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free-range thinking

Good Causes, Better Ads

As I reported in *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes,* research conducted by the Starch division of RoperASW from 1990-2000 revealed that nonprofit ads were frequently the least effective ads in the magazines and newspapers in which they appeared. A new study of nonprofit ads, however, shows marked improvement.

Affinity *(www.affinityresearch.net),* a research firm which also measures the effectiveness of print advertising, studies 20,000 ads each year from publications including *Business Week, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, Vanity Fair,* and dozens of other well-known titles. Ads are measured for "total recall" (did readers remember seeing the ad), "brand association" (did they note the ad's sponsor), and "actions taken" (which could run the gamut from ordering a product, visiting a web site, or just changing one's opinion of the advertiser).

The chart below shows how nonprofit ads performed compared to the average of all other advertising categories in publications appearing from January 2005 to June 2006:

While nonprofit ads are still outperformed by many commercial advertisers, they are running closer to the middle of the pack than the rear. According to Tom Robinson, managing director of Affinity, the 13% difference in brand association may be due to the vast number of nonprofits competing for attention, as well as the similarity in names among all the funds, foundations, leagues, etc. But the relatively strong showing in "total recall" and "actions taken" suggests that good causes are doing a better job when it comes to telling their stories in print. ■

In Affinity's study of 100 nonprofit ads running between April and June 2006, this ad for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation garnered the highest scores.

Category	Total Recall	Brand Assoc.	Actions Taken
Nonprofit Organizations	47%	70%	48%
All Others (average)	53%	83%	51%

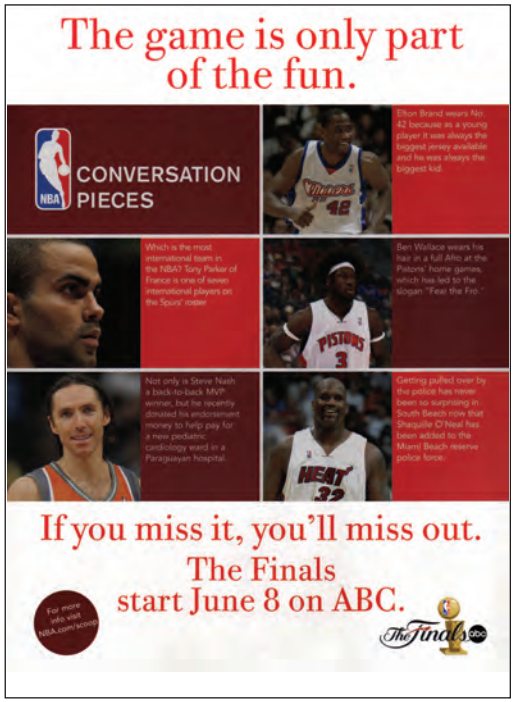
Tales: You Win

From courtrooms to classrooms, from the NBA to the GOP, examples of the power of storytelling are everywhere.

I collect stories about stories, but they're not for me. They are for the skeptics I regularly encounter who claim their field is so driven by data that stories "just won't fly." So I'm constantly on the lookout for articles that show how stories can be used to engage, educate, and persuade in just about any context.

They are not hard to find. I recently spotted one such article about the Enron trial that attributed the guilty verdicts to the triumph of one story over another in the courtroom. In June, I read a piece from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that proposed integrating stories into science curriculum to help students remember and learn more. When the NBA Finals began, I started seeing print ads that told stories about the players and soon discovered this was part of a carefully conceived campaign. And in July, I read a fascinating commentary about Karl Rove's plan to help Republican candidates craft stories that could lead to surprising success in November.

But don't take my word for it: see for yourself. Brief synopses of each of these articles are included inside. And if all this carping about storytelling makes your head hurt, you'll find another example that, once again, comes up "tales."



Why did the NBA go with stories over stats? The answer is inside.

a goodman
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Newsletter edited by Lori Matsumoto.

"Enron Jury Saw Story Defense Missed"
(*The Los Angeles Times,* May 27, 2006)

In 1993, social psychologists Nancy Pennington and Reid Hastie conducted a study to determine how jurors make decisions. They discovered that jurors often have difficulty cataloging each and every piece of information that is presented in the course of a trial. Consequently, jurors gradually construct stories in their minds that will hold the evidence together in some reasonably logical order. When the time arrives to render a verdict, they compare their stories with those presented by the competing attorneys and side with the story that most resembles their own.

The latest example of this phenomenon can be found in the Enron trial. During closing arguments, Jeffrey Skilling's lawyer said, "There is no story here," meaning that the government prosecutors had not built a credible conspiracy story involving Skilling, Kenneth Lay, and other senior managers. The jurors, however, saw an age-old story about greed that had simply been updated to take advantage of the latest legal loopholes. And when the time came for a decision, this story easily trumped the defense's tale of well intentioned but ill-informed executives who were unaware of the illegal dealings all around them.

"Teaching Science as Rich Narrative"
(*The Philadelphia Inquirer,* June 2, 2006)

Do neurons (a) carry oxygen, (b) secrete digestive enzymes, (c) remove foreign particles from the blood, or (d) receive signals from the environment? Less than half of high school seniors tested gave the correct answer, (d), which is yet another indication of the sorry state of science education in this country. How do we fix it? In this commentary, Ursula Goodenough, a biology professor, and William Grassie, executive director of the Metanexus Institute (which promotes research at the nexus of science and religion), assert the answer may be found in stories. "Human thought takes narrative form," they write, "and we most readily remember narrative accounts." Give students a bunch of facts, and they forget them. Tell them a story that weaves those facts together, the co-authors say, and they will remember...and learn.

"NBA Wants Women to Talk Basketball"
(*The New York Times,* June 9, 2006)

How do you convince more women to watch basketball? Back in June, when the Miami Heat were preparing to face the Dallas Mavericks in the championship round, the NBA decided that stories were the key. Ads filled with so-called "conversation pieces" were placed in magazines including *People, Us,* and *Entertainment Weekly,* to give women more to talk about than scores and statistics. They could learn, for example, that Shaquille O'Neal had an off-the-court job with the Miami Beach reserve police force, San Antonio's Tony Parker was born in France, or that Phoenix Sun Steve Nash donates his endorsement money to a hospital in Paraguay. "The game is only part of the fun," the ads boast, which may lead knowledgeable *male* fans to wonder if they're referring to off-court paternity suits and drug arrests. But hey, that's another story.

"Karl Rove's Scheherazade Strategy"
(TomDispatch.com, July 7, 2006)

Like nuclear energy, which can light an entire city as well as destroy it, stories have power that can be used for good and evil purposes. In this essay, Ira Chernus, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, explains how Karl Rove is urging Republicans to use stories to distract voters or to reframe attitudes on controversial issues. "Rove is telling Republican candidates to follow Scheherazade's rule," Chernus writes. "When policy dooms you, start telling stories – stories so fabulous, so gripping, so spellbinding that [Americans will forget] all about a lethal policy."

In the case of Iraq, for example, Rove wants Americans to view U.S. troops "...as the cavalry putting down the 'Injuns.'" This would recast the war as another in our long and proud history of frontier conflicts – battles that "true Americans" do not walk away from. To win in November, Chernus writes, Democrats will have to do more than rely on the facts, as overwhelming as they may seem. They must tell a more compelling story. ■

(Special thanks to my colleague, Terrence McNally, for helping round up these examples.)

To demonstrate its effectiveness, the pain-reliever Aleve is inviting satisfied customers to submit their stories at AleveGoodNews.com. The best stories can be seen online and in television ads.