

Storyteller-in-Chief

By Nancy Egan, FSMPS

They carry a range of titles, from creative director to director of communications to senior vice president. Their career paths include roles as surprising as director of R&D for a Fortune 500 textile manufacturer and professor of classics. What they share is a belief in the power of storytelling to bring a brand alive and communicate the values of organizations.

These communicators, and others who share similar roles, are responsible for various challenges in an industry under pressure to evolve. Organizations are dealing with mergers and acquisitions, leadership transitions, the search for talent, and the unrelenting, competitive heat. How an organization tells its story influences perception and, ultimately, decisions. Shape the narrative and you can shape the outcome.

The storytellers who gathered around the virtual campfire for this article included:



PHILIP BARASH,

creative director at Sasaki Associates, who enjoys a dual role at the firm. He partners with institutional, corporate, and civic clients on place-making and place-branding initiatives. Internally, he works across the firm to enlarge Sasaki's capacity for thought leadership, strengthen its reputation, and communicate the value of design to the marketplace.



MAGGIE FUSCO,

marketing communications manager at EYP, works with senior leadership to develop brand identity, managing print- and Web-based materials that express the firm's expertise-driven, client-focused approach to design. She is an accomplished writer and the creator of award-winning multimedia campaigns for recruiting, fundraising, and business development.



THOM MCKAY,

senior vice president at CallisonRTKL, has managed a full range of communications at the firm for most of his career. He began as a writer, helping establish the RTKL's reputation in Europe as the marketer for the London office before returning to the United States as the director of communications, a role that has expanded with the growth of the firm.



REBECCA W.E. EDMUNDS,

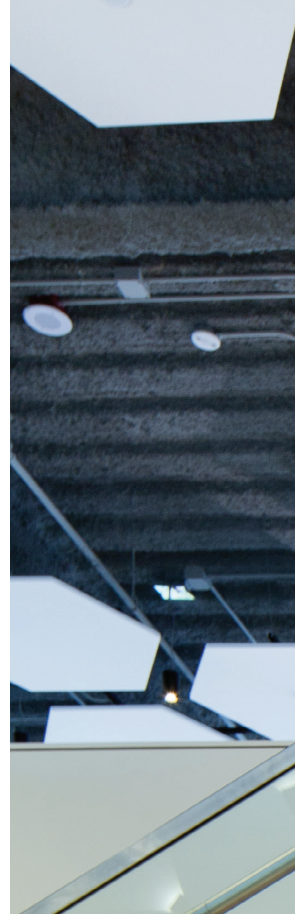
Associate AIA, and tsarina at r4 llc, is an independent consultant who works with professionals, designers, and artists in developing comprehensive narratives for their projects, achievements, careers, and creative philosophy. She brings a background in design, R&D, graphics, architecture, and creative writing to professional narrative development.



BRIEN MCDANIEL,

director of communications at FXFOWLE, is responsible for developing, implementing, and ensuring that communications strategies are integrated and aligned with the overall vision, values, and strategic business goals of the firm. His expertise includes public relations, community/industry outreach initiatives, communications and branding collateral, and online identity.

Over a series of conversations, these experts discussed the communications landscape at a critical time for professional services firms. During the last decade, in addition to dealing with the recession, communications teams have experienced the ascendency of branding, the arrival of transmedia/multiplatform storytelling, increased globalization, and the homogenization of ideas. Several overarching themes reveal an increasingly critical role for the storyteller-in-chief.





Authenticity and Aspiration

"Human nature doesn't vary much," says Fusco. "To tell a true story, you must know yourself and know your audience. People want an authentic story with an aspirational glow."

Barash spoke specifically to place-branding, which deals with the identity of an entire destination, be it a town, a neighborhood, a park, or a college campus. However, his message applies equally well to firm branding. "People connect to place in a powerful way. The desire for authentic places or brands is a backlash against the globalization hangover. It's authenticity versus homogenization."

McKay, having been part of the RTKL international expansion and domestic growth, understands that to remain authentic, the brand story has to evolve with the organization and adapt to context. "We built our reputation as a solid, service-driven commercial design firm in the United States, which was who we really were. In Europe, we were able to tell a bigger story about design. By the time we arrived in Asia, the market was ready for more and so were we. The brand had different meanings in different cultures, which allowed us to be more aspirational in our messaging."

