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PERSPECTIVES ON STORYTELLING FOR RETAIL





The magic begins with the story. By now, this statement has been made so many times, that it has resonated beyond its origins in traditional story-based industries, such as entertainment, leisure, attractions and culture. However, while the connection point from character, plot and other narrative elements in the theme park experience, the game and the movie is well-established, this is not always the case with other industries, such as retail. What is it exactly that comes after the story, and what is the story all about? Magic is great, but what exactly is it, and how does it unfold? The same goes for the story. As the power of the story and the value of the experience in combination is widely recognised as crucial points of lasting connection with customers, it seems like everywhere we turn, we find storytellers and storyteller services lined up beside the experience designers. But, for retail specifically, what is story? *What is magic?*

Relevance Is Required

Neither of them is just one thing, and no one solution or recipe will match the need of every retail space or brand out there. Finding your story and your magic is a question of perspective that combines the context, challenges and opportunities that are relevant to you and your relationship with your customers and stakeholders. That is why I do not subscribe to the retail leisure solutions that are best described as fun-in-a-box, no matter how strong the IP, design or technology is. These are solutions, where the leisure experience begins at the entrance to the secluded experience area and ends at its exit. It does not take the full context of the total retail space, experience and audience composition into consideration, and really does nothing to bind the retail space experience and together. Are you considering VR? What if your strongest draw is young children, too young to use VR? This is just one example of a worthwhile consideration, as you want to make certain you get the most out of your investment. One solution does not fit all. Period.

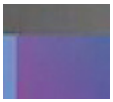
Perspective And Multiplicity

One way of creating great dynamics in storytelling is through the use of different perspectives or storylines. Multiple views enrich the story and even sometimes being able to read the thoughts of the hero, the villain, the helper and others. At the same time, as the story unfolds, we get to

follow different storylines that are either connected or will have some characters venture off on their own, as independent, but character- and world-building subplots, as you will often see in television series.

We can use the same kind of dynamics to explore perspectives in storytelling for retail. At AdventureLAB, we work with Integrated Storytelling, and part of this is creating connection points across time and space with the audience. The full story is a combination of what they have experienced across different platforms and at various locations; the story of a space begins before you go there, and it continues long after, all of which can be used to create attention and retention. Alternatively, when a brand is not delivering as expected, can be a social media deathtrap when not monitored or appropriately handled.

The following examples below show different perspectives to your retail story, which can be combined in a multitude of ways. That is another important consideration when giving your story air to live and breathe and support your brand; it is not a single effort or in other words a silver bullet, that will make everything work right away with the push of a single button. Just as is the case with any great story, yours consist of a multitude of elements that are presented over time manifested as events, messages and the stories you do not tell yourself but are being told about you.



SETTING THE SCENE FOR RETAIL STORYTELLING



Before we dive into the perspectives, let's set the scene. This is not necessarily entirely reflective of your situation, but it is certainly relevant to a long list of retail professionals I have had the pleasure of talking to and working with. In their world, some vital elements of narrative structures can be outlined as follows:

✓ **The HERO:** If you want to create compelling story-based experiences, this is not you or your brand. This is your audience, which often is your customers, but depending on perspective, can be your team.

✓ **The VILLAIN:** In the case of current-day retail, the threat is genuine; the ultimate price to pay is that of stores that shut down and result in abandoned malls. It is easy to proclaim the internet the villain.

However, in today's world of digital-physical hybrids, merely calling out online is too easy. The villain may rather be a concept, such as the lack of relevance of specific physical retail spaces to the people that we need to get to come to visit.

✓ **The HELPER:** This is a better spot in which to position your brand in, than that of the hero. If you claim the hero spot, you might get in the way of the audience being the hero, and they, all at times, have a lead role in their own lives. Hearing of someone who talks about their own heroism constantly can be rather tiring and doubt-inducing (remember Gilderoy Lockheart from Harry Potter, anyone?). On the other hand, who wouldn't want to befriend someone who can make them the hero?

✓ **The SCENE:** The scene is actually a multi-dimensional one, representing different touchpoints across both time and space. It is not just the store or the retail space. It is what comes before the key retail experience, what happens simultaneously when it unfolds and what follows. Your whole scene includes the message that made people come, giving them a reason to why they should be here, what transpires while they expect you to fulfil that promise and their reaction afterwards, be it on location, in person or online.

