

BACKSTORYTELLING



What's the Trend?

Organizations use the power of stories to share their heritage, mission, and reason for existing with audiences to earn loyalty and position themselves as desirable places to work.

One of the most famous advertising agencies in the world had a hundred-year-old secret.

Madison Avenue has been dominated by the same big ad agency names for decades: Ogilvy; Leo Burnett; Grey; Young & Rubicam (Y&R); J Walter Thompson (JWT); Mullen; Saatchi & Saatchi; and Wieden + Kennedy. All of these names have something in common: they pay homage to the men that founded the firms.

All of them, except for Grey.

Founded in 1917, Grey Advertising was one of the earliest advertising agencies, and the only agency *not* named after its founders. This was not out

of modesty. A film recently released by the brand reveals the truth in its opening voice-over:

“It’s 1917. New York is booming. Two young Jewish entrepreneurs, Lawrence Valenstein and Arthur Fatt, set up a company. But anti-Semitism is rife. Their names could cost them business. So they call it Grey, after the color of the wallpaper.”

It is a sad fact of history that the founders of what is today one of the largest agencies in the world justifiably feared that using their names would cost them clients. One hundred years later, the current team at Grey decided to temporarily change the firm’s name to celebrate the anniversary of its founding.

In the first quarter of 2017, Grey’s London office renamed itself Valenstein & Fatt for 100 days, and even gave its branding a complete makeover. They changed all the signage, the letterhead, and the website, and even trained the receptionist to answer the phone with the new agency name. The result of the effort was plenty of media attention and, more importantly, a powerful story to share with potential new recruits. This backstory offered a new reason to believe in the brand that was not reliant on the current clients or even their creative work. Instead, Grey used the power of *Backstorytelling* to take their own history and use it as a reason to inspire belief and position the agency as a desirable place to work.

When I first wrote about the *Backstorytelling* trend as part of my 2013 trend report, it was about more than brands telling stories as a key element of their marketing strategies. The key was to focus on the *back* part of *backstory*—using heritage, history, and the past to tell a better brand story and inspire belief.

Scandinavian Tweed and Turkish Cymbals

Røros Tweed is a renowned European textile company with an unusual backstory. The company was officially founded in 1940 and owes its existence to the generosity of a man named Peder Hiort.

Back in 1789, Hiort was director of the coppermine that employed a significant number of people in the tiny town of Røros. He died childless and

bequeathed his entire fortune to a foundation that offered training in textile production to the city's poor. Having to endure harsh Scandinavian winters, the people of Røros maintained their tradition of textile manufacturing, and today they have built a client list that includes the Emperor of Japan and Christian Dior.

That story is now a fundamental element of the brand's identity, featured prominently across their retail stores, printed materials, and website. The story inspires pride among employees and curiosity among travelers.

Another brand with a fascinating history is Zildjian, the world-famous cymbal makers. Zildjian was first established in Turkey as a manufacturer of quality cymbals in 1623, making it one of the oldest companies on Earth still operating today. The founding story of Zildjian starts with the tale of Avedis, a alchemist searching for gold. In the process, he accidentally discovered a mixture of metals that had exceptional musical properties and began to produce cymbals which soon became popular at royal ceremonies. The Sultan Osman II gave Avedis the title Zildjian, a combination of the Turkish words zil (cymbal), dji (maker), and -ian (son of).

In the generations since, the company has been handed down from father to eldest son. A feud between brothers Armand and Robert in 1981 led the latter to spin off a competitive cymbal brand, Sabian, but Zildjian has continued to dominate the industry.¹ In an ironic twist considering its father-son history, in 1999, Armand Zildjian named his daughter, Craigie, CEO of Zildjian. She is the first woman in the company's history to take on this role.

How Startups Can Win with Backstorytelling

There are many examples of brands with long histories who can turn back the clock and tell those powerful stories as a reason for consumers to engage with them. *Backstorytelling* is not only a trend for brands that were founded many years ago. It can also be a powerful way to introduce a startup or younger company through focusing more on the personality of the brand rather than the years it has been in existence.²

Fridababy is a perfect example of a younger company through the force of its personality. This is how their website summarizes what they stand for: “Fridababy is the brand that gets parents. That means you. We are not a lifestyle. Far from it. We are a solution-based brand. The 411 of parenting. The who-do-I-call-in-the-middle-of-the-night-cause-my-baby-won’t-stop-screaming brand.”

