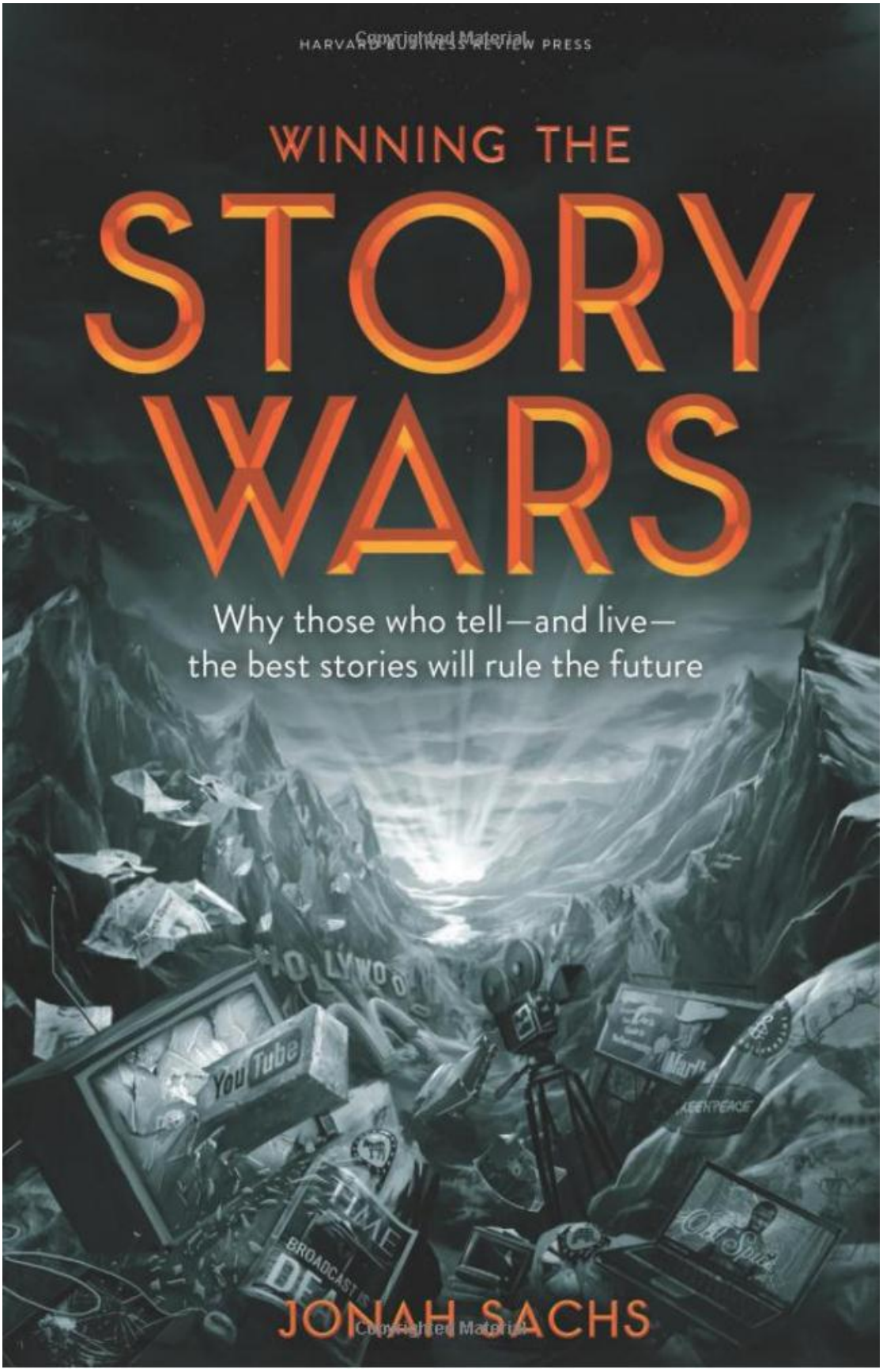
HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

WINNING THE STORY WARS

Why those who tell—and live—
the best stories will rule the future



JONAH SACHS

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sachs, Jonah.

Winning the story wars : why those who tell—and live—the best stories will rule the future / Jonah Sachs.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4221-4356-8 (alk. paper)

1. Marketing—Social aspects. 2. Storytelling—Psychological aspects. 3. Consumers—Psychology. 4. Social media. I. Title.

HF5415.S223 2012

658.8'02—dc23

2011053284

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Publications and Documents in Libraries and Archives Z39.48-1992.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tell the Truth, Part I

The Art of Empowerment Marketing

As a teenager, I spent half of my time at my mother's house and half of my time throwing baseballs with my father. Baseball had become our obsession by default. Soccer had ended after a confusing and hopeless season of scoring on my own goal; basketball was dismissed after a single futile shoot-around. I was so short and slow-footed that my father, full of unrealistic dreams for his only son, was driven to a state of near despair. Then it dawned on him that, with enough practice, anyone could learn to pitch. So every day we were together, we went out to the backyard and I threw to imaginary hitters, one after the next.

By the time I was thirteen, I had developed good control and a terrifying curveball that sped toward a batter's head only to change direction at the last moment and fall right into the strike zone. I reveled in dropping six-foot pubescent boys to their knees—the perfect vantage point from which to witness the umpire signaling strike three. The pitch required only one thing—a good baseball. The texture of the leather and the height of the seams made all the

---

Abraham Maslow and the foundations of empowerment marketing

difference. I was so dependent on the quality of the ball in my hand that my fingertips learned to ascertain instantly if this one was capable of breaking or not. I came to believe that I knew everything there was to know about baseballs.

