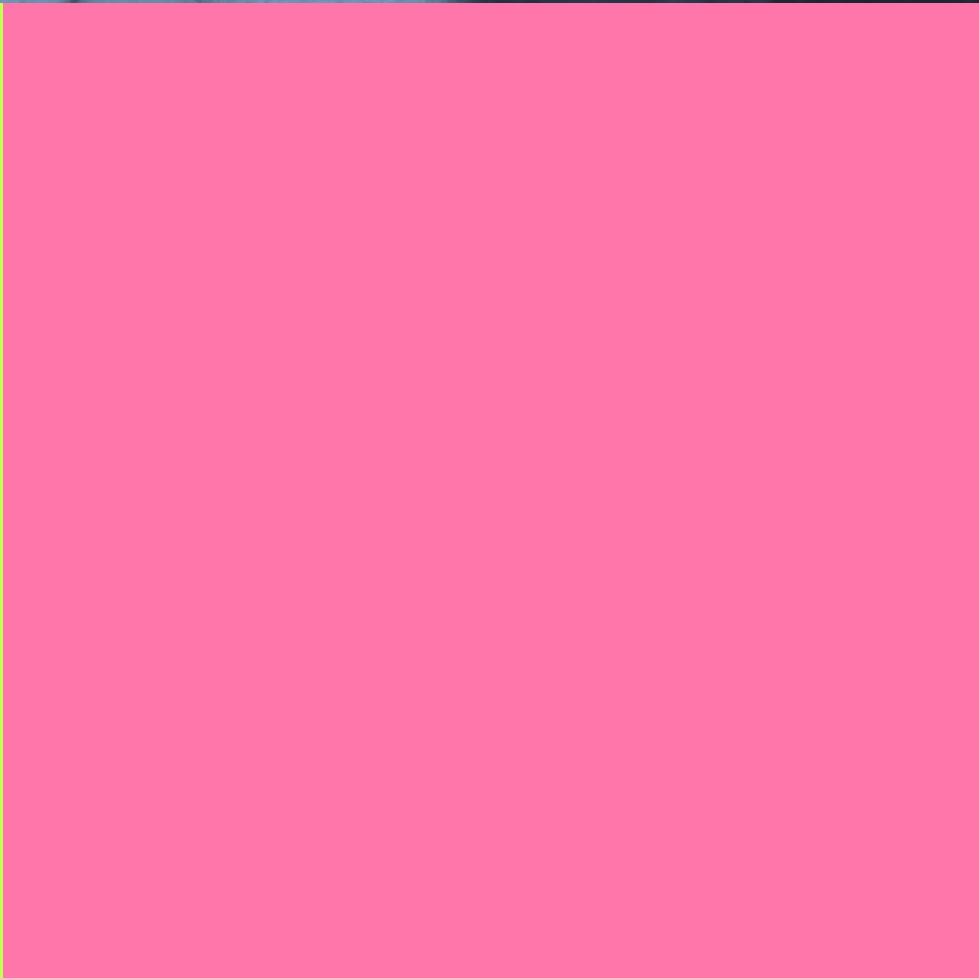
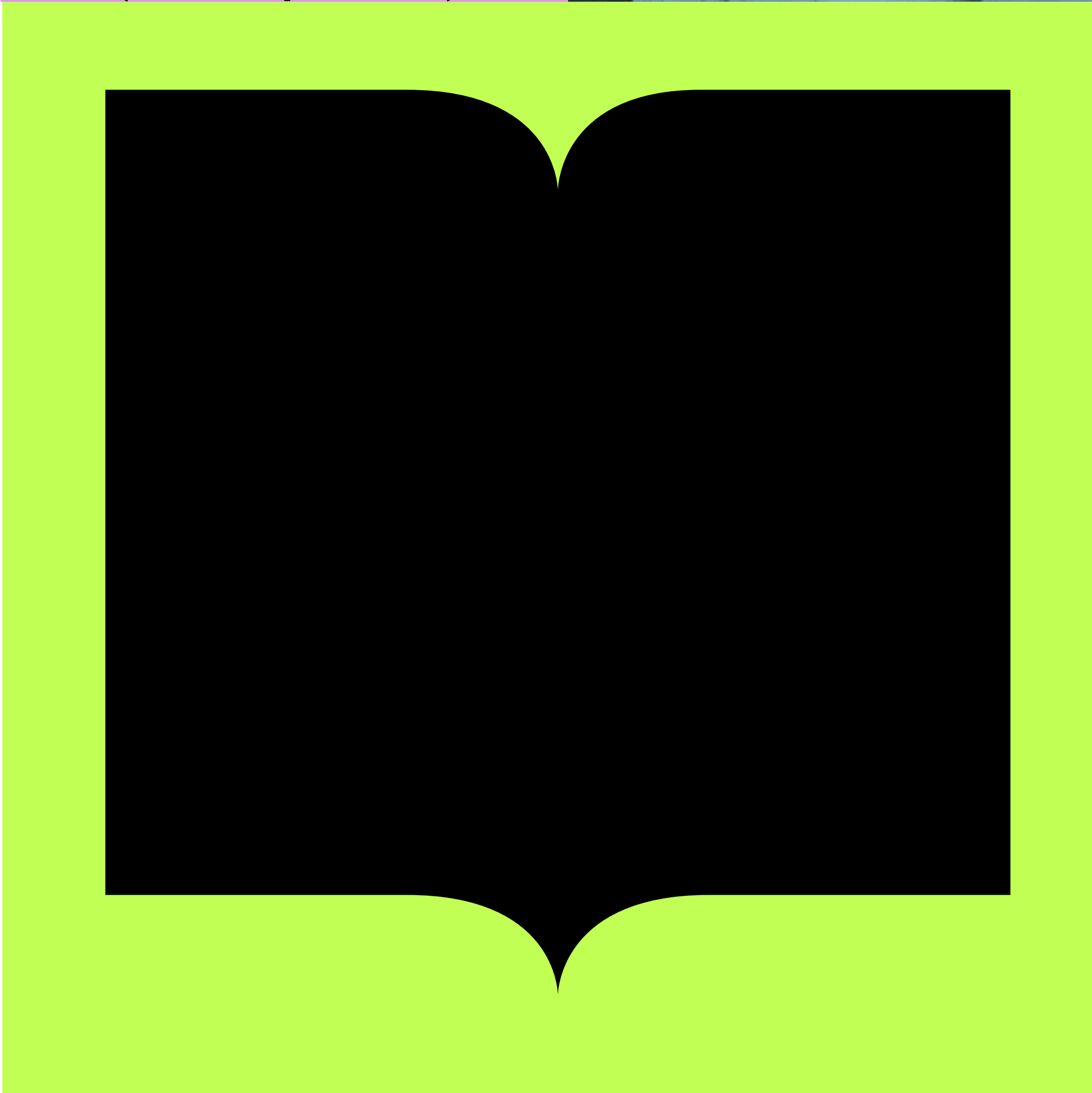
