



Find Your Brand's Controlling Idea

The following PDF is for any company, individual or organization struggling at getting started constructing their Brand Story.

Story is such an overused, abused and abstract term that it can be hard for most people to even know where to start. The nasty truth is that storytelling is difficult, to do it well is extremely difficult and requires years of practice.

But there are some useful tools.

The benefits of of storytelling for brands is two-fold: 1) for marketing the solutions your business is offering your customers (external use), and 2) as a model for embodiment and behavior (internal use).

If you know your brand story and what makes you different from other companies in your category, your day-to-day behavior in the world become clearer. The Controlling Idea is one of those helpful tools that can quickly get you thinking in terms of action. When you've distilled your Controlling Idea to its most fundamental level, the Controlling Idea becomes:

- The Rosetta Stone for all of your daily business dilemmas,
- The clarifying tool that allows every member of your organization to see how their daily actions are a part of the overarching company story
- A guide for behavior in difficult dilemmas
- A tool for revealing behavior that doesn't match the story, that needs to be amended or eliminated.
- An alarm when one or more levels of your company (management, employees or customers) are out of sync with one another's stories.

It's immensely clarifying, and over the next few pages we will show you how to do it.



What is “The Controlling Idea”?

The controlling idea is a term developed and popularized by Robert McKee, storytelling guru and author of the book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. He described the Controlling Idea as a more action-oriented, practical version of a story’s “theme.” Most of us remember in English class growing up when we had to find the “theme” of a given novel or movie. If that felt ephemeral, subjective or nebulous to you, the Controlling Idea is far more specific.

The Controlling Idea has three components which can be tinkered with like a car engine. It even has an equation of sorts:

Primary Value at Stake is achieved/lost because the Main Character performs the Defining Action.

There are three components to a Controlling Idea: 1) value at stake, 2) a character with agency and 3) an action they take in the face of pressure.

Values at Stake

In storytelling, values are not beliefs. A storytelling value is Polar Opposites of Elemental Concepts, such as:

- Justice/Injustice
- Love/Hate
- Success/Failure
- Happiness/Sadness
- Freedom/Slavery, etc.

Each of these is a single value in storytelling terms. By nature, every person and every company is dealing with one or more primary values at stake in their lives.

In business, we frequently refer to offering “solutions” for our customers. Why do so many of us choose that word? The fact that we use the word “solutions” reveals that we are seeing a problem in our customers’ world. Many businesspeople are trained not to discuss “problems,” but deep down we all know our offerings would be superfluous without them. In this sense, problems are assets!

If there’s a problem, that means there’s something at stake. Whatever is at stake has 1) a real-world, case specific manifestation, and 2) a fundamental value expression. This can be sometimes easier to understand when using an example from popular culture.

Imagine Dirty Harry. Dirty Harry is a detective. His real world specific problem: Solving the specific crime in the story. His primary value at stake: Justice/Injustice. If he beats the bad guy, justice is achieved; if he loses, justice is lost. Those are the two possible outcomes.

What is your brand’s primary value at stake?



Character

The second component to a Controlling Idea is a character with agency. In the popular culture example of Dirty Harry, the character is Dirty Harry. In 99% of brand stories the main character is going to be the customer. However, that's for marketing stories. For internal stories meant to guide corporate action and business behavior, the main character is the company (or whatever individual in the company is performing the specific task at hand).

We'll focus on the internal brand story for the purposes of this document.

The main character in any story is the character that takes on the climactic, defining act that resolves the tension, solves the problem, and wins or loses the primary value at stake.

For the purposes of this exercise the main character is your brand.

Defining Action

The final component of the Controlling Idea is the act the defining action. This is your brand's differentiator from competitors in the same category. It's also what guides you and your company's behavior at every fork in the road.

Let's return to the example of Dirty Harry. Another detective in pop culture is Sherlock Holmes. Both characters are dealing with justice/injustice as their primary value at stake. They are both known in their respective worlds as detectives, so they exist in the same category (the way two construction contractors or two tech companies exist in the same category). What differentiates them is how they achieve Justice.

