

BRAND STORYTELLING



PUT CUSTOMERS AT THE HEART
OF YOUR BRAND STORY

MIRI RODRIGUEZ

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PRAISE FOR *BRAND STORYTELLING*

Miri Rodriguez's *Brand Storytelling* is an engaging and insightful must-read for all digital marketers and storytellers. Plenty of ah-ha moments for brand storytellers seeking to infuse their communication strategies and tactics with empathy and vulnerability that will resonate with their customers, but in the most authentic, emotional, and immersive way possible. *Brand Storytelling* provides an essential journey for brand storytellers that truly does put the customer at the heart of the story.

Michael Raymond, Senior Writer, The Walt Disney Company

Miri Rodriguez's *Brand Storytelling* is bound to serve as an essential practical guide for anyone seeking to harness the power of the brand journalism movement that has revolutionized communications over the past decade. Whether it's benchmarking, waving the 'magic wand of vulnerability or amassing an army of storytellers, Rodriguez's methods will electrify the town square of any organization. And who better to guide us than an influencer with an international reputation in the field of storytelling?

Mark Ragan, Chairman and Owner, Ragan Communications and *PR Daily*

Miri Rodriguez's demonstrated experience in the technology industry, with a marketing and multicultural background, plus her personal and professional experience, have positioned her as an authority in the storytelling field. With this gift to the world, she inspires us to be the best, by being story designers driven by the power of empathy, vulnerability and authenticity. A must-read for generations to come. Having spent quality time over the past five years, reading, researching, trying, failing, executing, teaching and successfully creating a Visual Storytelling Studio, I can tell you with no doubts in my mind that Rodriguez has created a masterpiece with a profound, delicate and fascinating equilibrium. This book is for

readers of all ages, in any industry, for any role, for entrepreneurs and business leaders, students and anyone interested in using a guide to understand, value and apply the power of storytelling to awaken and inspire emotions and transform them into meaningful actions.

Dieter Avella, General Manager, Zebra Technologies

Storytelling is the foundation of all communication, but is often overlooked. Miri Rodriguez is not only one of the best storytellers out there, but is also able to give practical, reliable, easy-to-implement advice for the real world. Well worth the read.

Craig Stilwell, EVP and GM of Consumer and Small to Medium Business, OpenText

Rodriguez's insights and advice on brand storytelling are critically relevant for both public and private sector organizations alike to survive, succeed, and stand out in a crowded social media landscape of noise and distractions.

Chris Hsiung, Deputy Police Chief and social media influencer

We know how important storytelling is – it captures the hearts and minds of your consumer in a way that no other type of marketing can. After seeing Rodriguez's dynamic presentation about brand storytelling at my conference in Sydney, I could not wait to read her book. And Rodriguez does not disappoint. She delivers so much valuable content. Rodriguez helps you to discover your story and provides a template to help you craft it and share it with the world. It is a must read for every business.

Mireille Ryan, CEO of the Social Media Marketing Institute and award-winning entrepreneur

Brand Storytelling

Put customers at the heart of your brand story

Miri Rodriguez



For Luis, Alex and Isaiah – you are my best story. And to all of you storytellers daring to find stories and the courage to tell them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miri Rodriguez is an award-winning digital marketer and storyteller. She has dedicated the last four years of her extensive marketing career advocating for and evangelizing brand narrative across many sectors and industries around the world. Rodriguez' mission for imparting storytelling techniques entrenched in vulnerability and empathy began when she worked as a creative journalist in the engineering discipline at Microsoft Corporation. There, she recognized the immediate need to help educate and inspire engineers and colleagues across functions on designing distinctive narratives that help define and drive immersive and emotional customer engagement experiences, while navigating the uncertainties of the digital age.

Basing her storytelling techniques in design thinking and user experience (UX) principles, Rodriguez has successfully bridged the contentious gaps between traditional business practices and creative communication strategies, crossing the brand storytelling boundaries from simple narrative design to a culture activation blueprint.

Rodriguez' thought leadership in both the digital marketing and tech worlds, as well as her passion for leading diversity and inclusion efforts, has made her one of the top sought-after speakers and business consultants in the industries. Clients include Walmart, Adobe, McKesson and Discover. Rodriguez holds a Master's degree from Georgetown University in Integrated Marketing Communications and certification in Design Thinking. She is also a NASA Social and MySkills4Afrika Programs alumnus and has served on the board for Africa and Middle East sector social enterprise association Trade + Impact and US marketing conference Social

Shake-up.