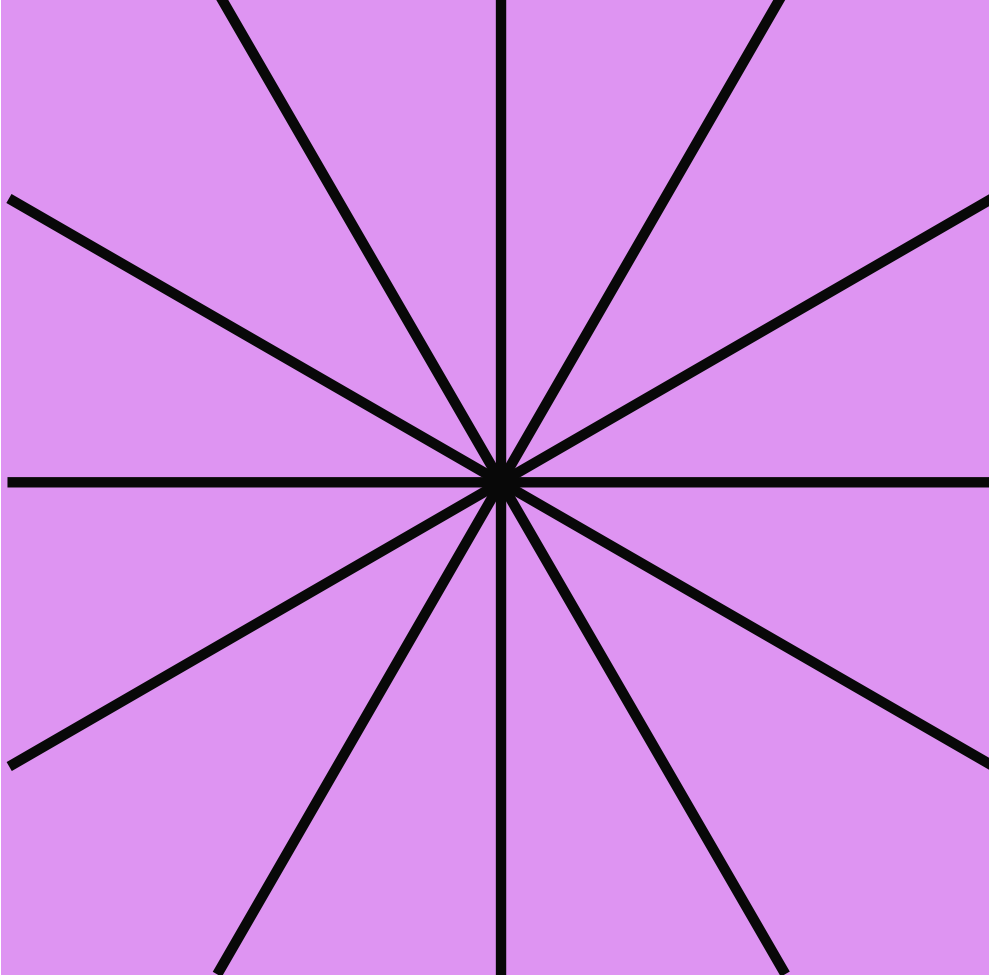


