

# Learning to Swim Without Water: Brand Storytelling vs. Story-doing

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## ***Where belief meets action and the importance of each for brands***

Much has been said and written about the importance of brand storytelling. Some argue that a brand is simply a story. This is only half true.

While a brand story can be told, it isn't the brand. A brand must be experienced if it's to be believed, understood and felt. As [Marty Neumeier](#), author of the best selling books *The Brand Gap*, *Zig*, *The Designful Company* and *Brand Flip*, states in *The Brand Gap*, "A brand isn't what you say it is, it's what they say it is."

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— Steven Morris

The brand story can convey what it might be like to experience the story, but no story can replace the actual experience that a customer has with the brand.

Imagine you're teaching someone to swim. You can tell stories of people swimming to Olympic medals in far-off lands, or swimming across great divides of shark-infested water. You can discuss the concepts of buoyancy, floatation and movement. And, then explain descriptions and methods of the freestyle, breaststroke, backstroke, breathing and kicking. But all this takes place without actual water or people immersing themselves into H<sup>2</sup>O. Until this happens, they'll never swim.

### **Enter the importance of brand *story-doing*.**

What a brand does to convey the experience is at least as important as the stories that make up the imagined experience. The stories either set an expectation of what the experience will be or they echo the actual experience of the brand. Only through experience can a customer really tell someone else what the brand is really about.

When companies go through brand evolution processes or go about living the brand on a day-to-day basis, the most critical step in getting the brand into action is to infuse it within the cultural beliefs and behaviors of the company.

*Story-doing* starts within organizations. The beliefs of the brand need to be evangelized, to be lived by the brand representatives of the company—which is everyone in the company. Denise Yohn in her best selling book *What Great Brands Do* talks extensively about *operationalizing the brand*.

Denise states, “I use the term 'operationalize' to describe the kind of brand-building I focus on—and to differentiate from expressing, promoting, and marketing a brand. Operationalizing your brand involves using your brand to shape your organizational culture, to drive your core operations, and to guide your customer experiences.”

The brand operationalized is a brand that has maximum value and can be experienced.

### **A brand *story-doing* in action.**

As most people know Southwest Airline has built their business and brand differentiation on love. It's embedded into their tagline “Heart Sets Us Apart,” into their culture and it's even their stock symbol (LUV). In a recent story, Southwest helped a special needs teenager celebrate her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in grand style.

[Kellisa loves to travel](#), she also lives with cerebral palsy and epilepsy. Her father treated her to a multi-city trip. During a stop in Orlando, the family was escorted off the plane by a man wearing a tuxedo and was greeted with a fully decorated gate area filled with cheering travelers—a celebration orchestrated by Southwest employees. Here's a [video](#) of part of that celebration.

Now, it's one thing for this post to tell you this story and share the video, but can you imagine the exponential impact that this actual experience was like for the passengers of that plane, Kellisa and her family? If the brand were a story alone this experience for Kellisa would have never happened and the Southwest employees wouldn't have taken the action to positively impact Kellisa's celebration.

### **Some tips on brand *story-doing*.**

The below assumes that your brand has a foundation on which to tell and live your story. This includes, but would not be limited to, a purpose, mission, vision, core values, promise and the entire brand visual elements applied consistently to all audience touchpoints. And this foundation is expressed in the vernacular of your brand style, voice and tone. From here the opportunity is to operationalize your brand and then put it into action in the world, through living examples of the brand come to life. After all, people trust you when the integrity of your brand's actions are aligned with what you say.

#### **Keys to brand *story-doing*:**

**Get the leadership on board:** Brand experience success depends on the committed involvement of company leadership to get the entire organization to buy in and make the brand experience a vision on which to live.

**Before and after benchmarking:** Be sure to benchmark (identify key wins or metrics) before the process starts, continually test and measure throughout the brand evolution process, and then measure afterwards at 3-month, 6-month and 1-year intervals.

**Engage throughout the organization:** Make sure the brand *story-doing* isn't confined to the marketing or advertising teams. Remember every employee is a brand ambassador.

**Strategize a *story-doing* experience:** Any strategy without execution can be delusional. Make sure you have a strategy for all brand *story-doing* that translates into a consistent customer experience.

**Focus on hero actions:** Define a manageable set of iconic, transformative actions to focus on and deliver experientially, and live up to them.

As part of our robust brand evolution processes, Mth Degree deploys internal brand launch planning, adoption and launching, as well as brand introduction campaigns and HR integration. We also offer internal team workshops to work with leadership and employee adoption training. Both services ensure that the brand evolution processes reach maximum impact for companies. [Contact us](#) to find out more.

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[Need help with your brand story?](#)

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