While other brands seem afraid to talk about the messier side of parenthood, Fridababy wants to be the brand that will gladly suffer through it all with you.

*“No other brands are this focused on being there for you
when it’s 3 a.m. and your hands are covered in baby shit.”*

CHELSEA HIRSCHHORN, CEO, Fridababy

The brand sells 15 specialty products including their most popular: the NoseFrida (a tube that lets you suck mucus out of your baby’s nostrils), the SnipperClipper (a newborn size nail clipper), and the ButtWasher (which helps keep toddler’s butts clean when toilet training). Each is a product that may seem slightly quirky, off-putting, or plain disgusting ... unless you happen to be a new parent.

Beautiful Stories and the Future of Cosmetics

In the beauty industry, these backstories are often told through the personal lens of an engaging *microinfluencer*, who builds an audience through personal content and videos.

Huda Kattan is fond of describing herself as “everyone’s beauty BFF.” In her case, that’s not too far from the truth. The 34-year-old social media personality who bears an uncanny resemblance to Kim Kardashian has more than 20 million followers on Instagram, has been named one of the Internet’s most influential people by *TIME* magazine, and owns a rapidly expanding beauty empire selling fake lashes and other makeup products under the brand Huda Beauty.

Based in Dubai, Kattan has been described by *The New York Times* as “the most influential beauty blogger in the world.” Keeping those fans engaged and connected with her is a full-time job. She spends more than four hours every day on social media, answers questions from customers on her blog, and stars in video tutorials demonstrating how to use her latest products.

There are dozens of other aspiring beauty bloggers who are candidly sharing their own backstories, winning loyal fans, and converting them into customers by launching their own lines of beauty products. They charismatically share their frustrations with current beauty products and offer up a solution to a niche problem born from experimentation. These charismatic founders are finding that big cosmetic companies are hungry for a little of that same attention.

In the past year, there were 52 acquisitions in the beauty and personal-care industry (the most in a decade).³ The majority of these smaller players were not acquired solely for their products. Instead, they each have value from their large fan base, who remain loyal because of the power of their microinfluencers’ backstories.

This same principle has driven one of the world’s fastest-growing European tourist destinations to create some interesting content and experiences of their own.

How to Avoid Hot Tub Awkwardness In Iceland

If you ever needed a tutorial on how to avoid hot tub–related awkwardness, you might want to start by asking an Icelander. Iceland is in the midst a tourism boom, having quadrupled their annual visitor counts over the past several years.⁴ While good for the economy, the influx raises some natural questions about resources and how to protect the unspoiled beauty that many travelers seek when they visit the country.

One way is to convince visitors to travel to unexpected destinations within Iceland instead of sticking to—and possibly spoiling—the most popular natural wonders. To do so, Iceland’s tourism board created the Iceland Academy, a video series hosted by locals that teach people “How to Eat Like an Icelander,” or tell

a personal history about their experience in the country through “A Beginner’s Guide to Icelandic Sagas.” And they included the uniquely Icelandic guide titled, “How to Avoid Hot Tub Awkwardness.”

The island nation is not new to this strategy. Back in 2015, the “Promote Iceland” campaign enlisted the help of seven locals, all of whom shared the same popular name (named Guðmundur or Guðmunda), answering questions about Iceland on social media in real time, offering the “world’s first human search engine.”

These inventive ideas help Iceland to share its story and culture in a beautifully authentic way. They offer travelers a real sense of what it might be like to visit there—and effectively inspire more of them to take the trip in the future.

Making the Backstory Tangible

Earlier this year, Airbnb launched a travel magazine to fill a gap that CEO Brian Chesky identified in the market. As Chesky recalls, “We looked at the existing travel magazines and noticed that most had no people in them. We found that strange, because in our experience the real magic of travel comes from meeting and connecting with people. We wanted a magazine that would celebrate that kind of traveling.”⁵

In addition to featuring destinations, *Airbnbmag* tells the story of why Airbnb exists, features great places to stay through the platform, and serves to unite their community of hosts by featuring their stories in the publication.