Then one day, I caught my dog ripping a particularly good one apart. Grabbing it from her mouth, I was stunned to see that beneath the ball's familiar cover was a tangle of tightly wound string. I remember feeling shock—not because I expected something else to be there. The shock came, instead, from the realization that I had never even considered what was beneath the surface of this perfectly familiar object.

I sat down next to my disappointed dog and began to unwind the thread. And then finally, to my delight and amazement, I reached a bouncy cork sphere wrapped in red rubber. As I was unraveling, I had been wondering how this lump of string could pop off a bat with so much life when it was hit just right. The hidden red ball was my answer—a secret of the universe had just been revealed to me.

Much later, I learned that good stories are structured just like baseballs. On the surface, we find the story's visible elements: the setting, the characters, and the actions those characters undertake. These are the elements of stories we've all been familiar with since childhood. We know the cover and we think we know everything there is to know. But there is so much more.

Just beneath the surface, the story finds its structure in the moral of the story. The storyteller does not introduce characters and actions by happenstance. Each visible element exists to illustrate an overarching point, an *explanation* of a professed truth about how the world works. Just as the ball of string beneath the cover invisibly determines a baseball's size, shape, and weight, the moral of a story provides its structure, shape, and relevance. In a fable, this moral will be overt and even stated outright. In a more complex story, it will be up to the listener or reader to glean it from the tale. But no matter how hidden or obvious it may be, without this underlying structure, audiences will intuitively feel that a story is just

a collection of random events. Without some kind of moral, we instinctively reject a story as poorly told.

And then there is the story's core, hidden one layer deeper at the center of it all. This core may even be hidden from the storyteller herself. Here we find the *values* implied by the moral. When we hear a story with the moral "Better safe than sorry," we know something about the storyteller; we know she values safety and predictability. When we hear a story with the moral "He who hesitates is lost," we know our storyteller values something entirely different—adventure and risk. The values at the core of a myth provide its *meaning* and, unless we are looking for them, these values often remain hidden from our conscious minds.

I've found these insights enormously useful, and we'll employ them to explore the iconic success of stories built from the core outward on truths about human nature. These are truths that inadequacy stories ignore and often seek to deny. We'll unpack the mythic formula of what I call *empowerment marketing*—stories told to help encourage audiences on their path to maturation and citizenship. The practice of empowerment marketing is based on two of the most influential theories in the field of human growth and maturation—Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Joseph Campbell's hero's journey. The hierarchy of needs provides us with a vastly expanded menu of universal values you can appeal to in your audiences beyond greed, vanity, fear, and self-interest. Using Maslow's insights, you can define higher-level values appropriate to your message, brand, and audience. Then, using what we learn from Joseph Campbell, you can turn those values into a resonant moral of the story and create a story structure that will appeal to the heroic potential in your audiences. These models show us a clear alternative to the dark, limited view of human nature inspired by Freud and brought to the marketplace by men like Edward Bernays. And because these empowerment marketing stories function in the way traditional myths always have, calling their listeners to growth and maturity, campaigns built on these models are asserting their supremacy in our new oral tradition.

So we begin our journey to heal our broken world.

Empowerment Marketing: A Resistance to the Dark Art

For nearly a century now, inadequacy marketing has provided the favored weapons for fighting the story wars. And though the cautionary tales of Groupon and Kenneth Cole (see chapter 4) show how the digitoral age is putting chinks in its armor, the approach is anything but dead. In fact, its practice remains the automatic starting point for most of us, whether we're selling fish curry or social action.

But that's only half the story. For nearly as long, a countercurrent has run through the story wars. Empowerment marketing eschews every assumption made by the inadequacy approach. Acting much in the way myths have for millennia, this approach builds stories that point out the possibility for human growth and even transcendence. Empowerment stories often delight audiences by mocking the familiar anxiety provoking assaults of the dark art. They inspire action by painting a picture of an imperfect world that can be repaired through heroic action. And most importantly, they create deep affinity by acknowledging that human beings can be something more than selfish machines seeking status, sex, comfort, and convenience.

Media mogul Arianna Huffington, who sold her homegrown, virally powered news site to AOL for $315 million, knows a few things about what works in the digitoral era. She recently described what she called the most important trend in marketing: "the recognition by businesses that there's much to be said for appealing to consumers' better instincts, and engaging them with something other than materialism, sex, money, and self-interest."

"It's not a coincidence," she added, "that this trend is escalating at the same time social media have risen to the forefront in the worlds of both marketing and activism."

Huffington is right—social media platforms are amplifying the power of stories that appeal to better instincts. But it's misleading to call it a trend. These stories have always been with us and have always been powerfully resonant.

Now, to judge the importance of empowerment marketing by the frequency of its use is to deem it irrelevant. Its stories represent

but a tiny handful of the thousands of marketing myths that vie for our attention daily. But if you evaluate empowerment marketing by its ability to create unforgettable, iconic campaigns, it reveals itself as the ultimate secret weapon for winning the story wars. In fact, its relative rarity is one element of its enormous appeal. Beleaguered audiences often experience empowerment marketing stories as a celebrated breath of fresh air.

Telling the truth—most importantly, the truth that human nature goes beyond our basest desires and orients to a higher potential—provides the foundation of a storytelling strategy that can build your next breakthrough communication—and your entire brand. It also offers the opportunity to participate in a revolution aimed at repairing our dysfunctional and negative media landscape. Of course, putting a new, positive sheen on marketing is not an end in itself. But reorienting our myths away from the adolescent, depressed consumer mind-set and toward the empowered citizen worldview is a powerful first step in reshaping our society for the better.