SVBOTEUR

Foundations for freedom

The Saboteur Brand Toolkit
Brand Narrative



Get in touch

A brand narrative is just one of the ‘foundations for freedom’ that great brands put in place in order to escape their constraints and achieve their potential.

If you would like to find out more about our brand messaging toolkit, who it’s already worked for, and how we can use it to set your brand free, please get in touch.

Saboteur Team

hello@saboteur.studio

+44 203 8839 559

Contents

1. What is a brand narrative?
2. The ingredients of a powerful brand narrative:
 - Characters in conflict
 - Structure
 - Plot
3. The relationship between brand narrative and other brand elements
4. Further reading

Brand Narrative



A brand narrative is the most compelling story you can tell about yourself.

It's your [brand positioning](#) translated into inspiring and accessible language; an internal document that provides everybody in your organisation with motivation and clear direction, and also serves as a starting point for [brand messaging](#) and [verbal identity](#).

A well-written brand narrative is an especially powerful tool for change, because it's natural to make decisions that align to 'your story', and difficult to make decisions that contradict it.

Note that your narrative is not 'the history of your brand' but an outline of its role in customers' lives now and in the future. It links what you do with what they want, and why it matters.

The ingredients of a powerful narrative

1. Characters in conflict

2. Structure

3. Plot

Note: As brand narratives are rarely published, this toolkit includes rare examples of narratives that have made it into the public domain, along with other communications examples that follow the same principles as a narrative, and are therefore helpful to anyone looking to write one of their own.



1. Characters in conflict

Without conflict, we don't have a story.

This is true in all of literature, film and theatre, and it's true of all good business stories, too.

It's the audience's desire to see conflict resolved that keeps them engaged in a narrative. So, however much a business might be tempted to remove conflict from their story, conflict there must be.

Characters are the vehicles for conflict.

It's their struggle against and alongside each other than creates the tension that compels us.

An effective brand narrative contains three essential characters in conflict.

1. The Hero

The Hero is almost always the brand's end customer. As a business, but more importantly as fellow human beings, we identify with them and their objectives, and root for them to succeed.

2. The Enemy

The Enemy is almost always an injustice or entrenched 'status quo'. The Enemy stands in the way of our Hero, and of everything they're trying to achieve.

3. The Guide

The Guide is almost always the brand and its people. The Guide has fought this Enemy before, and now their role is to pass down their knowledge and tools, so our Hero can defeat it once and for all.

1. Characters in conflict



Hero

Usually the end customer.



Enemy

Usually an injustice,
or the 'status quo'.



Guide

Usually the brand
and its people.

Creating characters



Hero

Usually the end customer.

1. Make it clear who the Hero is

Effective narratives tell a story about how the customer can transform (with our help), not about how we succeed (with the customer's help).

2. Answer their deeper need

A surface need might be “to buy a car” but a deeper need may be “to feel safe” if it's a Volvo, or “show who's boss” if it's a Range Rover. The surface need is obvious and addressed by everyone in your category. The internal deeper is hidden and addressed by only you.

3. Provide an ‘aspirational identity’

Does it describe who we will help them become, and is that something they aspire to?



Enemy

Usually an injustice, or the ‘status quo’.

1. Make it clear who the Enemy is

The “Enemy” is the single biggest thing the customer is battling against (Note: it's most commonly an injustice or entrenched ‘status quo’, sometimes an industry and rarely a single entity).

2. Make sure they're evil enough

Is it a common Enemy to both customers AND the brand, and is it evil enough to inspire the audience to make sacrifice something (such as their time, money, energy) in order to fight it?

3. Tell us what's at stake

Does it make it clear what unhappy or even disastrous outcome we are helping our audience, the people they care about, or the world as a whole to avoid?



Guide

Usually the brand and its people.

1. Make it clear why this brand is the best Guide

What can this brand – and only this brand – do to help the Hero win the day? How can we prove we've already conquered the challenge or developed the winning formula for the challenge the customer faces?

2. Articulate a philosophical point of view

What does it stand up for despite pressure not to? Is this belief important enough that customers AND employees would sacrifice something to defend it?

3. Set out a plan for success

What are you going to do from now? What is the path to success you're setting out for your customer?

