

DID YOU HEAR THE ONE ABOUT...

STORYTELLING IN THE AGE OF BRANDED CONTENT

After digging to a depth of 10 feet, a team of Toronto scientists found traces of copper wire dating back to 1894. The next day, the *Toronto Star* ran a cover story: “Scientists prove Toronto had the earliest telephone system in Canada.” Not to be outdone, Vancouver archaeologists, excavating to a depth of 20 feet, discovered traces of copper wire dating back to 1874. *The Vancouver Sun* trumpeted: “Archaeological proof that BC had the first telephone network — 20 years earlier than Toronto.” About a week later, Newfoundland’s *Evening Telegram* reported: “After digging as deep as 30 feet in his backyard, Dennis Boland reported that he found sweet f...k all. Boland figures that, as early as 150 years ago, Newfoundland had already gone wireless.”

Everyone loves a story.

What is it about stories that draw humans into the storytelling and listening circle, like a moth to the flame?

Sociologists and anthropologists report that storytelling has been deeply ingrained in us since the beginning of time. Before language. Since we learned to mime. From our first sketches on cave walls, telling stories about life and death, danger and victories and, just like today, to simply entertain. Stories are shared in every culture on every

continent on this planet. It’s clear there’s a deeply rooted need — an emotional, psychological, social and personal need — for us humans to be entertained.

Why are great ads — like Johnny Walker’s “Keep Walking” and John Lewis’s Christmas stories — so loved and remembered, and so widely shared? Why are the other 95 per cent never noticed, except perhaps in annoyance, and shared only in ridicule?

He was born with a lazy eye.

And, as he grew up, it spread to the rest of his body.

We know people are moved by stories, and the emotions and feelings evoked by hearing and sharing and reliving stories.

“Facts and figures and all rational things that we think are important in the business world actually don’t stick in our minds at all,” reports *Harvard Business Review*. “But stories create ‘sticky’ memories by attaching emotions to things that happen.”

So when did stories ever become “content,” a commodity like asphalt or the stuffing in sausages? And when did advertisers first believe they could irritate or bore people into loving their brand?

What makes a good story?

Great stories don’t come from an algorithm. Or from a content factory. The Internets, as George W. Bush put it, has billions of words describing and discussing stories, and pre-

scribing how to write ‘em. There’s not a lot more to add. But there’s one thing for sure: in advertising, we have to be creative storytellers. We cannot be “content producers.”

Nobody ever sat around the campfire, hanging on to every word and gesture, the night so quiet you could almost hear the stars slip across the sky, captivated by “branded content.”

Two young fish were swimming along.

An older fish, swimming in the opposite direction, quipped, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” After a minute, one young fish looked at the other and said, “What the hell is water?”

We need our eyes wide open.

We need to be mindful of the world around us. We need to notice the tiny details, textures, colours, eccentricities and emotions. Like Tommy, the Who’s Pinball Wizard, we need to see it. Smell it. Taste it. Hear it. Feel it. Ask yourself what you remember from your commute this morning. The colour of the light? The skateboarder’s hair? The ways people walk? The shape of clouds?

We need to see different things, and see things differently, to spark our creativity.

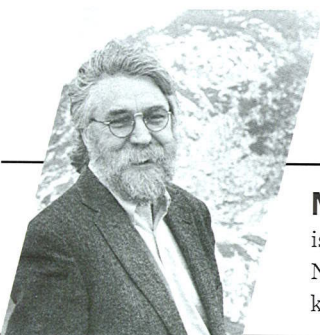
Sometimes, it’s where you live.

No matter which way you turn, you see Newfoundlanders popping up on screens and stages across the country — over-indexing on awards and acclaim for writing, acting, painting, singing, playing, and, well, having a good time.

There’s a reason Newfoundlanders are natural-born storytellers. This place is a terrible beauty, a rock in the sea. Its people and culture are a creatively exotic enigma. How could anyone not be inspired simply by being here? Far from the manufactured canyons of steel and concrete, you might just notice the whisper of fog seeping over the top of Signal Hill, flowing down the cliffs and spilling quietly over the Battery and across the Narrows, only to evaporate in the sensuous colour of the morning light.

Borrowing a line from our Tourism campaign, this place is as far from Disneyland as you can possibly get.

Now, there’s an idea for a story. Just, please, don’t call it “branded content.”



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