Before we use the empowerment marketing lens to understand some of marketing's most famous successes, however, I offer an important warning: breakthrough empowerment stories are not the exclusive property of responsible products or organizations. To understand the connection between effective stories and responsible behavior, we'll have to wait for our exploration of John Powers's final commandment, Live the Truth. For now, I ask you to put aside your judgments about any product, organization, or political cause being examined. Yes, there is hypocrisy in some of these campaigns. But at this point, I simply want to illustrate the great power held by these iconic stories and the resonance they inspire.

Tactic #1: Expose Lies of Inadequacy Marketing ← !

The first tactic of empowerment marketing is perhaps the most powerful: tell a more resonant truth in the face of commonly accepted lies.

Think Small

In the late 1950s, nothing expressed the dark art strategy more aggressively than automobile advertising. American automakers assailed the public with campaigns insisting that status, taste, and social acceptance were magically achieved and expressed entirely through the car you drove.

At the top of the heap sat the Cadillac, whose ads were aimed not only at those who could afford its exorbitant $5,000 price tag but also at those aspiring to such heights. These ads didn't just sell cars, they sold a whole set of values—values about happiness, identity, and the good life. The subtle effect of these campaigns was to coerce Americans to work longer hours and sacrifice more to step up the ladder from a Chevrolet to a Buick to an Oldsmobile and one day, God willing, to the ultimate automobile, the Cadillac.

Here's what a typical Cadillac ad from 1959 promised under the headline "A Single Glance Tells the Story":

> *The 1959 Cadillac speaks so eloquently—in so many ways—of the man who sits at its wheel. Simply because it is a Cadillac . . . it indicates his high level of personal achievement. Because it is so beautiful and majestic , it speaks of his fine taste . . . why not visit your dealer tomorrow and arrange to have a new Cadillac tell its wonderful story about you?*

Climbing the automobile ladder was hard work, and staying on top was even harder. Each year, employing the practice of perceived obsolescence, Chevrolet would roll out an entirely redesigned, and usually larger, model. A car that had been the height of fashion yesterday would look small, embarrassing, and worn-out tomorrow, communicating the exact opposite story its driver so deeply desired to have told. As you would imagine, all of this provoked a good deal of anxiety from the bottom to the top of American society.

Then in 1959, seemingly out of nowhere, simple full-page newspaper ads began to appear with an unadorned image of the Volkswagen Beetle and the headline "Think Small." The ad didn't say

much more, except that the car was modest and efficient—it even called the Beetle a "flivver," contemporary slang for a piece of junk. People found the ads shockingly honest and hilarious, allowing them to publicly express an unnamed anxiety that marketers had been instilling in them for years. Will I make it to the top of the ladder? Who cares?

Spurred on by the outrageous success of these ads, VW's agency, DDB, intensified its assault on the Detroit inadequacy approach, in effect *celebrating* the joys of what others might call inadequacy.

"Live Below Your Means" advised one particularly revolutionary advertisement. The campaign celebrated the fact that the clunky design of the Beetle had not changed for almost two decades (when Hitler had first commissioned its creation—a small detail that was, of course, omitted).

The effectiveness of these ads has been endlessly chronicled, and fifty years later it is still widely considered the stand-alone best marketing campaign of the twentieth century, number one on the *Ad Age* list. It turned the strange, sluggishly selling car into the totem of the counterculture revolution. It helped a whole generation fill the myth gap left by disaffection with the suburban dream as they discovered new explanation and meaning in freedom and the open road—and a new driving ritual to enact their new story. Think Small is even credited with starting the creative revolution that turned advertising on its head in the 1960s. But the campaign does not owe its success to offbeat creativity or its celebrated use of white space on the page. The power of the new story VW was telling began at its core, with its values. While Cadillac was celebrating an endless quest for status and wealth, VW celebrated joyful modesty of material desire and truth in the face of insincerity.

Real Beauty

Nearly a lifetime after Think Small's breakthrough success, Unilever's Dove brand rediscovered the power of a direct assault on inadequacy. Dove would base a new campaign launched in 2004 on

the insights of a study showing that only 12 percent of women are satisfied with their appearance and a mere 2 percent consider themselves beautiful. According to the study, a shocking two-thirds of all women age fifteen to sixty-four said they withdraw from "life-engaging activities due to feeling badly about their looks"; *life-engaging activities* include things like voicing an opinion, attending school, and even going to the doctor. Who's to blame? A vast majority of respondents blamed the media, at least in part, for creating and promoting messages that celebrate unattainable beauty ideals. Of course, these ideals are no accident—they are the carefully nurtured engines of anxiety that drive inadequacy marketing. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent every year reinforcing them.

Dove's Real Beauty campaign dragged this anxiety into the light of day and in the process created one of advertising's early online viral sensations. A seventy-five-second video, titled *Evolution,* shows in silent detail how a normal, even haggard-looking, model is Photoshopped into the perfect cover girl. The spot reveals that her beauty doesn't come from her cleanser, her moisturizer, or any one of a bagful of products women are constantly being encouraged to apply. We learn that this kind of beauty is just digital magic. A dark art secret had been revealed in little more than a minute, and millions of women around the world rejoiced, passing it from friend to friend. The video got picked up and shown as content, not advertisement, all over daytime TV. Oprah, who herself had become the most powerful woman in media through a relentless focus on empowering stories and higher ideals, featured the Real Beauty campaign every day for a week. The video would earn its creators tens of millions of dollars of free media.