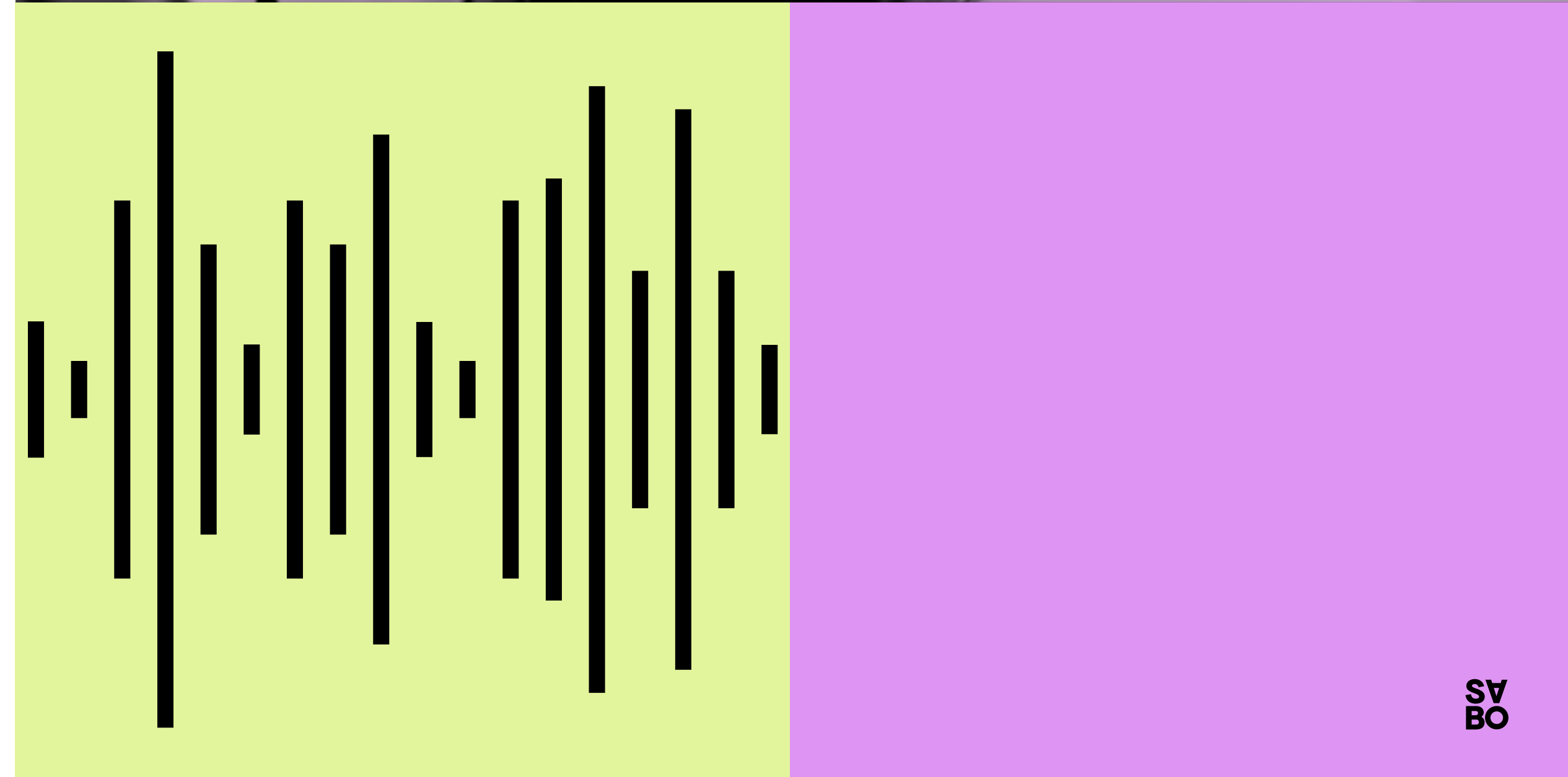
Nike Better World

Don't tell us what we can't do. Don't tell us not to dream big fat hairy audacious dreams, like making the world better through sport.

Sport is our passion. Sport inspires hope, instils discipline, reduces depression and disease and raises self-confidence, raises awareness rallies communities, defines nations, defies gravity and denies prejudice. Sport laughs in the face of racism, it flicks a towel on sexism's ass and kicks sand in the face of discrimination. It makes neck hairs stand to attention. Hell, it's even been known to stop wars. That's a pretty impressive resume. Sport, you're hired.

We won't rest until every living breathing person on this planet has access to it, and we won't stop making the best gear to propel humanity forward without wrecking our global playground in the process. We will do good with a vengeance.

And to all the cynics and the naysayers we're gonna make the world better for you anyway, because like sport we don't discriminate. We've made the world better, but we still want a better world.

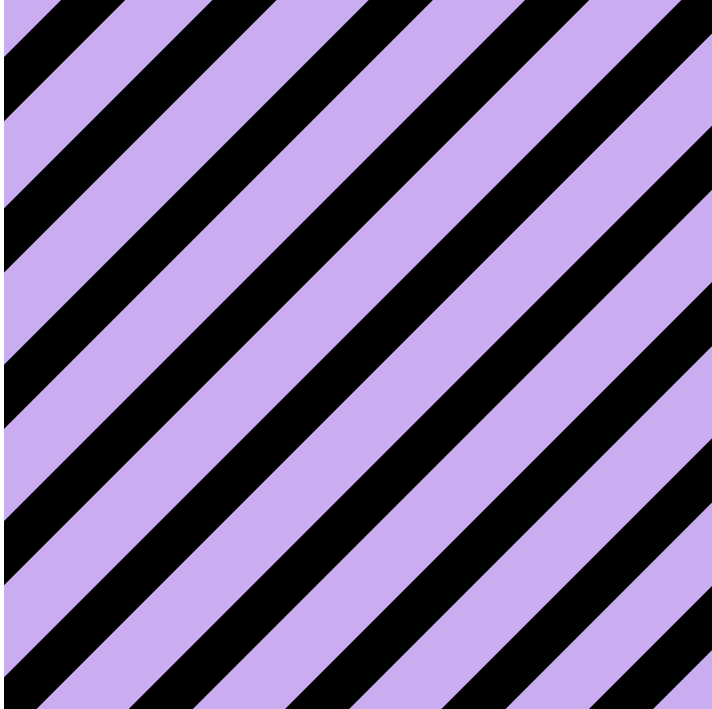


Characters in action:
Nike Better World



Hero
Usually the
end customer.

- 1. **Make it clear who the Hero is**
Everybody who is passionate about sport
- 2. **Answer their deeper need**
To do right by others
- 3. **Provide an ‘aspirational identity’**
An athlete and an activist



Enemy
Usually an
injustice,
or the ‘status
quo’.

- 1. **Make it clear who the Enemy is**
Injustice and conflict
- 2. **Make sure they’re evil enough**
Racism, sexism, war
- 3. **Tell us what’s at stake**
Without sport we’re more vulnerable to the world ills



Guide
Usually the
brand and
its people.

- 1. **Make it clear why this brand is the best Guide**
We’re most determined and we’ve already made the world better
- 2. **Articulate a philosophical point of view**
The world should be less prejudiced and more responsible
- 3. **Set out a plan for success**
Making the best gear, responsibly, for everybody

