



What's the Role of Transmedia Storytelling in Marketing?

by Elaine Fogel

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Although marketers have embraced storytelling since the advent of advertising, storytelling has taken on a new framework in our digital world. Moving seamlessly from our desktops or laptop computers to tablets to television screens to mobile phones without skipping a beat is so easy. And how many of us are using these devices simultaneously?

We're seeing new marketing tactics that distribute entertainment value and engage followers across multiple channels.

Because I wanted to learn more about transmedia storytelling and its role in marketing, I decided to ask transmedia storytelling expert and social marketer [Nedra Kline Weinreich](#). She is president and founder of [Weinreich Communications](#) and program manager for the [Entertainment Industries Council](#), working on health and social issues.

Elaine: With scores of new digital marketing communications channels opening up to marketers every day, it appears that those



channels with entertainment value are catching on. Since you're involved in transmedia storytelling and entertainment education, can you share what opportunities these new trends hold for us?

Nedra: I believe that the age of the 30-second spot and interruption marketing is just about over. It's so easy now to skip over TV commercials with our DVRs, block online banner ads, and tune out the pitches being thrown at us constantly. Our challenge as marketers is to figure out how to integrate our products and brands---in my case, healthy and pro-social behaviors---into the content to which people want to pay attention. In many cases, that's some form of entertainment, whether product placement on a favorite television show or your own original compelling content that makes people want to give you their most valuable commodity---their

time and attention.

We live in a transmedia world, meaning that we now seamlessly move from mobile phone to computer to television---often all at the same time! **Transmedia storytelling** takes advantage of this fluidity by spreading different parts of a story across multiple media and allowing the audience to become participants in integrating the pieces. So, you could have characters from a television show tweeting about what they're doing during the week in real time in between episodes.

A graphic novel could provide back story for one of the characters that helps fans understand how he became a villain. Viewers could see a URL flashed on a business card in the show for the company the characters work for, go to that fictional company's website, and sign up for the corporate newsletter that provides weekly articles tying into the storyline. A minor character on the show might be an uncontrollable gossip who sends you texts about what the main characters are doing. And it's even more engaging when you can talk to the characters online, and they talk back to you.

Putting the story where the people you want to reach are already spending their time ---whether on **Twitter**, **Facebook**, **YouTube**, TV, mobile phones, or elsewhere---creates an immersive experience. When it feels like a story is unfolding around them, and especially when they have spent enough time with the characters to care what happens to them, they are primed to pay attention.

In the work I do centered on health and social issues, this is where the potential for influencing knowledge, attitudes and behaviors is highest, by integrating concepts from the research-tested field of **entertainment education**. Seeing a character experiencing a health problem, including their challenges and successes along the way, offers great opportunities to model desired behaviors and reinforce social norms.

How many people watching Claire Danes' character Carrie on "Homeland" have learned what bipolar disorder is from the show and perhaps recognized it in themselves or someone they love? How much more powerful would it be if we could read Carrie's diary as a teenager, see her medical chart, or follow someone in real life living with bipolar disorder as they discuss how their experience relates to Carrie's? Higher engagement and immersion in the story heighten the chances that an individual will be primed to take action in their own lives.

Elaine: The use of "story" has been around for eons. What is its role in marketing now, and how can marketers leverage it for both



business and nonprofit marketing?

Nedra: You're right that storytelling is an ancient activity. We humans are hard-wired to respond to stories and use them to understand the world around us. A good story hinges on an emotional response, just as good marketing does. With so many products out there, marketers are constantly seeking the hook that will make a connection with their potential consumers.

Often, that connection comes about through a story---whether it's about the product itself, about how the company started, or about how people use the product. (And sometimes the story doesn't even have anything to do with the product except in the emotion it tries to evoke.)

In some ways, nonprofits have it much easier than inert products like duct tape and washing machines in figuring out how to incorporate stories into their marketing (though look at how evocative the story of the lonely Maytag repairman is!). Nonprofits are inherently about people's stories... stories of loss, challenges, triumphs. The trick is going beyond just talking about the mission and services of the nonprofit (or the features and uses of the commercial product) and finding the stories of how it's changed people's lives for the better.

Elaine: I understand that you are involved in the [Entertainment Industries Council](#) (EIC), working on health and social issues. Can you explain how storytelling plays a role in this organization's mission "To bring the power and influence of the entertainment industry to bear on health and social issues?"

Nedra: The work that we do at EIC really has at its core the idea of harnessing the vast power of the entertainment industry to grab people's attention through the stories it tells. We work directly with the world's best storytellers---Hollywood writers and creators---to help them create accurate portrayals of health and social issues, reaching their massive audiences with important information in a way in which they will pay attention. We connect them with experts on the topics they are writing about and provide resources and depiction suggestions for how they could incorporate the issues into their shows.

As a nonprofit that's been around since 1983, EIC has gained the trust of the industry by understanding the creative process and how we can best assist creators in their work. Every year, EIC recognizes the best portrayals of mental health and substance abuse issues in the entertainment media through the PRISM Awards; to get a good idea of how storytelling plays a role in our mission, watch the PRISM Awards Showcase, now available for free viewing on demand on the [FX Network website](#).

Elaine: Thanks to Nedra for sharing her expertise!

If you have experience using transmedia storytelling or entertainment education, please share how you're using it for marketing purposes. If you have questions on this topic, fire away and we'll ask Nedra to respond.



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