Just like Think Small, the surface of the larger Real Beauty campaign is certainly worth attention: real-looking women starring in beauty ads, feeling beautiful in their less-than-perfect bodies. But it is the moral of its story—that the beauty ideal is a lie and that real beauty comes from truth—and its core value—sufficiency of all women as opposed to inadequacy—that created such enormous audience affinity and resonance. Although the campaign makes

this moral implicitly clear, Dove wanted to make sure it couldn't be missed. Giving their models a mouthpiece through the campaign, the women spoke out, clearly stating the values and the point of the Dove story: "I love the thought of being a part of an ad that would potentially touch many young girls to tell them that it is all right to be unique and everyone is beautiful in their own skin," said model Shanel Lu.

And even more to the point is Sigrid Sutter, quoting Keats: "Truth is beauty."

Tactic #2: Speak to the Hero, Not the Child

The second tactic of empowerment marketing emphasizes the power of the audience, casting the viewer as the hero with the brand or organization as a helper, speeding her on her way.

Courage

At the center of Nike's 2008 "Courage"campaign is a website gallery of athletes who through sheer will and perseverance overcame tremendous odds. And at the center of this gallery sits a sixty-second video that denies every tenet of inadequacy marketing. It begins with a title card reading: "Everything you need is already inside." Then, to the beat of the Killers' song "All the Things That I Have Done" and the chant "I've got soul but I'm not a soldier," the viewer experiences a hyperspeed montage of the perfection of nature, the innocence of children, the diversity of world culture, and overlaying it all, the painfully won transcendence of athletic achievement. Finally, of course, we get the tagline: *Just Do It*. With these three simple, and now universally recognized, words, the viewer is asked not to simply admire all of this perfection but to pursue similar achievement in whatever way he or she defines it. The *it* in "Just Do It" is intentionally nonprescribed and thus, for many, has become deeply personal.

Courage is but one of the hundreds of Just Do It messages that has catapulted Nike to iconic status in its industry over the last twenty years, but I've chosen to highlight this execution because it so clearly declares the moral of the incredibly resonant Nike myth. Reminiscent of one of Aesop's fables, Courage's moral is spelled out for the audience in unmistakable terms: "Everything you need is already inside." Stirring up feelings of inadequacy? This is the exact opposite approach.

It's important to not just understand but to *feel* the distinction between empowerment marketing and inadequacy marketing—because that's how your audiences experience them. So try this: watch the *Courage* video and then watch the 2010 Skechers Super Bowl ad featuring Kim Kardashian—a classic lust-focused inadequacy spot. It's a muddled lascivious mess of a message in which the reality star gives up her trainer/lover for a shoe that does all the work for her. Audiences rated it a painful flop. Notice how the two approaches instinctively pull you on a gut level in opposite directions—one toward a sense of empowerment, the other away.

Still, the Courage message goes further than uplift. Traditional marketing has deeply ingrained in us the assumption that audiences prize ease and convenience and avoid making sacrifices at any cost—case in point, a shoe that replaces the need to work out. Even the latest strategy briefs from marketers working on climate change warn against acknowledging the need for tough choices and trade-offs. Rather, they exhort cause marketers to focus only on self-interest and ease of action.

This is a destructive and flawed assumption. People are programmed to believe in heroism, and, as Christopher Vogler notes in his classic text on mythic structure in movies: "Sacrifice is the Hero's willingness to give up something of value, perhaps even her own life, on behalf of an ideal or group." The post-modern inadequacy approach insists that people have lost any interest in difficult but ultimately heroic action. The success of Just Do It, with its relentless focus on pain and failure ultimately giving way to success, powerfully indicates otherwise.

It's interesting to imagine how counterintuitive Just Do It would have seemed to our marketing forefathers. If everything you need is already in you, what hole is there for the brand to fill? I can just imagine a 1950s creative director laughing at a junior copywriter, the *Courage* brief in his hand and soon to be in the trash bin.

Apple's 1984

Since we've already explored the details of this campaign, I'll pause here only to place it among its empowerment marketing kin. First, like Just Do It, "1984" mocks the idea that a corporation can take care of us and give us what we need. The droning voice of conformity on the giant screen is not just a stand-in for IBM. Most audiences didn't care enough to rebel against the monolithic computer maker because at the time, computers just weren't that personal. The story was so resonant because the villain represents advertising's typical consumerist approach, an approach that audiences indeed feel a deep need to resist. After all, the book *1984* was written as Orwell's response to the increasing levels of social engineering he saw all around him in the supposedly free world. Through the action of the ad, Apple doesn't try to step in as a heroic replacement for IBM, a better Big Brother. Rather it casts itself as a tool for the creativity of those who resist.

On its surface we find a remarkably produced and familiar tale of dystopia and rebellion. And it was well timed, coming at a moment of myth gap in which the techtopia future promised in the 1950s appeared to be nothing more than an illusion. More deeply, we find a moral deeply contradictory to the dark art: creative nonconformists will rule the world. And at its core, we find the values of self-realization and creativity.

As Steve Jobs would tell his biographer before his death, "The people who buy [Apple products] do think different. They are the creative spirits in this world, and they're out to change the world. We make tools for those kinds of people."

!!! ——> Tactic #3: Forget the Consumer, Call on the Citizen

The final tactic of empowerment marketing comes down to this: inspired citizens make better brand evangelists than helpless consumers.

Yes We Can

I thought I detected tearstains on the hundreds of messages that filled my inbox, e-mailed from my nearly forgotten friends, colleagues, and even my grandfather. For a moment I wondered if the same spammer had hijacked every e-mail account on Earth. But each message contained a personal, heartfelt confession—some variation on the single theme "I *had* to share this with you."