✓ **The STORY OF US:** Shopping is a social activity, and the story that we formulate ourselves within our hearts and brains is heavily influenced by it being part of a narrative of our interrelationships. The story of space is the story of the people that inhabit or visit them,

and the narrative of the retail space is not any different. The story of us is the story about memories we create together, and sometimes, a retail space becomes the canvas for when we picked up something for our home, a new dress for a special occasion or a cup of coffee over which we confided in each other. All memorable moments that link us together, and in turn, connects us to the space where they took place.

✓ **The COMMUNITY CONNECTION :** Retail spaces have an essential and impactful connection to communities. Without proper retail offerings, a community will wither away, often beginning with the symptom of house prices dropping. For every mile you have to drive to shop for even the most common everyday things, the lifespan of a neighbourhood shortens. What role does retail play in your area, and are you doing enough to create or share the story of the valuable connection between people, spaces and community?

✓ **The HISTORY OF SPACE:** A retail space may be in a location that holds a rich history, one that can be used for themed concepts and events. It may be the history that precedes retail, or history that evolved along with the retail space. Some retail spaces have been around long enough to have their own rich history but in the spirit of retail looking and moving forward, finding innovative ways to create connections to that which has been is often not on the agenda. So because of this, some opportunities for taking ownership of a locally connected storyline is not only passed by, it is often never discovered.

✓ **The HISTORY OF BRANDS:**

Some brands have been with us for so long, that by now, they are part of our shared story, sometimes as props in the Stories Of Us mentioned above. Their value as a brand story surpasses that of the constructed marketing message, because they are truthful reports, and it is really challenging to take over your history, as long as you claim and maintain ownership of it, and put it to good use.

✓ **The STORY OF CREATION:**

Taking part and playing a role in the creation of something is highly memorable, and it changes the role of the audience - even if just slightly - from consumer to co-creator. Many know of the online custom-building features presented by brands such as Nike, but creation can happen beyond the screen as well. The shop can be a physical place for creation, even if limited, and lifestyle

boutiques can benefit hugely from the realisation that what they sell are empowering people to alter their homes and thus, in any way, big or small, create their own habitat.

✓ **The STORY OF PEOPLE:**

Brands today are personified by people, be it Tim Cook, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos or that nice person or couple that has the shop you frequently visit. When you enter a retail space, you immerse yourself in a brand, whether it is that of the space or that of a particular store. Your team are not just representative of your brand, they are an integrated part of the brand experience, and their efforts and stories can be as worthwhile as any story about the founder. Any business is about people, and how people meet and interact in a retail space is pivotal to its success and the stories that follow.

Please note that none of these story perspectives has the typical retail communication elements of price or product features to them. That is not because these are necessarily not useful for marketing and creating footfall, but because they are simply not of high value to good storytelling. They can play a part, sure, but price does not generate the kind of connection that ensures loyalty and features are hardly essential before they manifest themselves as benefits and changes in one's own life. Still, focusing on them is a die-hard habit, that can put the brakes on the development of a great storyline, so I would suggest that you rather leave them be to part of your tactical sales marketing efforts.

APPLICATION AND EXPERIENCE

Once you have explored and defined what story perspectives are relevant to create and maintain a connection between you and your customers, it can and should be applied in different ways. You could want to show and tell your story again and again in a multitude of ways. Merely putting it out there once and for all on the page of a website is just the tip of the iceberg of the possibilities with your story, as you take it from words to visuals to experience and beyond. Your story is more than something you tell; it is something that you live and let people live as well. This can be done in a multitude of ways. On our part at AdventureLAB, we have worked with and participated in research on whether storytelling and experience can go hand in hand to create interest and traffic. The short answer is, yes it can. The longer explanation is that if you want to create something like a mission-based story that reveals its content gradually as people explore it, it has to be relevant and connected to the physical points that connect the story with the audience. Also, one has to be very aware of a designing a logic, non-disturbing shift in modality; the timing for making a shift from audience to shop visitor to customer has to be spot on to not become forced and disruptive. Finally, for this kind of Integrated Storytelling experience to be successful to retailer and customer alike, integration and collaboration are essential. When it works best, the team in the shop has a role in the interactive storyline compared to being utterly void of knowledge of what is going on and what to do, when someone exploring your story approaches you for something else

other than a product-related question. The magic does indeed begin with the story. If you take the time to explore what makes most sense to both you, your team and your customers in both terms of story and experience, you will gain benefits all across the line as you provide an answer to why people should care about you, visit your space and come back, as you claim a unique position in the new world of retail. ■



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