



Everybody's Talkin' At Me

Steve Portigal
Portigal Consulting
steve@portigal.com

First published in
Steve Portigal's
column, "True Tales,"
interactions
Mar/Apr 2008

Pop culture reveals our appetite for stories.

In a 2005 New York Times Magazine article, "Watching TV Makes You Smarter," adapted from his book *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, Steven Johnson identifies the increasingly complex narrative structures that we've become accustomed to in series television. Compare the density of plot and character in "Curb Your Enthusiasm," "The Wire,"

"The Shield," or "Lost" with "The Rockford Files," "Adam-12," or "Gunsmoke." Pop culture reveals a maturing in our appetite for stories. This voraciousness continues to grow, with social media emerging to deliver us stories in all shapes and sizes. We get big stories from blogs; miniature stories via Twitter; multimedia stories on Flickr and YouTube. All of them are equipped with handles to make it easy for

© 2008 Portigal Consulting. Please do not distribute without permission.

A sales channel isn't necessarily the best way of getting information back from customers, and it shouldn't be the only way.

us to retell the narrative to others (something we've dubbed "viral").

Procter & Gamble is selling stories, too, with products like Febreze Scentstories. Positioned as more than a traditional air freshener, the product offers "a variety of scents from an assortment of scent-themed fragrance discs" such as "farmer's market," "spa day," or "world treasures." In 2004 Nissan advertised heavily around "Tell Better Stories," suggesting that the end result of using their products was the story a driver and passengers would tell. And screenwriting guru Robert McKee coaches corporations on how to be better storytellers, while author Steve Denning has analyzed what types of stories can be used by business leaders across a range of situations.

While this commercialization of stories is all lovely, the emphasis is unfortunately placed on the telling of stories, rather than the act of listening to stories.

Let me tell a story about that.

Recently, we worked with a company that sold a niche B2B software product. They had wonderful relationships with their small set of customers, but the main conduit were the account executives, who were essentially salespeople. The account executives did a great job of advocating for the company and touting the benefits of their software. That inevitably created a conflict when their customers offered feedback. A sales channel isn't necessarily the best way of getting information back from customers, and it certainly shouldn't be the only way. At our recommendation, the client instituted a "listening channel," and we began training product managers and developers on the basics of having an open-minded and open-ended conversation with customers.

Skip ahead a few years. Our client has been acquired by a larger company that has developed a crucial software product enthusiastically derided by users. Yet when these new corporate masters are introduced to The

When these new corporate masters are introduced to The Listening Channel, the reaction is instantly negative—"I don't want The Listening Channel. I want The Telling Channel."

As in, "We'll tell you why our product is the best. And we aren't interested in listening to your problems with our product."

Listening Channel, the reaction is instantly negative—"I don't want The Listening Channel. I want The Telling Channel." As in, "We'll tell you why our product is the best. And we aren't interested in listening to your problems with our product." Meanwhile, it's proving difficult for them to hold on to their spot in a tightly competitive market.

We can find more common examples of telling over listening in the marketing rhetoric of "educating the customer," commonly used when companies realize that the public isn't doing what they want them to be doing. By labeling their customer as "uneducated," they place responsibility on someone else's shoulders. No need to look at the solution being offered if you can marginalize those who haven't adopted it. The recent fluorescent-bulb hype is a timely example; California, like Australia, has introduced legislation to mandate the use of fluorescents in the home, while companies such as Wal-Mart are putting a lot of money into marketing these

products. Wal-Mart is trying to persuade us to use these new bulbs, even as people express frustration over the poor quality of light they produce. Instead of investing this money and effort in refining the product, Wal-Mart continues to pressure a marketplace that has already indicated its objections. Do we need (re)educating, or just a better bulb? The problems with the current product are well-documented; the pathway to consumer acceptance has been lit from within. It would be nice (and ultimately more effective) if they worked on the bulb, not on changing the meaning of the bulb. As we know, the bulb has to really want to change.

PR people are masters at making telling sound like listening. Sound bites that supposedly come from CEOs typically feature hollow customer-centric phrases that serve to validate any business decision (a new product, a new feature, a change in a previous way of doing business, the removal of a feature, etc.). "Our customers tell us that food

These businesses tell a good story (we call that “innovative” advertising), but they fail to deliver the promised experience.

packaging is extremely important to them and can determine what they buy,” and “We’ve done research, and research shows us that our customers like . . . movies.” Maybe these companies are listening to their customers and maybe they aren’t; they’re so busy telling us how hard they are listening that it’s difficult to sort out what’s real.

The retro chic of AMC’s “Mad Men” has reminded us in a rather quaint way of the role of advertising to persuade (some may say “manipulate”). And it’s in advertising that we see the biggest disconnect between the story that is being told by the producer and the story that is being told by the consumer. It’s in their interest not to listen. Oil companies care about the environment, and McDonald’s loves to see us smile? Do we still

believe that Target is a champion for good design when we go into a store and see huddled masses yearning to shop cheaply?

These businesses tell a good story (we call that “innovative” advertising), but they fail to deliver the promised experience. We measure advertising by the attention it can grab, but who measures coherence? The Cluetrain folks told us this was supposed to be a conversation, but it’s hard to consider it a dialog if it’s one-way.

Listening can bring value to all parts of the organization and the product development process. Indeed, to reach the stage of *conversation*, we need to better utilize the listening tools we have at our disposal, even as we find more effective and impactful ways to *tell*.

Steve Portigal is the founder of Portigal Consulting, a boutique agency that helps companies discover and act on new insights about their customers and themselves.

Steve has been studying customer behavior and corporate culture for more than a decade and has advised dozens of clients on the creation of new products, services, and innovation processes.

Steve speaks and writes about consumer research, innovation, design, and contemporary culture. For a complete list of speaking engagements and publications, visit www.portigal.com/about-us/

If you'd like more information on Portigal Consulting, contact Steve at (415) 894-2001 or steve@portigal.com

Other Articles (available upon request)

- *Persona Non Grata*
- *The Journey Is The Reward*
- *Hold Your Horses*
- *Living In The Overlap*
- *Some Different Approaches to Making Stuff*
- *Poets, Priests, and Politicians*
- *Interacting With Advertising*
- *Ships in the Night part I: Design Without Research?*
- *Ships in the Night part II: Research Without Design?*
- *We Are Living in a Sci-Fi World*
- *On Authenticity*
- *Ever Notice?*
- *Let's Embrace Open-Mindedness*
- *Take it From Consumers: Simpler is Better*