I click the link, and within a moment I'm riveted to YouTube:

> *It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation. Yes we can.*

will.i.am, frontman for the Black Eyed Peas, sings the mythmaking words of a sensational candidate for president who had just been defeated in the New Hampshire primary.

> *Yes we can, to justice and equality. Yes we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes we can heal this nation. Yes we can repair this world. Yes we can. Sí, se puede.*

Scarlett Johansson, Kareem Abdul-Jabar, and John Legend are all singing, chanting, signing along with Obama's concession speech—a speech that promised hope, not the kind that would be delivered to us as consumers, but that we could work together to earn for ourselves as citizens.

> *We know the battle ahead will be long, but always remember that no matter what obstacles stand in our way, nothing can stand in the way of the power of millions of voices calling for change.*

Yes We Can is the perfect expression of the digitoral era: a mash-up, produced without the knowledge of the candidate who once owned its words. It's a reinterpretation and retelling of a story that had the power to move a nation but whose expression on a single night of defeat might have been forgotten in the twenty-four-hour news cycle—if not for tens of millions of views online. It's too long and unconventional to be a TV spot, too bold to be an official campaign video—and too compelling to resist forwarding it along. will.i.am had put his name on the first digitoral political masterpiece.

> *We have been told we cannot do this by a chorus of cynics who will only grow louder and more dissonant. We've been asked to pause for a reality check. We've been warned against offering the people of this nation false hope. But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope . . . We will begin the next great chapter in America's story with three words that will ring from coast to coast; from sea to shining sea—Yes. We. Can.*

The ad earned will.i.am an Emmy and extended his legend as a man who chose to capitalize on—rather than run from—the massive changes the Internet had brought to the music industry. Of course, the digitoral-savvy of will.i.am is only half the story. The real magic came from the story *Yes We Can* had created, and that story began with Barack Obama, the candidate who was telling the truth. I'm not talking about the surface truth pertaining to policy details. Barack Obama was telling the truth about human nature. He was on his way to winning an election by winning the story wars.

The stage for the truth Obama would tell was set in an America exhausted by politics based on the dark art. The events of 9/11 had given rise to the most powerful narrative of the decade, and it was a narrative that meshed perfectly with the story told by the man who came before him. Even before the tragedy, George W. Bush had been warning: "Today we live in a world of terror, mad men and missiles." It was an unsettling tone we would come to expect as a matter of course and for a while it offered enough explanation and

meaning to keep a nation moving forward. But it could not hold for long.

With an economic collapse looming and unstoppable and two wars raging, fear was everywhere. Obama responded with: *Yes we can*.

Contained within those three words was a campaign that turned inadequacy marketing on its head. Obama's words glorified optimism over fear, collective sacrifice over individual greed, and engaged citizenship over prepackaged, convenient solutions. My social network wouldn't have been weeping if Obama had been addressing us as a mass of passive children needing to be coddled and directed. He touched a nerve with an empowering message highlighting our boundless ability to mature and transcend.

Obama's story spread wildly through the digitoral landscape. People believed that yes, they could, and became joyful evangelists. The Obama campaign raised over $500 million online alone. And, against all odds, Barack Obama became the president of the United States.

What is most commonly admired and studied about the Obama campaign is not its brand but its success in leveraging emerging online tools. But the two cannot be separated. Sure, the campaign recruited Facebook wonder boy Chris Hughes to do its online organizing and seemed to grasp the magic of widgets and ringtones faster than anyone else. But tools alone don't deliver resonance. *Authenticity* does.

"It's even easier to reveal inauthenticity in the online world," observed Jeff Gulati, a professor tracking the use of social media in campaigns and a student of the Obama run for president. "If it doesn't resonate in the offline world, it won't resonate in the online world."

While the tools accelerated the massive spread of the message, it was the message itself that drove Obama's online success. And that message was simple: "Change will not come if we wait for some other person," he told his supporters on Super Tuesday, "or if we wait for some other time . . . We are the hope of the future."

It's a powerful message of hard work, personal maturity, and community engagement. And it's a direct assault on inadequacy marketing.

And what about audience response to Obama's message—everything from professional masterpieces like will.i.am's music video to thousands of in-person get-togethers and personal fan sites? Should these be explained by technological savvy or by the power of Obama's positive, citizen-powered message? This element of Obama's digitoral success is part of a larger pattern of empowerment marketing: brands that aim to empower tend to seek out and invest in new channels through which they demonstrate respect for their audience's power and opinions. And audiences quite often respond.

Because the Obama campaign believed in the possibility of maturity and even brilliance in its supporters, its marketers turned control of large pieces of the campaign over to them. Mybarackobama.com was a particularly sensational success, allowing enthusiasts to write their own blogs, submit policy recommendations for all to see, and fundraise the way they saw fit.

Inspired citizens, it turns out, don't just make good customers. They make great partners.

The Story of Stuff

Chapter 1 offered an in-depth look at Annie Leonard's legendary online campaign, but there's one further insight worth noting as we come to understand the characteristics of empowerment marketing, and it, too, involves the strategic power of speaking to the citizen, not the child.

When Leonard approached our studio with her project, we brought a few inadequacy assumptions of our own to the first creative session. We watched her hour-long live presentation with excitement but also with some skepticism. "Twenty minutes?" we responded when she told us of her goal to cut the talk down for the Web. "People don't want to think that much. They'll give you five at most."

