

Ready! Fire! Aim!

Before we jump into social media, let's stop, pause, and think about our story.

A few years back, I went to an innovation conference at the headquarters of Patagonia Clothing in Ventura, California.

While we were there, we all did a company tour. Our guide was Chip Bell.

Chip personified California cool. If you referenced 'laid back' in the dictionary, you'd probably see Chip's picture. He looked and spoke like The Dude in *The Big Lebowski*. All that was missing were the sunglasses, the bathrobe and the White Russian.

Welcome to Patagonia, dudes. Hope you're feeling awesome.

One of the first places Chip took us was the materials research department. While he was describing how they invented new stuff, one of his colleagues hollered 'Hey Chip, your disk is ready' and threw Chip a Frisbee. Chip caught it, and was *super, super stoked, dude*.

Why the fuss, I wondered out loud? It was a...Frisbee.

"Dude, this Frisbee is made with 100% sustainable stuff." Yeah Chip, but still – it's a *Frisbee*.

Then, the person who threw the Frisbee explained why this was a big deal. Chip was 11 time freestyle Frisbee world champion. Chip rolled his eyes in embarrassment while his friend shared this bit of info. It was like his mom was telling the world what a great flute player he was or how smart he looked in his Sunday suit.

We were floored. Our tour guide was the 11 time world freestyle Frisbee champion.

The tour continued.

A short while later, Chip took us down the famous Patagonia surfboard staircase, where he talked about the company's official 'Let my people surf' policy. That is, *"If the waves are up, everyone at Patagonia can grab their board and go surf. The work can wait, dude."*

I asked Chip if he was a surfer. Stupid question, really.

"Dude, I run a surf school when I'm not at Patagonia. I teach special needs kids to surf. They're awesome, dude!"

Chip Bell. Tour guide, world Frisbee champion, entrepreneur, surfer with a heart of gold.

Who was this guy? And with his credentials, *what exactly did he do* at Patagonia? We were all very, very curious.

I imagined he was head of sustainability, or innovation. Other folks thought maybe he ran the PR division.

Wrong, wrong and wrong.

Chip took us back to his desk. The front desk. He was the receptionist.

We were, to put it mildly, surprised.

It was later that day I heard another Chip story. This one really put the icing on the cake.

Turns out, a few years ago, Patagonia was looking for a new President. Being Patagonia, though, they decided to get their candidates from inside the company and vote.

Chip came in...second.

Outsiders might say that's ridiculous. Chip Bell, president? No way!

Granted, his grasp of complex management theory may not have been up to snuff. But they have people for that. He would've made a fine president.

My thinking is, though, Chip would've been wasted as President. He had a much more important job.

Chip was the soul of Patagonia. When you met him, you met the company. You knew in an instant how they thought, felt, what their priorities were. Name a president of a company, apart from Steve Jobs or Richard Branson, you could say *that* about.

So that's my story about Chip.

I love a good story. Everybody does. Much better than a boring speech.

Thing is, if you liked listening to it as much as I liked telling it, I bet you'll share it with a few friends. Which makes it relevant to a social media conference. You, my friends, have just witnessed social media in action. We're kicking social media old school here.

But this story has even deeper relevance. It gets to the heart of what I want to talk about today.

The power of stories in building brands.

Seth Godin said *brands are a collection of expectations*. While I like that definition, I'd add *great brands are a collection of stories*.

You see, stories bring people together around an idea. They create a wonderful affinity – *I like this story of Chip Bell. If you like it, we'll probably like each other. And you'll probably like Patagonia, too.*

Do you see what I just slipped in there? The company. I've managed to take the magic of a good story, and hitch it to something that isn't even alive. A corporation. I've given that corporation human emotion and power.

That's a neat trick. And it's hard to pull off with any credibility. Not every brand can do this.

Umair Haque, who runs Havas Media, one of the most influential advertising groups in the world, estimated that 70% of the brands today could disappear without any of us missing them. No good stories have been told about those brands. There would be no stories to remember them by.

Is your brand like Patagonia? Do people tell wonderful stories about you? Or is your brand one of those that nobody would miss if you disappeared tomorrow?

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To bring us back, I was supposed to talk to you about how to build brands *with social media*. Problem is, I don't think that's possible. I believe the only way to build great brands is *with great stories*.

Stories are *not* social media.

They're not print ads, either. Or TV commercials, or websites, or even ads on toilet paper.