Engage, Educate, and Empower

No matter how true and powerful the defining story may be, it's never enough. Vital organizations have many stories to tell and multiple voices to share them. Yet, most technical professionals are not professional communicators.

"Traditionally, architects have not been taught communication skills," Edmunds says. "At the 2015 American Institute of Architects conference in Atlanta, I was excited to see a new generation of communications specialists—individuals with creative writing, theater, and film backgrounds—who are jumping in to shape narratives for the profession and its work. Firms are recognizing the value and energy this type of thinking brings to their staff, practice, and clients. Today, the audience for architecture is wide open, but you have to help people to find and exercise their voice."

At FXFOWLE, McDaniel is part of a task force that includes principals and associates who are exploring ways to evolve the brand story. "We are at a transition point with new leaders stepping forward. There's a great sense of inclusiveness—everyone is on the same page as we broaden the narrative to reflect who we are now."

Interestingly, McDaniel and his team are using the firm's recently released monograph *Reveal, Filter, Evolve, Effect* as a starting point for discussion. "The question is how do we move forward and incorporate the new? The monograph demonstrates what the story has been. Now we want to express who we are becoming, our true, best selves."

Fusco works closely with EYP senior designers and managers to help them learn how to tell their project's stories. "We have to remember that it's all about the client audience. If we can show them something useful and create meaning for them, they will pay attention."

She helps the technical staff understand the difference between fact-stacking or description and a story that is built around what the building means, and the impact it has for the user, community, and potential client. To help them get to what matters, she developed an exercise based on the Hedgehog Concept that Jim Collins articulates in his book *Good to Great*. By assessing what people are deeply passionate about, what they do better than anyone else, and what will generate revenue, individuals and organizations can determine their

Figure 1

Hedgehog Concept

(Copyright © 2002, Jim Collins, originally published in *Good to Great*)

“The oldest pathway for which the brain is hardwired is narrative.”
—John Seely Brown



Hedgehog sweet spot, which will also help them shape their narratives (see Figure 1).

Media Is Not the Message

Futurist Thomas Frey explained in his essay “Four Unexpected Macro Trends for 2013 and Beyond” that we are now in a period of multidimensional literacy. Beyond reading and writing, people are consuming information in many different ways that demand photo, video, coding, app, device, and social media literacy.

Hence transmedia storytelling, which moves across multiple platforms and formats, allows stories not only to reach a larger audience but also to expand the narrative itself. It presents both a challenge and an incredible opportunity for communicators.

“The medium is not the message,” argues Fusco. “The message is the message, and our job is to tell the same story across all platforms.” Audience expectations and the conventions of the format reshape delivery but not the “core message, which should be told with clarity and consistency,” as Edmunds notes. Whether you use Twitter, YouTube, or post a blog entry, it’s the same story.

Reaching the audience requires a wider range of communications skills than ever before. McKay’s team includes a writer, a tech, a designer, and a wrangler to make sure it gets done. At EYP, Fusco works with a team that includes a media coordinator, designer, web developer, and videographer.

Barash’s charge with place-branding has him working with teams that include landscape designers, environmental graphics, and interior designers to tell the story.

Communications As Strategy

“What we do is not wordsmithing, it’s strategy,” explains Fusco. Storytelling is not an add-on for an organization that understands the power of messages to “evoke emotion, passion, and more,” notes Edmunds.

“It’s strategy,” agrees McKay. “Where’s the company going, what’s the structure? It translates to other things like HR and proposals.” McDaniel calls for “a holistic view of the communication position as integral to the success of the firm.”

One of the most compelling reasons to look more closely at the role of the storyteller comes from a discussion currently taking place in business literature.

As Geoff Colvin writes about tomorrow’s workers in his recent book *Humans Are Underrated: What High Achievers Know that Brilliant Machines Never Will*:

“They can and must become champions at the skills of human interaction—empathy above all, social sensitivity, collaboration, storytelling, solving problems together, building relationships. And then they must be sure that their work demands these skills. The reason is that we’re hardwired by 100,000 years of evolution to value deep interaction with other humans (and not with computers). Those wants won’t be changing anytime soon.”

As our marketing departments become increasingly sophisticated organizations with multidimensional literacy skills and state-of-the-art technology at the ready, it’s important to remember that real, durable value creation is rooted in human connection. Storytelling will always be one of the marketer’s most powerful tools. ■