And when it came to the audience for the piece, Louis felt that the world was ready to hear the message but the rest of us agreed

it wasn't going to travel much beyond the choir. Yes, Leonard had learned that her talk had to be *simplified* to reach beyond non–technical experts. That's what made her presentation great. But she was steadfast that the presentation not be *dumbed down.* If the system was interconnected and multilayered, the animation would have to be as well, even if that meant a narrower audience. If there were no easy fixes out there, no "10 things you can do" to solve the *stuff crisis,* then no simple solutions would be proffered. We were going to treat our audiences as if they had adult attention spans and an adult interest in understanding complex issues. We would frame the problem as serious, something that could not be solved with a click. Sustained collective action would be the only out.

We started the project with deep misgivings that there were enough mature citizens out there on the Internet to get the project off the ground. That was 2007. Fifteen million views later, I've changed my opinion. This doesn't mean that I'd recommend anyone launching a campaign to ignore what's interesting in favor of an earnest recitation of dry facts. But you don't have to dumb down your message, either. As you'll see, empowerment marketing provides plenty of tools for getting it out there with depth and nuance still intact.

The campaigns we've just touched on each created new myths, as marketers have done since the earliest days of the story wars. They identified a place where old explanations—about everything from status, beauty, political engagement, possessions—aren't working anymore. They tell stories that provide the possibility of new explanation and meaning in the gap that's been created. And they offer new rituals to enact these new stories—a unique interaction with your computer, a chance to volunteer with a campaign, a deeper commitment to sport. But these efforts go a step further than their dark art peers. By appealing to higher values and believing in the desire of their audiences to seek truth, take on challenges, and understand complexity, these empowerment marketing stories achieved iconic status and built some of the most successful campaigns of all time.

Maslow's Answer to Freud: a Foundation for Empowerment Marketing

At this point in our journey we have reached a threshold. We have dissected inadequacy marketing and seen its Freudian foundation. In the story wars, we have come to know our enemy.

We've also observed a small but remarkably successful resistance—iconic campaigns that contradict dark art assumptions. The digitoral era and our own consciences will demand that we create more of these, but how exactly do we do that?

Do we organize our own resistance simply by copying the elements of what has worked for past empowerment marketing breakthroughs? Do we charge ahead on instinct, replacing inadequacy values with values that we inherently feel are of a higher service to society? And if we want to heed Campbell's call to create myths that help people "mature," how do we define *maturity* without randomly judging what is "grown up" and what is not? Without a coherent theory, we risk creating stuffy, moralistic, and naive marketing campaigns—typical socially conscious marketing fare.

In my own work, I found myself stuck for a time at this same threshold, eager to build my stories on higher values, those that I'd observed to be held by most of the people I've encountered in my life. It simply didn't fit my experience that, as Freud wrote, "hatred is at the bottom of all the relations of affection and love between human beings." But I needed a model to explain why people might resonate more strongly with something higher—to prove that Nike, Apple, Obama, and Leonard weren't simply lucky flukes.

And then I encountered the writings of Abraham Maslow, once a blaspheming rebel in the field of psychology who eventually rose to be one of its kings as the president of the American Psychological Association. As a young man in the 1940s, Maslow desired, as Freud had, to understand human nature so as to help avoid the horrors of another world war. But as his study and fieldwork progressed, he began to experience deep misgivings about the limitations of the strict Freudian worldview.

It was while living among the Blackfoot people of Alberta, Canada, that Maslow's faith in Freud first began to waver. In the society of eight hundred individuals that he studied, he reported that there had only been five known fistfights in the past fifteen years. During his stay, he never personally experienced a single instance of hostility, and noted that these people were appalled by the aggression they observed in white society. The dark, violent nature, supposedly inherent in humanity, just wasn't present in this small tribe. Returning from this experience, Maslow was inspired to look at his own society's problems not from the assumption of mankind's moral inadequacies, but from the exact opposite vantage point: "I wanted to prove," he wrote, "that human beings are capable of something grander than war and prejudice and hatred."

Maslow launched his assault on psychological orthodoxies by pointing out a simple, yet overlooked fact—Freud had developed his theories primarily by observing his patients, and all of his patients had been mentally ill. "If one is preoccupied with the insane, the neurotic, the psychopath, the criminal, the delinquent, the feeble-minded, one's hopes for the human species become perforce more and more modest," Maslow would write. "One expects less and less from people . . . it becomes more and more clear that the study of the crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy specimens can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy."

While everyone else was studying sick people, Maslow set out, as nobody had before, to study the healthy, mature, and "self-actualizing"—those who seemed to find satisfaction in life and fulfillment of their potential. Maslow looked for patterns in the psychologies of the living and the dead—his mentors, his students, John Keats, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ida Tarbell, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, George Washington, John Muir—thousands of individuals in all.

And just as his contemporaries were describing highly specific symptoms of various neuroses, Maslow identified the common symptoms of healthy maturity. Maslow and his colleagues set the bar extremely high for self-actualization, and his early work was somewhat confounded by the rarity of those who reach this final

goal. But what would be far more useful than the identification of such special individuals was Maslow's discovery that movement toward self-realization is a nearly universal drive. Self-realization, he wrote, is "a far goal toward which all men strive."

In Maslow's worldview, human needs are not confined to the basics of survival—food, shelter, sex. As soon as these needs are fulfilled, and—as further research has shown—even when they are not, "higher" needs make themselves known. A person who is starving may perceive that his only need is for food. But once his belly is full, he will begin to feel the need for safety and shelter. Once the safety need is met, he will begin to act on the need for belonging and esteem of his peers, and so on. Neuroses, in Maslow's opinion, come not from suppressing the aggressive drives of the id, as Freud supposed. They can just as easily arise from the suppression of needs that lead to self-realization. We are all on a lifelong journey to maturity, he taught. We may never actually get there, but at least some part of us can't help but strive toward it.