Those things are tactics. Ways to communicate. Like a pencil and piece of paper.

Increasingly, this point seems to be lost on us.

Maybe it's because technology is like a shiny new thing. Like fish, we love shiny new things.

If you think about it, it's hard to beat social media in the shiny new thing department. With no real effort, social media lets us communicate with the *world* in the *blink of an eye*. *Effortlessly*.

Makes stories look pretty old-fashioned. And it makes coming up with stories look hard.

Truth is, coming up with stories *is* hard. Ask any writer.

Good stories often take a long time to write. Sometimes, hundreds of years.

It's true. Aesop, the creator of the famous fables, lived in 500 BC. His fables, however, were first *written down* in 200 BC, 300 years after he died. In those 300 years, they were passed along, retold, crafted, tweaked, edited, by generations.

Imagine coming up with a story, and being told by your editor that you could expect the final draft in 300 years.

What would Stephen King say?

Another thing, some of the greatest stories aren't even created by a single author. This ups the degree of difficulty to an insane level.

Think of the Bible. A massive collection, hundreds of stories, no doubt authored, edited, tweaked, by thousands of people. Talk about complicated. Imagine being in charge of the workflow for that project. Makes designing a digital campaign look fairly simple, I'd say.

My point is not that stories are impossible to create. But they do take time, inspiration, reflection. The sort of thing that requires you shut off the computer and take a walk, at the very least.

That's an effort fewer and fewer of us want to make.

We just want to jump to tactics and forget that whole story headache.

And bit by bit, we've come to believe that stories aren't that important. They're...*content*.

I remember when I tried Search Engine Marketing for the first time, some years ago. The specialist I was working with told me he'd found all the keywords that would get me the most hits. All I had to do was add content around them.

"Content? I said. What do you mean, content?"

"You know, words."

"The story, you mean?"

"Yeah, that kind of stuff."

The story, the essence of my company, had been reduced to 'stuff'. Preferably 140 characters or less, thank you. No big deal.

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This perspective doesn't help us. In fact, it hurts us.

And it isn't just the stories that are suffering. It's our lack of patience, our inability to sit back, think, and just let ideas flow. We're getting out of practice.

And it shows.

In a recent [BusinessInsider story](#), senior correspondent Alyson Shontell listed the top social media mistakes most businesses make. The biggest ones were...

- Thinking it's a sprint instead of a marathon,
- Not having a plan or strategy,
- Talking too much and not listening enough,
- Spending too much time on self-promotion,
- Expecting social media to do all the work,
- Not understanding it's all about relationship building,
- Getting on social media because everyone else is.

How does this reflect back on us? Makes us look like we have the attention span of a squirrel. We're shallow, disorganized, egocentric - like that guy at every conference who shoves a business card in your face before you even say hello. "Hey, how are you? Here's what I do. What'd you say your name was? Gotta go."

We're unwilling to invest in crafting a compelling story, or listening to our customers' stories. We're just pushing for the sale, baby.

President Andrew Jackson said. "Take time to deliberate. But when the time for action arrives, stop thinking and go." We have, as a culture, *forgotten to deliberate*. So when the time for action comes, we screw it up.

That brings me to the final social media blunder Alyson Shontell talks about.

- Not measuring the true cost of social.

Sure, social is free. It's one of the wonderful things that makes it so shiny.

But how much does it cost to send messages that people don't care about, or don't want to hear? Imagine hiring somebody to just write ads that nobody will ever pay attention to? Would you invest in that?

And then there's this. What did it cost for Kenneth Cole to send out this tweet during the Iraq war? Or this one during the Egyptian revolution? It took a mountain of PR time and money to undo this stupidity and lack of thinking.

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So we've established that stories are great for brands, but hard to do. And engaging in social media might be easy, but makes us look bad if we don't have our story straight.

Now, I'm going to let you in on a little shortcut.

This is something I do with virtually all my clients who want to really get to the heart of their story, without, like Aesop, waiting for 300 hundred years of editing.

First, *listen*.

My mentor Ron Woodall helped build one of the greatest ad agencies in Canada. I was lucky enough to be working there, so I saw him do it.

It was simple.

He came into our office, sat down with a piece of paper, and said "So?".

This made us so nervous, we just started blabbing to fill the dead air. We told him what we loved, hated, the story of how we got there, everything. All he had to do was write. And write. And write.