Rodriguez was born in Caracas, Venezuela, and currently resides in the state of Washington, US, with her husband, two sons and American Bulldog.

FOREWORD

‘You have to meet Miri,’ my friend Jack stated, and it wasn’t a request. Jack and I had developed a close friendship while working on his book, and have remained so in the years since its publication. He had been on a book tour and was in the Seattle area speaking at Microsoft when we met for a quick lunch that turned into a half day of catching up, and that included his Miri statement.

Jack is a former KGB spy (now US citizen and patriot), and when someone with KGB training tells you to do something, you generally listen. At least, I do.

Days later, Jack introduced Miri and me over email, and I dove into the usual social media ‘research’ to find out more about her, while we tried matching schedules to meet in person.

At that time, Miri’s title on LinkedIn stated she was a Storyteller at Microsoft. After 25 years of writing stories, I was immediately intrigued. What a great title. And at Microsoft? I wasn’t sure how those two worlds – tech and art – co-existed without some major marital issues.

Then, I met Miri.

We met in front of the Microsoft Visitor Center as designated. She had her Bosch headphones around her neck, a chic outfit that looked more appropriate for someone in fashion than in tech, and her tall stiletto heels impressed me to say the least. She called my name and rushed towards me with a huge smile on her face. I was immediately enveloped into a heartfelt embrace and into her energy and charisma. She’s the type of person that makes you feel better than you felt before seeing her that day.

After a whirlwind tour of Building 92, we headed to lunch in the Commons. I was impressed by everything I saw on campus and felt

drawn to the world of Microsoft, though mostly I was impressed by and felt an immediate connection with Miri herself. We laughed a lot, talked about our shared faith in God, and discussed our love for stories and how she was bringing them to life in the corporate world.

Over the next two years, Miri and I spent more time together, and I was able to attend several of her Storytelling workshops and keynotes. That's when I was able to see exactly how she was marrying art and tech in a way that could shape people, products and companies if they followed her advice. I could see why she was such a sought-after speaker in locations all around the world.

I was also excited that Miri touched on an area that I've long felt passionate about, and that's to not follow the trend of 'platform building'. To create a platform, you are seeking to have a product or person, or company, stand above everyone else. Instead, Miri talked about embracing people in a brand through storytelling to build trust and a loyal connection. I loved how she emphasized linking humans to products and companies through stories, and how empathy is the core of that connection.

Now, as I've become part of the corporate world, I've discovered how much storytelling has become a buzz word and trend. At first, I loved this. As an author and writer, stories and storytelling have been a core part of my world for nearly three decades. I'm always asking how I can tell a story in the most compelling way to my particular audience (or readers), and how to best leave them with the most impactful takeaways. But in the corporate world, I discovered how often the words 'story' and 'storytelling' were being misused or misunderstood. People just weren't getting what a story is! While these topics are being talked about and taught in workshops, they're not often being used correctly or in an impactful way.

Meanwhile, Miri has become an amazing story evangelist,

speaking around the globe and working hard to change these story abuses and perceptions. I was thrilled when she shared that she was writing a book to reach more people. After all, you can only impact so many on a stage. In book form, anyone can discover what storytelling is, its power to connect, how the craft should be used, iterated on, and how humans should be at the centre of brand development, always. She also provides innumerable tools to guide in the brand storytelling process.

I have a staple of writing and storytelling books I return to over and over again. Miri's book will be added to that small stack, and it should be added to yours.

So now, hear my voice as I emulate Jack's spy tone and say to you, 'You have to meet Miri!'

Just as I am, you will be grateful that you did.

Cindy Coloma

PREFACE

There are stories. Then there are great stories. A great story is one that reaches beyond the narrative, unsuspectingly grabbing you by the hand and immersing you into a newfound storyworld, never to bring you back again.

Are you a storyteller? Of course you are. We all are. At the cradle of our humanity lies the intrinsic cognitive ability to connect with other human beings through the most powerful medium that successfully influences our behaviours and decisions: story.

But, are you a good storyteller? *That* is the real question. We know a story is made of three basic elements: a character, plot and conclusion. In other words, you can say that if you are able to introduce these three elements to any type of content, it will inevitable become a story. However, does that make it a *good* story, or you a *good* storyteller?