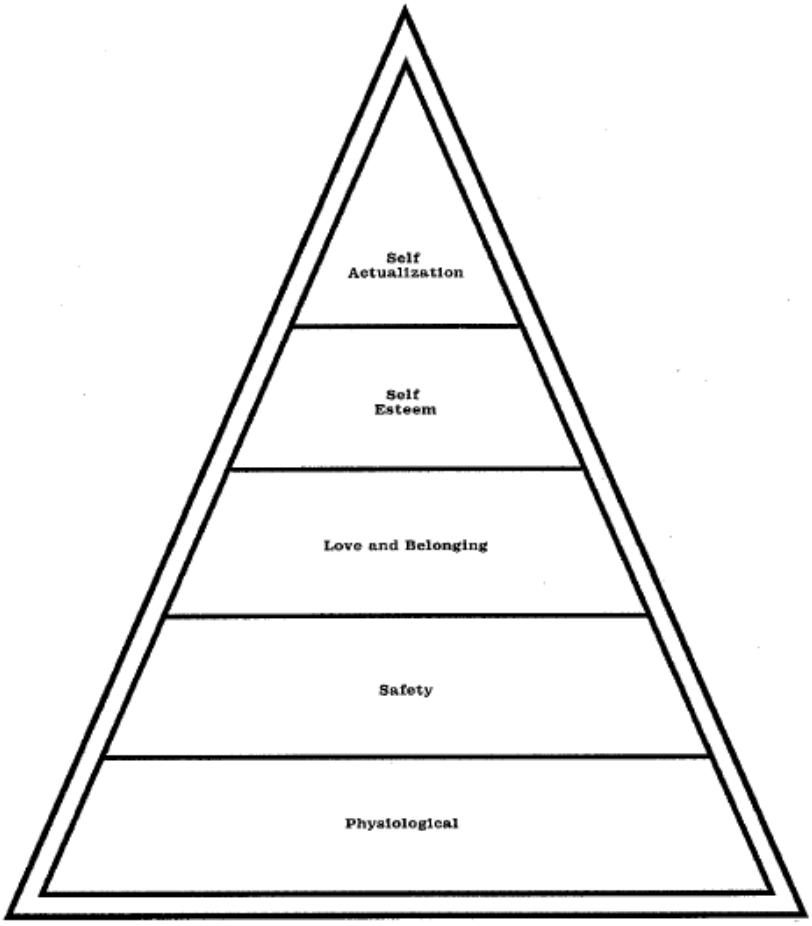
Maslow arranged the universal needs he observed into a hierarchy. It has evolved much over time and been interpreted dozens of ways, but in essence it looks like the schematic shown in "Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." It's important to note that while a "hierarchy" may seem to imply that some values are better or more important than others, this is not the case. Maslow felt that all of these needs were essential to human fulfillment.

At the bottom of this pyramid, we find the *basic needs.* They begin with the needs of our bodies. Deny these and you die. At the top end of this "lower" group are the needs of esteem. Maslow also referred to the needs in these four lower levels as *deficiency needs* because if they are not met, the individual will feel anxiety and inadequacy. This is where inadequacy marketers love to dwell.

When our deficiency needs are mostly met, we gain a platform off of which we can strive for psychological maturity. At this higher level, we find what Maslow labeled the *growth needs.* It is here that individuals question simplistic prejudices and turn to the larger concerns of society. Here the selfish consumer becomes the mature

Abraham Maslow's

Hierarchy of Needs



citizen. Maslow also called these needs *being needs* to highlight that the object of these needs is not something to possess; rather, the individual moves toward the embodiment of these ideals. In this way, they are quite different from the deficiency needs, which might be delivered to and possessed by an individual.

It is on this pyramid that we may find a far more varied and exciting palette of universal values on which to base our marketing

myths. And it is here, knowing that people strive to find a path to fulfilling higher level needs, that we find an explanation for the resonance of the empowerment marketing successes we've seen so far.

Maslow boiled the growth needs down to a collection of single words. With an eye toward making them useful for understanding and building empowerment marketing campaigns, let's elaborate on those we will find most useful. Beyond sex, status, and convenience, people are also driven by a need for:

- WHOLENESS: The need to feel sufficient as an individual and connected to others as part of something larger, to move beyond self-interest

  PERFECTION: The need to seek mastery of skill or vocation, often through hard work or struggle

  JUSTICE: The need to live by high moral values and to see the world ordered by morality, to overthrow tyranny

  RICHNESS: The need to examine life in all of its complexity and diversity, to seek new experience and overcome prejudice

  SIMPLICITY: The need to understand the underlying essence of things

  BEAUTY: The need to experience and create aesthetic pleasure

  TRUTH: The need to experience and express reality without distortion, to tear down falsehood

  UNIQUENESS: The need to express personal gifts, creativity, and nonconformity

  PLAYFULNESS: They need for joyful experience

As soon as I came to understand Maslow's hierarchy, I knew I had discovered the foundation for a powerful alternative to inadequacy marketing. If we see these needs as *values,* as Maslow often referred to them, we find a whole new way to select a core for empowerment-based storytelling strategies.

The Values at the Core of Legendary Campaigns

With this palette of values in mind, let's rip the cover off some of the marketing myths we've seen on our exploration to this point, unwind their structures, and peer at the values hidden at their centers. Table 5-1 is my view of what we might find. Keep in mind that this analysis is the result of reverse engineering, surmising the deeply embedded values from the campaign outputs. You might assign different values from Maslow's hierarchy to each campaign but the pattern that will emerge, and that will be discussed in a moment, should remain abundantly clear.