The effort technically might be described as content marketing, but the best storytelling initiatives rarely feel like some sort of artfully disguised brand promotion. Instead they feel real.



Backstories Through Filmmakers

Last year, luxury fashion brand Hermès launched a film called *La Fabrique*

de la Soie to offer consumers an artfully produced behind-the-scenes look at the history of how the company makes silk garments. The film used beautiful footage and a compelling soundtrack to take consumers to a place that most could never have access to in real life.

In the book last year, I shared the story of 600-year-old Japanese soy sauce brand Kikkoman, which engaged award-winning documentary director Lucy Walker to produce a brand film called “Make Haste Slowly.” It took consumers inside the saga and history of how soy sauce has been made for centuries. It was an example that year of the *Preserved Past* trend, which is closely linked with this trend of *Backstorytelling*.

To engage consumers, the Kikkoman film starts with the powerful opening line: “It was started by a woman in a time when women didn’t start companies.” Until that film, I never cared much about what brand of soy sauce I would buy. After seeing it, Kikkoman became my brand of choice. Will one well-produced film be enough to win over any consumer? Most likely not.

But the power of *Backstorytelling* is that it can help you humanize a brand and win over some consumers by giving them a reason to see you differently than the competition.

India’s Favorite Beer

In just two years, Bira 91 has become one of India’s most popular beer brands.

When creating the company, the one thing Indian entrepreneur Ankur Jain knew about beer in India was that people mainly bought and consumed it to get drunk. The country’s top-selling beers were relatively boring imported brands, and the culture of microbreweries he had seen when living in Brooklyn, New York, was nonexistent in India.

So he created it. In 2015, Bira 91 launched with a Belgian-style white ale and a blonde lager that were produced in Belgium and imported into India. Speaking about his initial challenge to build the brand, Jain says, “There was skepticism at every level. People said Indians would never want to drink

premium brands. People are suddenly realizing this could be an interesting category. There is now a huge chunk of the population that will pay more for better beer.”

Today, the beer is created using locally sourced wheat and aromatic coriander from Indian farms, and Jain tells a much different story to try and help the brand expand beyond India. Embracing his heritage as an Indian, Jain believes that his creation can win: “People just want unpretentious beers that are flavorful. That void could be filled up by Bira.”⁶

New Columbia Distillers is another ambitious startup trying to tell a compelling backstory. The DC-based spirits maker owns the first legal distillery in the District and makes Green Hat Gin, a popular small-batch liquor. The name of the gin is inspired by a bootlegger named George Cassiday, who supplied alcohol to members of Congress during the Prohibition in the 1920s. When Cassiday was eventually caught, he was arrested while wearing his signature green felt hat, which had earned him the nickname, “the Man in the Green Hat.” Today, the story of the gin is linked to that historical tale and offers an interesting backstory that people can share with others.

Why It Matters

There are many types of backstories. Some are deeply personal and human, like those of beauty bloggers connecting with their audiences directly. Others are professionally produced and told through artfully shot documentary films like the film, *from Hermes*. Others are printed on the back of packaging to share a slightly quirky story that explains an odd choice of brand name, like Green Hat Gin.

The power of *Backstorytelling* comes from the impact these stories can have in the race to stand out from competitors. The companies that do manage to focus on story will be leaps and bounds ahead of the others.

How to Use This Trend

- ✓ **Be who you are.** This was one of the lessons that GE's chief marketing officer Linda Boff shared in a session I led a few months ago. Her point was that every company has a natural origin story and the problem sometimes is that we try too hard to reinvent ourselves instead of embracing who we are. GE, for example, is a company filled with engineers who make complex products. Instead of trying to dumb them down, GE engages in storytelling that lets you appreciate the wonder of how everything from airplane turbines to hospital scanners even work in the first place.
- ✓ **Use stories when onboarding new employees.** We tend to think the keepers of our stories must be the people who have been at the company the longest. The truth is, sometimes your newest team members can be the most enthusiastic—if you give them a chance. Their experience with the company is fresh and they don't have the same preconceived notions as other workers. As a result, a great onboarding program can help to shape their experience and knowledge about the company and help them learn the stories that they can later retell and live by. This shared experience also fosters a community, giving employees an easy way to connect with future new hires.