We've all been exposed to dull, uninspiring narrative. Stories that pass us by inconsequentially and leave us at the same place where we started. Today's digital age – also known as the *information* age – has forged a modern path for the way we engage and connect with one another and with content. We are savvy consumers, parents, friends, siblings, children with access to an unprecedented plethora of information available at our fingertips – and now, voice command. We are driven by passion and enthusiasm to do something significant, purposeful; to leave a mark in the world. We have little or no time to waste on lifeless, useless content that provides no value to our lives or business. So why should we expect our customers to be any different?

In *Brand Storytelling* I want to offer practical tools to help you become a skilled brand storyteller, both at the personal and

business levels. These narrative schemes have proven successful in turning *any* content into compassionate human experiences where stakeholders and audiences are inspired into action and where your allegory alchemy will turn *words into worlds*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I will never be able to put into words the depth of gratitude and appreciation I have for every person who has in one way or another influenced, supported and inspired this epitome. This book is a result of countless hours spent not only writing, but sharing insights with incredibly smart industry experts, acquiring wisdom from extraordinary mentors offering guidance, celebrating small milestones with friends and family who have seen me through the entire process, and saying intimate prayers with my husband and sons on the days I felt I couldn't keep going.

I want to begin by acknowledging Jesus Christ, my Lord and Saviour who has given me the health, endurance, capability and a platform to share my lived experiences and knowledge with a worldwide audience. It is He who prepared a table before me, providing me with the ultimate direction of strengthening my empathy soft skill to become a human-driven communicator and servant to others.

Thank you to my husband, Luis. My eternal support and better half, who prepared rose and camomile hot teas on demand, coffee shots made of very specific beans at odd times in the mornings and ensured I was taken care of mentally and physically at all times. Thank you for keeping Team Rodriguez thriving and extending yourself to our house and the boys while I sat perpetually in front of the laptop. You are the cornerstone of our family. I love you.

A special thanks to my sons Alex and Isaiah for not only putting up with Mom being 'away' for a while but collaborating with me on this project. Alex, thank you for taking time to illustrate some of the concepts. You are a gifted artist. Isaiah, thank you for always letting me run ideas by you and offering insightful perspective. You are a

great storyteller. Most of all, thank you both for inspiring me every day to find and tell better stories.

An equal amount of thankfulness goes to my sister, Eli, who spent countless hours letting me decompress from the day's demands, listening to my rants and worrying about my sleeplessness. Our FaceTime routine and your prayers saved me.

I also want to thank my mom and dad for believing in me, for bringing our family to the United States of America so we could make dreams like this one a reality. Thank you for your sacrifice. I hope you're proud.

My dear tribe of extended family, friends and mentors, you are my accomplices in all I do and have undoubtedly challenged, shaped and loved me into the person I am today. Thank you for being there for me all these years. I wouldn't be here without you. The list is long, but you know who you are.

I owe a deep gratitude to Microsoft Corporation. When I made the choice to join this company many years ago, I really had no idea how empowering and fulfilling it would be to me. Thank you to the leaders, including my immediate managers, who not only encouraged me to pursue my passions, but launched me on many platforms. Thank you to my colleagues from the different disciplines who spent time listening to, teaching and doing life with me. You are family.

I'd also like to thank Cindy Coloma for writing the stunning foreword as well as everyone who enthusiastically jumped in to collaborate in the midst of their very busy schedules.

Finally, a special thanks to the Kogan Page team, and specifically to my commissioning editors Lachean Humphreys and Charlotte Owen for having faith in me and in this project and supporting me to the end. Charlotte, thank you for reaching out to me and presenting the idea. You started it all.

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Introduction

I was in London speaking at a marketing conference about the power of storytelling when a commissioning editor for Kogan Page publishing house introduced herself – along with the idea of me writing this book. I must admit, I wasn't immediately sold on this proposal. The opportunity couldn't have come at a worse time in my life. My mother was not doing too well. I had recently uprooted my immediate family three thousand miles from our home state of Florida to Seattle and was dedicating every ounce of personal extra time I could afford to relocation, personal matters, a new job and finishing my Master's degree. However, as often happens in life and against all logical reason, my heart stirred for a brief moment when standing in front of this opportunity, and began to whisper softly. It began to tell me a story about *you*.

My heart spoke about your struggles as a marketer and communicator and the many moments in your career that may have felt like wasted energy when you fervently tried to create and relay compelling messages that could inspire your internal and external audiences... yet you counted on minimal support or scarce resources. It painted the grim picture of your daily frustrations when trying to creatively incite other leaders or business partners within the organization to speak the language of empathy for the customer, while they brushed you away and remained focused on the product or the bottom line.