The ingredients of a powerful narrative

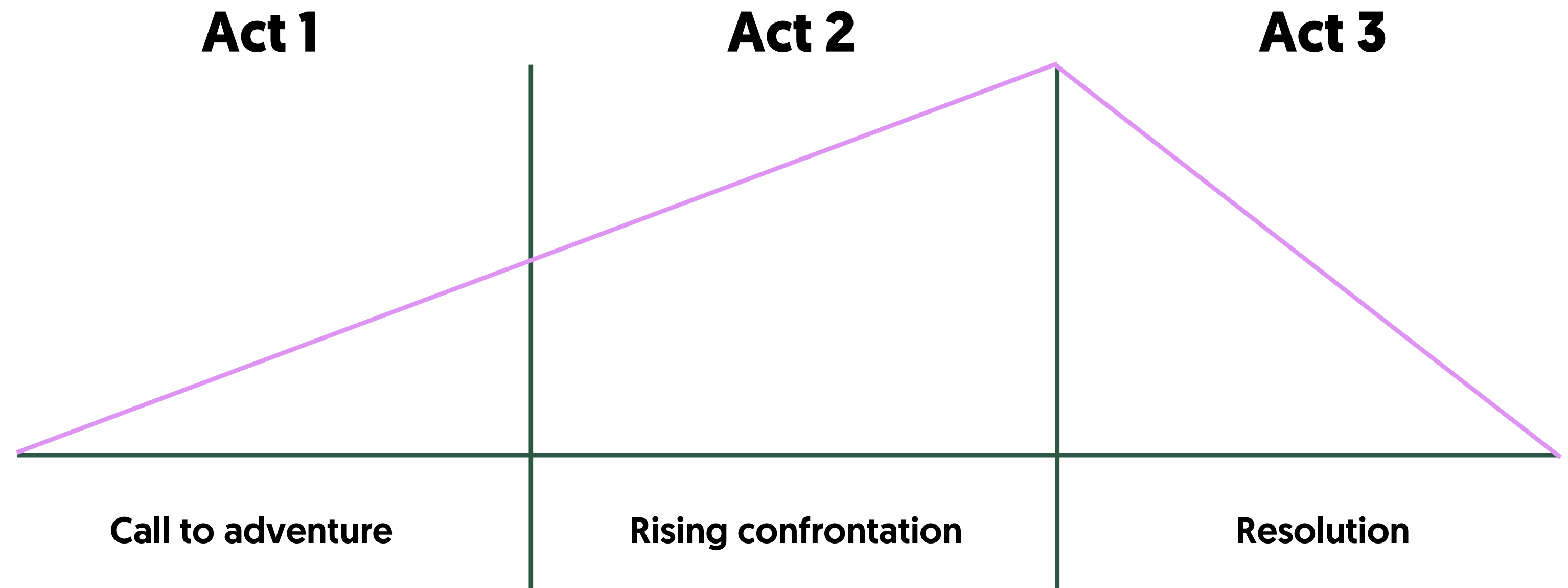
2. Structure

Like any story, a brand narrative needs a beginning, middle and end.

The '3 act structure' – seen throughout film and theatre – is a great place to start.

A basic 3 act structure might work as follows:

- 1. Call to adventure** (the opportunity or challenge that you are compelled to address)
- 2. Rising confrontation** (the obstacles or enemies you will encounter along the way)
- 3. Resolution** (where we discover the reason we will ultimately prevail)



2. Structure

Act 1: Call to adventure

An opportunity:

Making the world better

Act 2: Rising confrontation

The obstacles and enemies
we encounter along the way:

The world’s ills
[racism, sexism, war]

Act 3: Resolution

Where we discover the reason
we will ultimately prevail:

Our determination to do good

Nike Better World

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And to all the cynics and the naysayers we’re gonna make the world better for you anyway, because like sport we don’t discriminate. We’ve made the world better, but we still want a better world.

The ingredients of a powerful narrative

3. Plot

Like any good story, a narrative needs a plot.

Writers in other fields often talk about ‘the 7 basic plots’. These recur throughout literature, theatre and cinema, and they can be very helpful for business stories, too.

They are:

- I. Overcoming the monster
- II. Rags to riches
- III. The quest
- IV. Voyage and return
- V. Comedy
- VI. Tragedy
- VII. Rebirth

Different plots suit different objectives. Choosing the right one can help you make the impact you’re looking for.



3. Plot

I. Overcoming the monster



I. Overcoming the monster

Useful for

Uniting an organization against a common Enemy

Overview

This style of brand narrative calls on everyone connected to a brand to join together and defeat a ferocious monster, who stands in the way of a perfect world.

To work well, this structure depends on identifying a shared vision that all parties want to fight for, a monster they truly detest, and a genuine reason to believe they can defeat it. If any of these three things are lacking, the story loses its power to motivate. When they're present, this kind of story is an extraordinary unifier.

In Harley Davidson's classic manifesto, brand and customer join together to take on monsters like 'the system', and 'the man down here', ultimately 'riding off into the sunset' with their freedom intact.

Harley Davidson: Live By It

We believe in going our own way, no matter which way the rest of the world is going.

We believe in bucking the system, that's built to smash individuals like bugs on a windshield.

Some of us believe in the man upstairs. All of us believe in sticking it to the man down here.

We believe in the sky and we don't believe in the sunroof.

We believe in freedom. We believe in dust, tumbleweeds, buffalo mountain ranges and riding off into the sunset.

We believe in saddle bags and we we believe that cowboys had it right.

We believe in refusing to knuckle under to anyone.

We believe in wearing black because it doesn't show any dirt. Or weakness.

We believe if the world is going soft then we're not going along with it.

We believe in motorcycle rallies that last a week. We believe in roadside attractions, gas station hot dogs and finding out what's over the next hill.

We believe in rumbling engines, pistons the size of garbage cans and, tanks designed in 1936, freight train sized headlights, chrome and custom paint.