TABLE 5-1

Campaign	Moral of the story	Core needs or values celebrated
Listerine	Halitosis makes you undesirable.	Safety, sex, self-esteem
Cadillac	Your car tells the world who you are. Get the best.	Esteem by others
Daisy (Johnson)	Vote for Johnson or you and your children will not be safe.	Safety
Whopper Freak-out, Groupon, Kenneth Cole	Nothing is more important than this product.	The denial of all values other than consumption
The Crying Indian	Using a trash can will allow you to rectify an uncomfortable past.	Wholeness, justice
Real Beauty (Dove)	Truth is beauty and the truth is, everyone is beautiful.	Truth, beauty
Courage (Nike)	Everything you need is within you. Work hard to achieve.	Wholeness, perfection
1984 (Apple)	Creative nonconformists rule.	Uniqueness
Obama's 2008 presidential campaign	Working hard together, we can solve our problems.	Wholeness, perfection
The Story of Stuff	You can understand a complex, broken system and once you do, you can help fix it.	Richness, simplicity, wholeness

Now that we've pulled them apart, we might order these campaigns according to their core values on Maslow's hierarchy. What do we find? First, of course, the empowerment marketing stories tend to aggregate at the top of the pyramid, while the inadequacy marketing stories cluster lower down in the deficiency needs. This makes sense when we remember how the two strategies work.

Inadequacy marketing, as we know, begins by creating anxiety. This is done by stimulating desires that, if unmet, will make audiences feel threatened and insecure—as if there is a hole to fill. As Maslow described, this anxiety occurs when the lower-level deficiency needs are threatened. It is also here that readymade, consumable solutions can be credibly offered. A marketer can truthfully offer to meet the physiological needs (Listerine *does* temporarily cure bad breath) and can even promise to magically deliver safety, love, and esteem. When the lens of myth is applied to inadequacy stories, the brand or organization behind the message tends to be the hero, delivering the needed elixir to the consumer—whether that be a product or a cause to support. The audience, on the other hand, is the damsel in anxious distress.

Maslow would have deplored this model and the ideal of citizen-as-consumer—the man who is considered well adjusted because he works out his aggression with his shopping choices. In fact, Maslow believed that many people get stuck focusing on basic needs at the expense of dedicating themselves to higher purpose because society continually stimulates insecurity at the lower levels: "Anything that increases fear or anxiety tips the dynamic balance between regression and growth back toward regression and away from growth," he wrote.

Freud wasn't all wrong. Fear and anxiety are strong emotions, and that explains why the dark art has been so successful. Still, even for those stuck in a state of deficiency, the desire to move toward self-actualization is there, waiting to be accessed.

Empowerment marketing campaigns, on the other hand, rely on growth—being—needs that can never be fulfilled *for* individuals but must be embodied *by* them. To work with this reality, marketers must help audiences to see themselves as the emerging heroes of the

story. Everything you need is already inside, these stories say; we can help you on your journey to actualize your potential. I'm not implying, of course, that Nike doesn't benefit from and even encourage the notion that shoes can make you a hero. But the core strategy of empowerment marketing is not about magical fulfillment. It's about values and inspiration. Instead of offering to meet a deficiency need, empowerment marketers build stories around one of the growth values that are universal to human experience but rarely present at all in our consumer-frenzied media landscape. Recognizing that nearly everyone is striving for at least some of these higher ideals, empowerment marketers display these values in a way that stimulates audiences to renew or intensify their pursuit: See through the lies. Recognize your power. Push past failure. Dive into complexity.

The strategy works when audiences feel uplifted by the reminder that there's more to life than fulfilling base needs—take note, Kenneth Cole. Believing that the marketer is telling a deeper truth and sharing her deepest values, the receiver of the message feels uplifted. The message gains power and traction as she passes it along because she wants to share that uplift with her friends. Far from seeing the message as an intrusion, her friends will thank her for reminding them of their higher purpose. And everyone along the chain opens up to the ritual suggested in the message. Counterculture hippies became VW fanatics. Athletes bonded passionately to Nike. Voters fell madly in love with Obama. Educators defied the threat of dismissal to show *The Story of Stuff* in thousands of classrooms. And all of these groups evangelized these brands to widen their circles.

Before we go any further though, let's realize that we've stepped into dangerous territory, as we marketers are always apt to do. Empowerment marketing is not a wholly positive end in itself, and it is not easy to know what to make of campaigns that contain both dark art *and* empowerment elements.

Consider Edward Bernays's Torches of Freedom campaign. On the surface, we might deplore the ritual of smoking being inserted into the noble aims of women's suffrage. And you may remember

the inadequacy foundation of that campaign—Bernays wanted to remind women they lacked something men had. But it would be dishonest to deny that the campaign also leveraged growth values like justice and wholeness. Clearly, some campaigns walk a fine line—noble words, manipulative intentions. In these cases, the presence of higher-level values can be more of a trap for audiences than a gift. Can empowerment marketing principles be abused in the story wars? Absolutely. Have they been abused by some of brands highlighted above? Again, yes. But as we'll see, an ever-more transparent digitoral landscape will not create a comfortable future for marketers who place a veneer of truth over a body of lies. We will look deeply at this subject in chapter 8.

In Maslow's pyramid we find a way to lay the foundations for an empowerment marketing story strategy—choosing from universal human values that stress truth over falsehood, the heroic nature of audiences and the citizen over the consumer. In chapter, 6 we'll discover how to build story structure around this core using the insights of Campbell's timeless hero's journey.

Before we move on to that next step, though, let's do some on-the-ground basic training to put these theories into practice for your cause or campaign. The Basic Training that follows offers concrete steps for choosing core growth values that will align with your audiences and your own deeper truth.