources, the quote relates to Cicero, not Aeschines].