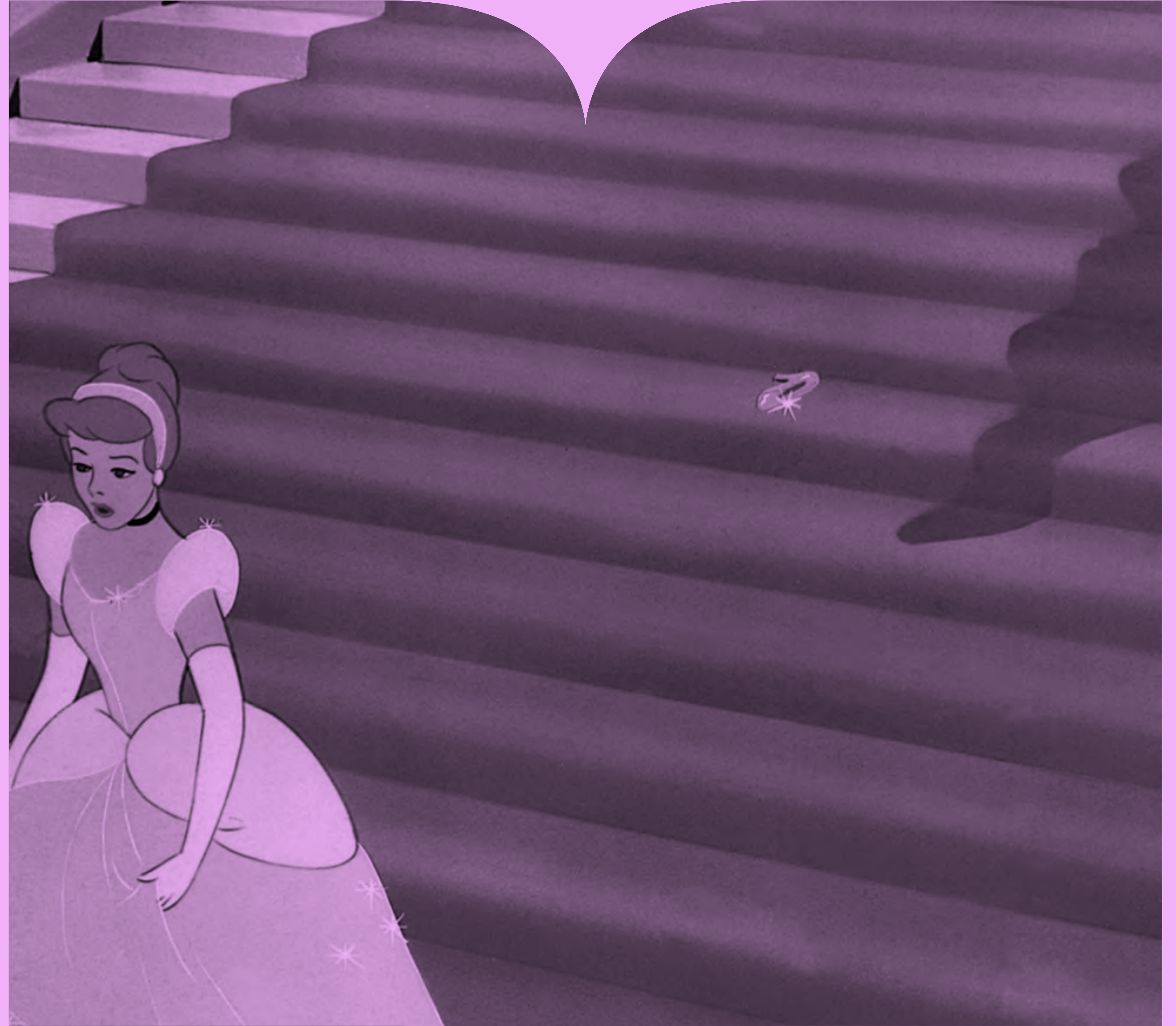
We believe in flames and skulls. We believe life is what you make it, and we make it one hell of a ride.

We believe the machine you sit on can tell the world exactly where you stand.

We don't care what everyone else believes.

Amen.

II. Rags to Riches



II. Rags to Riches

Useful for

Motivating people ahead of struggle

Overview

This type of narrative is especially useful when greater effort or sacrifice is necessary in order to achieve a result.

It sees the Hero trapped in a cruel, unjust and seemingly inescapable situation. That is, until the brand comes along with an escape plan, leading to a better life.

The success of this approach depends on persuading your audience that the ‘status quo’ is terrible enough to motivate an escape effort, and your escape route is credible.

Done well, it can fire people up for a struggle worth making.

In this example our Hero, a 12-year-old girl, is trapped by poverty. Her Guide – the brand and its supporters – has devised an escape route. It won’t be easy, but the reward for the struggle is a better life. For this girl, and millions of others.

Girl Effect: The Clock Is Ticking

We have a situation on our hands. And the clock is ticking.

When a girl turns 12 and lives in poverty her future is out of her control.

In the eyes of many, she’s a woman now. No, really she is.

She faces the reality of being married by the age of 14.

Pregnant by the time she’s 15.

And if she survives childbirth she might have to sell her body to support her family. Which puts her at risk for contracting and spreading HIV.

Not the life you imagined for a 12-year-old, right?

But the good news is, there is a solution.

Let’s rewind to her at 12. Happy and healthy. She visits a doctor regularly. She stays in school. Where she’s safe. She uses her education to earn a living.

Now, she’s calling the shots. And it looks something like this:

She can avoid HIV. She can marry and have children when she’s ready. And her children are healthy like she is. Now imagine this continuing for generation after generation.

You get the picture, right? 50 million 12-year-old-girls in poverty. Equal 50 million solutions. This is the power of the Girl Effect. That starts with a 12-year old girl. And impacts the world.

The clock is ticking.

III. The quest



III. The quest

Useful for

For inspiring your audience to aim high

Overview

In this plot type, the Hero is called on a mission to solve a problem too serious to ignore. Along the way, they encounter a series of obstacles which make the goal harder to reach than they expected.

This plot is useful for organisations who want to inspire their audiences to work harder or aim higher. By framing your demands as steps on the path to a higher goal, you send your audience on an inspiring mission.

In this example our Hero, the Patagonia customer, is called on a mission to fight climate change. With the help of the brand, they overcome various obstacles, like changing what they buy, and how much they buy. As a result, they fight the climate crisis while becoming a better person – the kind who ‘answers with action’.

Patagonia: Buy less, demand more

No longer can we assume the earth’s resources are limitless.

We wrote this in our first catalog in 1972.

Nearly 50 years later, it’s only gotten worse.

Today, the clothing industry contributes up to 10 percent of the pollution driving the climate crisis.