When he finished his interviews with all 100 or so employees, he went to the president of the company, Frank Palmer and said "This is your brand. If you don't like it, don't blame me. It's what everyone working here thinks." Then he went for a nap.

Lesson: do the research thoroughly, and the story starts to tell itself.

So that's the first part. Listen.

The second part is equally simple. *Think*.

Specifically, think about all the bits from all the stories from all the people you've interviewed that are the same.

These common elements are, I bet, the essence of your brand story.

You think I'm nuts? Think about the bible. The bible has a very simple brand story. It goes like this.

Play nice in the sandbox.

How do you get to that simple essence? It's in every one of the hundreds of stories in the bible. The one theme that binds them.

So I've said building a great brand story comes down to listening, distilling out the common themes.

Now comes the last part. Hang them together, and try them out on a bunch of people.

Most of you are familiar with tech. You've all heard of MVP, or minimum viable product.

Your stories, and the essence you've distilled, is your MVP.

Go to a few of your friends, buy them a drink, and see what they think of your MVP.

If you're onto something, they'll do this (lean forward).

If you're not, they'll do this (lean backward, cross arms).

I'd suggest that if you try this often enough, throwing out the stuff people don't respond to (lean back) and including more they do like, (lean forward), you're well on your way to crafting a very effective story.

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So what happens when you really nail it?

I want to show you a video clip. It's actually a scene from Henry V by Shakespeare.

In this scene, Henry's army is outgunned and outnumbered by the French. They're about to desert, when Henry tells them the story they needed to hear.

If we are mark'd to die, we are enow To do our country loss; and if to live, The fewer men, the greater share of honour.

God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.

By Jove, I am not covetous for gold, Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost; It yearns me not if men my garments wear; Such outward things dwell not in my desires.

But if it be a sin to covet honour, I am the most offending soul alive.

No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England.

God's peace! I would not lose so great an honour As one man more methinks would share from me For the best hope I have.

O, do not wish one more!

Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host, That he which hath no stomach to this fight, Let him depart; his passport shall be made, And crowns for convoy put into his purse; We would not die in that man's company That fears his fellowship to die with us. This day is call'd the feast of Crispian.

He that outlives this day, and comes safe home, Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd, And rouse him at the name of Crispian.

He that shall live this day, and see old age, Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours, And say "To-morrow is Saint Crispian."

Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars, And say "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot, But he'll remember, with advantages, What feats he did that day. Then shall our names, Familiar in his mouth as household words-

Harry the King, Bedford Exeter, Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester- Be in their flowing cups freshly rememb'ed.

This story shall the good man teach his son; And Crispian shall ne'er go by, From this day to the ending of the world, But we in it shall be remembered - We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; For he to-day that sheds his blood with me Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile, This day shall gentle his condition; And gentlemen in England now-a-bed Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here, And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

When you get it right, you win followers. People who believe in you. In Henry's case, who will kill for you. Who love your story.

Over time, these people mix their own stories with yours. And that becomes the brand.

Who tells the better story of Harley Davidson? The company? Or the bikers who live for their Harleys?

Who tells the better story about Apple? The company, or the grandmas and grandkids who share photos with each other with their iPads?

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And here, here is where social media comes in.

A recent survey by Gallup had some surprising findings on what social media is actually used for.

94% of people say they use it primarily to connect with friends and family. Their tribe.

Gallup said it best: "If companies want to acquire new customers, their best bet is to engage their existing customers and inspire them to advocate on their behalf."

I would say "Use social media to let your fans tell all of your stories."

Wait a minute. Aren't you supposed to be talking *to them* with social media?

No.

If you have a brand with a story that attracts, your fans will reach out to you. If you let them, they'll help you craft a better, stronger story with each tweet, each facebook post, each Instagram post.

In the book 'Brand thinking and other noble pursuits' Debbie Milman says:

Scientists and anthropologists tend to agree that humans are, in essence, pack animals. Which explains why we feel safer and more secure in groups. Perhaps our motivation to brand, and be branded, comes from our hardwired instinct to connect.

We are human. We have a hardwired need to connect. And we, as entrepreneurs and businesspeople, want our companies to have that human connection, too.

Whether you succeed or not, depends on how you approach it.

Nail your story first, then use social media to let your tribe enrich that story, and you'll be moving in the right direction.

Heck, it worked for the bible.