Dirty Harry achieves Justice by being more brutal than the bad guy. Sherlock Holmes achieves Justice by being smarter than the bad guy.

Once you understand the characters this way, if you were assigned to write a Sherlock Holmes story, you would know intuitively that it's wrong to include a scene where Sherlock Holmes pulls out a .357 magnum and shoots the bad guy. It would be a violation of the story and would feel inauthentic to the character.

The same is true in business. Once you know the defining action that your business performs to achieve the primary value at stake, you know intuitively what your brand does when faced with a dilemma. What is the most fundamental, irreducible expression of the defining action that transcends your brand's actions?



Encouraged/Discouraged/Possible Behavior

Once you have a controlling idea, you're able to articulate what behaviors are encouraged, discouraged or just possible. Here are some examples:

QUESTIONNAIRE

Value at Stake

1. You probably think of your brand as offering a "solution" or "set of solutions" to your customers. What is this solution?
2. Offering a solution means you must see a "problem" in your customers lives. What is this problem?
3. Seeing a "problem" in your customers lives can be articulated as an elemental value that's at stake.
What is this primary value? Note: Express the value as polar opposites, i.e. justice/injustice, love/hate, etc.

Main Character

1. Since we are only dealing with the internal brand story in this document, the main character for our purposes is your brand (personal or corporate).

Defining Action

1. List up to 10 specific features, benefits, services or offerings that you believe solve your customers primary problem. List as many as you can.
2. List up to 10 things you see your competitors doing that you would never do.
3. Compare and contrast your answers to the last two questions. Somewhere in there lies a pattern of behavior that can be reduced to a single transcendent, defining action. For example, Dirty Harry would never pull out the magnifying glass and look for clues at a crime scene, but we can point to many times that he's blown away his nemesis. His overarching pattern of behavior is one of brutality. Therefore, his defining action that achieves the value at stake is: being more brutal than the bad guy.

E/D/P Columns

Now that you have a first pass at your brand's internal Controlling Idea, brainstorm some behaviors that should be encouraged, discouraged or possibly considered.

EXAMPLE OF CONTROLLING IDEA FOR A RECIPE SERVICE:

“Life’s more fun when you can improvise and let go of fear of failing.”

What is Encouraged?	What is Discouraged/ Not Allowed?	More Possibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experimentation• Replacing ingredients (suggestions on/off)• Sudden changes while cooking• Stumbling upon new recipes• Sharing the experience, giving new ideas to others• Sharing and celebrating failures, too (hall of fame of bad or failed recipes)• Fixing bad recipes, submitting your own version• Seeking ideas from others (“What would you do with this?”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Following recipes strictly• Rating a recipe as good or bad (or stars, etc.)• Specific measurements in recipe	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Live-streaming while cooking• Recipe branching out with different variations• Weekly challenges with mystery ingredients or theme• Rating recipes based on how many new ideas you got• Become a master of an ingredient (master of potato, etc.)• Different levels of recipes based on how vague vs. specific they are

Conclusion

This is difficult stuff. We don't mean to pretend it's easy. However, it's an extraordinarily helpful process to go through, and should help you at least outline what your brand story might look like.

When working with clients on their brand story, our first task is always to boil down their Controlling Ideas.

Every single campaign, every piece of content, every video, and every podcast should have an individual Controlling Idea that fits in to the larger internal brand Idea. This process can take multiple meetings, days of research and weeks of refinement when done right. But once you have a Controlling Idea that acts as a mirror reflecting your brand back at you in a way that you recognize and accept as true, the self-knowledge achieved can be invaluable.

Further Reading

Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting by Robert McKee

https://www.amazon.com/Story-Substance-Structure-Principles-Screenwriting/dp/0060391685/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=

Storynomics: Story-Driven Marketing in the Post-Advertising World by Robert McKee

<https://www.amazon.com/Storynomics-Story-Driven-Marketing-Post-Advertising-World/dp/1538727935/>