For as long as we’ve been in business, we’ve seen quality as an environmental issue.

That’s why we build clothes to endure. So you don’t have to buy new as often.

We make gear with recycled materials. We grow food and fibre the way nature intended. We promote safe and fair labor conditions for workers.

There are some things you can do too. When you want something new, ask yourself ‘do I really need it?’. Look for one product you can use in multiple ways. Repair what you wear out, and pass things down.

Demand recycled. Demand Fair Trade. Demand Organic.

Buy less, demand more.

Patagonia.

Answer with action.

IV. Voyage and return



IV. Voyage and return

Useful for

Reinforcing [or reinstating] your core values

Overview

In this plot type, the Hero has a strange encounter which takes them far away from home. Excitement follows, along with challenges and eventually, success. Finally, they return home, wiser for the experience.

Brand narratives that use this plot often take the reader on a ‘voyage’ through the brand’s history, before ‘returning’ to its place of origin.

This can be a great way to encourage an organisation to ‘reconnect with its roots’, and stay true to the values that made it a success.

In this example, the Walker family is called on a voyage, which leads to adventure. At the end of the narrative we return to the brand’s original formula for success – ‘fiery ambition’, ‘skill and intelligence’ – and are invited to continue in that spirit.

Johnnie Walker: “The Man Who Walked Around the World” (abbr.)

Here’s a true story about a young lad named John...one day he went for a walk. Now, this walk began when his father died.

Young John was smart enough to be lucky. His father’s farm, where he was born and raised, was sold and the proceeds used to open a grocers.

Back then, all grocers stocked a range of local single malts, but they could be a wee bit inconsistent. For John, that wasn’t good enough.

He began blending different malts together as a way of offering his customers a consistent, unique product.

Now this back room art quickly developed into a commercial proposition, and a very profitable one...the Walkers became the biggest name in a rapidly growing industry.

It was John’s grandsons, George and Alexander [who] developed the iconic red label and black label.

By 1920 Johnny’s walk had taken him through 120 countries. Celebrated by filmmakers, singers, songwriters, novelists, winning countless awards for quality and even being awarded the Royal Warrant by King George V.

So what would the farm-born Victorian grocer have thought of all this? He’d have loved it.

The family that followed [him] were possessed by a fiery ambition, with a skill and intelligence that match.

200 years later and Johnny Walker’s still walking and he’s not showing any signs of stopping.

V. Comedy



V. Comedy

Useful for

Releasing tension, bonding over shared experiences

Overview

This type of plot places the Hero in a sticky situation, and sees them encounter weirder and wackier problems until, through cunning or sheer luck, it all works out in the end.

It can be a powerful way to bond with an audience over problems we all encounter, or to release a bit of tension by owning up to a flaw in your product or category that everybody sees but you haven't addressed.

Humour is very difficult to do well. It relies on a writer who is not only highly skilled, but who also has an acute understanding of the audience, their lives, and their innermost thoughts about the brand and its category.

Krispy Kreme

“Donuts are bad for you”

Donuts are bad for you.

So are cream cakes, lie-ins and loud rock music.

So is sugar. If you take it in your tea, stop immediately. If you take two sugars in your tea, obviously you're trying to commit suicide and it's a cry for help. Don't do it.

Your life is precious.

Not drinking enough water is bad for you.

You must drink 6½ pints a day, or you'll get dehydrated and that's bad for you too. Don't drink too much though, that can be really bad for you. If you drink over 14 pints at once it makes you feel drunk. So don't drink too much water and drive.

TV is bad for you. Watching too much can cost you your friends. None at all and you've got nothing to talk to them about. Lack of exercise is bad for you. But getting addicted to gyms is bad for you too. Also, some gym towels aren't laundered properly and spread germs.

Germs are bad for you.

Stress is bad for you. Well, at least too much stress is bad for you. Not enough and you don't realize you're alive which is bad for you too.

The thing is, life and the living that is involved is bad for you. It must be, because it kills everyone in the end.

At Krispy Kreme, we think the key to life, by which we mean eating donuts, is balance.

Sure, if you eat them morning, noon, and night and they are brought directly to your armchair, then that would be bad.

But then if you've never felt the pleasure of eating a delicious fluffy original glazed doughnut hot off the line and, heaven forbid, you get struck by lightning, well surely that would be really bad. Really really bad.

In this example, we are the Hero, and we are in a sticky situation. Whatever choices we make, there's always a massive downside. These dilemmas get weirder and wackier until Krispy Kreme turns up with a cunning way to rethink donuts, and it all works out in the end. It is a classic example of 'bonding over shared experiences', and of 'releasing tension' surrounding a product.

VI. Tragedy



IV. Tragedy

Useful for

Provoking action with a severe warning

Overview

In this plot type we learn that our once-successful Hero has a fatal flaw, which ultimately proves their undoing.

As this plot ends in disaster, it's seldom used by brands. It should only be deployed when a business is in such profound and immediate danger that only the strongest possible warning will suffice.

To make this kind of narrative work, writers must brutally expose the flaws that threaten to destroy the brand.

In this famous speech to Nokia employees, CEO Stephen Elop placed Nokia at the heart of a tragic narrative, drawing a stark contrast between Nokia's past glories and its present-day failures, and revealing its fatal flaws. His objective was to issue the most severe warning he could, ahead of the presentation of a new strategy at a later date.

Nokia: “We are standing on a burning platform” (abbr.)

A man was working on an oil platform in the North Sea.

He woke up one night from a loud explosion, which suddenly set his entire oil platform on fire. He decided to jump.

In ordinary circumstances, the man would never consider plunging into icy waters. But these were not ordinary times.

We too, are standing on a “burning platform”.