My heart went on to unapologetically expose the ugly battle scars I had collected over the past 20 years in the industry to poignantly remind me of the shortcomings and failures I had experienced in my quest to drive real human connection between my stakeholders.

It then took out a life-size mirror and discerningly planted it between the commissioning editor and me to faithfully expose a truth I seemed to have forgotten: the reality that I was once you.

My dear reader, if anyone can understand the arduous (and often underappreciated) unwinding journey that communicators and marketers have been forced to take within the past decade in attempts to successfully keep customers engaged and the brand thriving through the digital *chaos formation*; and if anyone can recognize the slightest pain points, mundane nuances and countless unseen *hats* the role of a marketer or communicator affords, it is yours truly.

You may not know me personally, but those who do can firmly attest that I do business with and lead with my heart. And it is that same heart that came up with the notion of me becoming vulnerable and empathetic – just as I lately invite others to do – to share my stories of failures, fears and learnings so that perhaps you will be saved from additional future heartache and feel empowered to fast track your marketing and messaging passions and inventions.

It is for you that I lost more sleep than I care to recount. And for you that my family made a significant sacrifice to put my *wife* and *mom* duties on hold for a while. Because I understand how hard it can be to navigate this uncharted landscape. And even more so when there is no one to guide you.

My hope is that this book will lead you beyond the practical storytelling tools and techniques instruction and wondrously rejuvenate your energy and passion for communication and marketing by offering a fresh hope grounded on ingenious, low-cost ideas birthed from your reawakened soul. Here's what you can look forward to.

In [Chapter 1](#), you will begin to explore the basic elements and structure of story and the importance of giving your brand story a

mission, so that you can purposely design it to reach a goal and target audience.

[Chapter 2](#) takes you right into the design thinking approach and breaks down each of the five design thinking phases as you begin the fun journey of prototyping stories. You will also learn to define the brand story's *universal truth*.

[Chapter 3](#) will take you on a magic carpet ride to a new mind palace: that of a story *designer*, not just a *teller*. You will learn some cool magic tricks that will sprinkle some pizzazz into your narrative and elevate it a step further.

Imagination is the key in [Chapter 4](#), where you will be able to reimagine a traditional integrated marketing plan by incorporating storytelling practices. Your brand story is now taking on a new force beyond content.

[Chapter 5](#) digs deep into today's market trend nuances and makes a compelling case for putting your customer at the heart of your brand story.

Get ready to get a little uncomfortable. In Chapter 6 you will learn the importance of practising vulnerability in order to tell authentic stories. This might be my favourite chapter.

[Chapter 7](#) makes an important case for drawing ethical boundaries as you uncover just how powerful storytelling is.

In [Chapter 8](#) you will be delighted with futuristic storytelling ideas that will take your brand narrative to the next level.

[Chapter 9](#) begs you to consider building a well-commissioned army of storytellers as you get ready to launch your stories.

Then in [Chapter 10](#) you will learn the best techniques and ground rules to take your story to market.

In [Chapter 11](#), you will understand how to define success when launching your story.

But we can't forget the story villains. We welcome them in [Chapter 12](#).

In [Chapter 13](#) the machines enter, and we have a *heart-to-heart* about what they will do to and for our stories.

And finally, in [Chapter 14](#), I introduce a group of incredibly talented storyteller colleagues from around the world who generously share their own experiences and leave you with invaluable wisdom that will be sure to inspire your brand story.

I'm really excited about the opportunity to take you on this storytelling design journey and hope you will find this guide valuable, memorable and insightful. Just as great stories should be.

1

Brand storytelling

What is it?

- What is storytelling and what is not
- The power of storytelling
- Your brand mission and the story arc

Google ‘Storytelling’ and you’ll find a plethora of definitions, videos, guides and how-to’s on what has become the hottest marketing sensation since influencer marketing. I don’t know about you, but the more hype the use of story for brand marketing seems to get lately, the more confusion it appears to create for industry leaders seeking to truly understand what it is. In the span of two years working directly in this field, I’ve seen it all: someone creating a PowerPoint presentation and calling it a story, someone else posting ‘stories’ on social media channels and calling it storytelling, and many others adding ‘storyteller’ to their business profile on LinkedIn but never having designed or told a business story before. I see brands scrambling to figure out how to effectively implement this messaging alchemy as part of their business forward strategy. And I see a lot of miscommunication happening across business disciplines, organizations and industries, all in the sacred name of story. But... why?

Simple: because the machines are here. And they’re here to