

# Branding narratives from IBM and Cisco

## *Developing marketing strategies in B2B markets*

### Review

One of the recurring themes in modern day marketing practice is the notion of a narrative. Indeed, it is difficult for any marketing presentation or pitch to go much beyond 60 seconds before storytelling is mentioned as a way to engage customers or build brand value. There is, of course, a good reason for this, as creating and developing a narrative arc will engender longer term interest in a product or service with the consumer. However, aside from the fact that talking up a narrative is starting to become a little bit clichéd, often the key ingredient from the story is missed: the ending.

Every story has a good ending, right? And by ending, in the context of branding that should mean return on investment for whatever fancy, expensive marketing activity is being pushed. Some of the most headline-grabbing narratives in marketing history may have caused a stir and raised the profile of brands, but at the end of the day they have not increased sales. Or worse, sales have increased but the firm behind the brand has no idea how much they have made. In other words, for a narrative arc to work, the pot at the end of that particular rainbow needs to be measurably bigger than it was at the start.

### A to Z of B2B

In a business-to-business (B2B) selling environment, measuring success of storytelling techniques for brands should in theory be easier. B2B sales are traditionally more direct, as they are often based on contracts, with a smaller, more defined audience without some of the randomness and noise produced by business-to-consumer (B2C) markets. Understanding narrative techniques in B2B markets is the focus of the study by [Bonnin and Rodriguez \(2019\)](#) in their article "The narrative strategies of B2B technology brands". In it, the authors study the impact of narratives on B2B audiences from two of the leaders in the digital space – IBM and Cisco.

The background of the article is a desire to uncover the "secret" of narratives and how B2B narratives are structured and component parts assembled using some of the biggest players in the technology sector. In terms of theory, it has long been acknowledged that the power of narratives lie in their ability to enable people to make sense of the world, and the authors distinguish this representation to a story, which is the actual events that make up the narrative as they are represented. More specifically, they also describe the notions of a metanarrative – a set of narratives that make up an overarching narrative – and the notion of transmedia – stories or narratives that are disseminated across multiple media platforms. These two concepts are necessary to understand the full use of narratives for major organizations such as IBM and Cisco, and the inherent complexity contained within these activities.

## IBM and Cisco

Using the two tech giants as case studies, with additional interviews with senior managers, the authors looked at major marketing activity between 2012 and 2016, with both companies pushing cutting edge developments to wide groups of stakeholders.

*IBM:* Its marketing case study was based around the utilization of Watson, its supercomputer that has a multitude of potential applications based on its phenomenal computing power. It's metanarrative centered around Watson wanting to "collaborate with humans" to solve their problems.

*Cisco:* Its case study was based around the company's development of solutions related to the Internet of Things (IoT) which it termed the "Internet of Everything". It's metanarrative was similar to that of IBM's, focusing on humanity's problems and how it could enable entities – human and non-human – to communicate with each other and create "a brighter future".

Each metanarrative was made up with a number of specific stories and narratives that explained the wider themes for each company. For example, IBM created a video of how Watson had helped Honda manufacture new cars, while Cisco had a video showing how the city of Barcelona was using the IoT to improve the lives of its citizens. As well as videos, other media employed included public speeches, documents, styles (eg science fiction and humor) and even performing art.

## Glimpse of the future

The upshot of all this work by IBM and Cisco was to present a holistic, unified vision of a central theme of their current and future solutions for key stakeholders. Looking at these marketing and strategic activities in more depth, the authors also identified that there were many, many smaller stories used to flesh out the metanarrative, and that these stories were created and recreated again and again across many different forms of media. What was perhaps surprising given the complexity and scope of these ambitions was that for both firms, the metanarratives were consistent and the causal links established in the metanarrative held firms across all smaller stories and media representations.

Looking even deeper, the authors also identified other consistencies, such as the presence of sociocultural myths, which were adhered to in both cases to further engage with stakeholder expectations of the brands and their stories. Indeed, so strong were metanarratives, the authors believed they provided the "glue" for brands, which has been recently explored as some scholars question what counts as a brand when they have so many different representations and "voices" across multiple platforms and channels.

One question does remain, however, and that is the contribution of metanarratives to the bottom line. This age-old problem with marketing activities is no nearer a solution with the exploration of metanarratives, although they do seem to cover every other base for organizations. Indeed, the authors recommend that smaller firms, which may not have spent

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too much time worrying about storytelling, should embark on developing a “metanarrative strategy”. They identify the technology sector as one which would in particular favor this approach, which would see a firm identify key characters among stakeholders and a causal link to cement a metanarrative, plan out how it would vary through different stories, identify counter narratives to preempt any problems, and ensure that the metanarrative itself can incorporate other discourses aside from the main one.

### Comment

The article “The narrative strategies of B2B technology brands” by [Bonnin and Rodriguez \(2019\)](#) provides a unique insight into the workings of some of the biggest marketing operations in the technology sector. What is incredible is the level of detail and consistency that both firms show in their storytelling, which provide both inspiration and a formula for others to follow.

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Artificial intelligence,  
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### Reference

Bonnin, G. and Rodriguez, M.A. (2019), “The narrative strategies of B2B technology brands”, *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-03-2019-0112>

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