While competitors poured flames on our market share, what happened at Nokia?

We fell behind, we missed big trends, and we lost time.

And the truly perplexing aspect is that we're not even fighting with the right weapons.

The battle of devices has now become a war of ecosystems.

Standard & Poor's informed that they will put our A long term and A-1 short term ratings on negative credit watch.

Consumer preference for Nokia declined worldwide.

We have lacked accountability and leadership.

We haven't been delivering innovation fast enough

We're not collaborating internally.

Nokia, our platform is burning.

VII. Rebirth



VII. Rebirth

Useful for

Turning a brand around

Overview

In this plot type, the central character discovers the error of their ways, accepts the challenge of improving themselves and their behaviour, and emerges a better person.

It can be a helpful vehicle for a brand in the process of a turnaround, providing the writer identifies and owns up to the specific reasons the brand has failed to meet customer needs, and the new approach it is committing to.

In this example, Carlsberg use a rebirth narrative to announce their brand turnaround. The brand reveals the errors of its ways (with honesty and precision), displaying a new attitude toward its customers, and revealing a changed approach to its product.

Carlsberg: “Probably not the best beer in the world”

‘Probably the best beer in the world.’

Once true, but today? Probably not.

Somewhere along the line, we lost out way.

We focused on brewing quantity, not quality.

We become one of the cheapest, not the best.

So, there was only one thing for it.

We had to create a better beer.

A new Carlsberg, that’s been completely rebrewed from head to hop.

The result?

A perfectly balanced Danish Pilsner with a crisper, fuller flavour than before.

Finally, a beer that lives up to its promise?

Probably.

The relationship between brand narrative and other brand elements



<div> <div> BUSINESS STRATEGY ARTICULATION Making the business's strategic objectives clear and compelling to all relevant stakeholders, especially those inside the organisation </div> <div> Organisational purpose statement, vision statement, mission statement, corporate values </div> </div>						
<div> <div> BRAND PORTFOLIO AND ARCHITECTURE STRATEGY Deciding the number and types of brand needed to reach an organisation's objectives </div> </div>						
<div> <div> BRAND POSITIONING Defining how the brand must be perceived for the business to reach its objectives <i>[key behaviour changes: purchase, invest, advocate, create]</i> </div> <div> Positioning statement, brand essence [a.k.a. 'strategic platform' or 'positioning idea'], brand narrative, brand personality </div> </div>					<div> <div> EMPLOYER VALUE PROPOSITION (EVP) Defining what you stand for, offer, and require as an employer <i>[key behaviour changes: apply, don't apply, align, stay]</i> </div> <div> EVP statement, essence, narrative, messaging </div> </div>	
<div> <div> BRAND NAMING Claiming or reinforcing the brand's position through its choice of name </div> </div>	<div> <div> VISUAL IDENTITY Claiming or reinforcing the brand's position through its look and feel </div> </div>	<div> <div> VERBAL IDENTITY Claiming or reinforcing the brand's position through its use of language </div> </div>	<div> <div> BRAND CAMPAIGN Claiming or reinforcing the brand's position through a series of ads or activations </div> </div>	<div> <div> CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE Claiming or reinforcing the brand's position through customer interaction </div> </div>	<div> <div> TALENT CAMPAIGN Claiming or reinforcing the EVP through a series of ads or activations </div> </div>	<div> <div> EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE Helping to realise the business strategy & EVP through employee interaction </div> </div>
<div> <div> BRAND POSITIONING </div> <div> SERVICE </div> <div> STRATEGIC DELIVERABLE </div> <div> COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORM </div> <div> COMMUNICATIONS APPLICATIONS </div> <div> EXPERIENCE PLATFORM </div> <div> EXPERIENCE APPLICATIONS </div> </div>	<div> <div> Visual identity platform or 'creative idea' Inspires and unifies all design applications <i>Expressed as a sentence or one liner</i> </div> </div>	<div> <div> Brand messaging and voice Inspires and unifies all written and spoken applications <i>Expressed as guidelines and examples</i> </div> </div>	<div> <div> Campaign platform or 'campaign idea' Inspires and unifies a campaign's elements and executions <i>Expressed as a short phrase</i> </div> </div>	<div> <div> Customer experience platform Inspires and unifies all signature experiences <i>Expressed as customer experience pillars and/or a short phrase</i> </div> </div>	<div> <div> Campaign platform or 'campaign idea' Inspires and unifies a campaign's elements and executions <i>Expressed as a short phrase</i> </div> </div>	<div> <div> Employee experience pillars Inspires and unifies a set of internal strategic initiatives <i>Expressed as a shared belief, behaviour, or 'mantra'</i> </div> </div>
	<div> Design applications, graphic device, logo, colour palette, motion principles, photography, illustration, brand tagline </div>	<div> Headline examples, internal comms examples, speeches, press release examples, etc. </div>	<div> Campaign applications including design, copywriting, campaign tagline, etc. [Can be customer, talent, or employee facing] </div>	<div> Signature brand experiences, customer service flourishes, hero products and services, key features in physical environments, etc. </div>	<div> Campaign applications including design, copywriting, campaign tagline, etc. [Can be customer, talent, or employee facing] </div>	<div> Employee engagement initiatives, events, rituals, internal initiatives, policy, codes of conduct, etc. </div>

Further reading

1. Building a story brand

By Donald Miller
HarperCollins (2017)

2. The Idea: The Seven Elements of a Viable Story for Screen, Stage or Fiction

By Erik Bork
Overfall Press (2018)

3. Into the Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them

By John Yorke
Penguin (2014)

4. The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories

By Christopher Booker
Continuum (2004)

5. The Hero With A Thousand Faces

By Joseph Campbell
Pantheon (1949)

Get in touch

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