

The eternal arts story

Storytelling can help your organisation stand out in the competitive world of the arts, heritage and cultural sector. **Adam Thurman** reflects on the importance of marketing as the art of telling an organisation's story to promote its work and values.

"Let me tell you a story."

That phrase, or some version of it, has been a defining aspect of human existence. Whether it's told in a classroom, a bedroom, or a bar we all lean forward when we know we are about to hear something interesting. We lean forward because we all desire a way to understand the world and the people in it. That's true now more than ever. And it's particularly true for those of us who work in the arts and cultural sector.

The art that your organisation creates is part of the most crowded and competitive landscape the world has ever seen. Whether it's live entertainment or digital, the battle for our attention and our wallets happens at an incredible pace. Which means that if you want people to consistently choose the work you do over a myriad of options you have to be able to answer this simple question: why you?

Why your theatre? Why your museum? Why your musical recital?

The answer to that question all revolves around a story.

What great organisations like Nike, Apple and Virgin do is not only sell a product. They promote a world view. They offer the public a particular point of view about a small slice of the world and how it works. They understand that in a world of endless options the things you and I buy are not only reflections of the

organisations we support, they are a reflection of us.

So here's the thing I want you to consider.

What does it say about your audience when they choose your art? Does it say that they are generous? Hopeful? Inspired? Does it demonstrate a commitment to artistic excellence? A desire for community?

Because that's the story you are telling through your marketing. You are telling the story about the values and vision of your organisation and how that set of values and vision connects to a specific community and audience.

Marketing is the process of telling a story that connects your values to your audience's values.

Let me give you an example. I work for the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis. It's one of the largest regional theatres in the US. It's a fantastic organisation. It's also an organisation that is in constant competition with other great theatres, professional sports teams, etc. When I approach our marketing I know it isn't enough to say we have a good product. A lot of people have good products. I have to talk about more. I have to talk about how the values we share as an institution connect to our target audience: parents.

This isn't about whether a parent wants to see a particular artistic performance. It's about whether they value what we value too. It's about becoming a part of the community.

That is why they come. And that is why they come back.

Here's what I want you to remember. Marketing isn't about tactics. It isn't about email, social media or direct mail. Those are the tools that deliver the marketing, but that isn't the point.

Marketing is the process of telling a story that connects your values to your audience's values.

That union will get you the revenue and support your organisation deserves. ♣

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