

Episode 91 - Interview: Will Storr, author of *The Science of Storytelling*, on how great stories persuade and inspire action

MichaelAaron Flicker: [00:00:00] Welcome back to Behavioral Science for Brands, a podcast where we bridge the gap between academics and practical marketing. Every week we sit down and go deep behind the science of some of America's most successful brands. I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: And today we're sitting with Will Storr bestselling author, journalist, and one of the world's foremost thinkers in storytelling.

Let's get into it, Will welcome to behavioral science for brands and we're so excited to have you on today's show. But before we get into our conversation, if you'll indulge me, I'd like to give our our listeners just a little bit of background on who Will Storr is and and then we can get into our conversation.

You spent nearly two decades exploring the origins and importance of stories and the power they have over us. You're an award-winning writer and author. [00:01:00] Your book, *Selfie* The Sunday Times said was approaching genius. The status game the Times said was excellent. Perhaps your best. And the Sunday Times bestseller, *The Science of Storytelling*.

The New York Times said was simply excellent and across your career, you've done so much to understand how we see stories and what that reveals about our own true selves, most of all as humans and about our humanity. We're thrilled to have you here at Behavioral Science for Brands. Thanks for being with us.

Will Storr: No, it's a great pleasure. Thanks for having me.

MichaelAaron Flicker: We, I, every week I say our listeners love stories and somehow that hits differently with you on the show. But can you tell us. How this all started for you? When did you become interested in the science of storytelling specifically? Because this is not your first chapter, as it were.

You've had other parts of your career where you've had lots of success [00:02:00] and lots of impact.

Will Storr: Yeah, so it began about, I mean, I guess it was maybe about 15 years ago, perhaps 20 years ago, where I was writing a book called *The Heretics* in the US it's called *The Un-Persuadables*. And the, the, the, the, what I was trying to find out in that book was.

Why is it that otherwise intelligent people end up believing crazy things? So, so, you know, it's not, the answer isn't you know, people are just stupid. They, they, they just believe stupid things. It's you know, my, my observation was that actually lots of really smart people end up believing things that are not, not smart.

So and as I was, you know, working on that, I was interviewing some of the, you know, world. Best psychologists and neuroscientists who were helping me with that. And, and whilst I was working on that, I was also writing my first novel and reading lots of books about how to tell stories. And it, it began to occur to me that a lot of the things the storytellers were saying about how stories work, but the same, about the same things as the scientists were saying about how the brain and the mind works.

So I was like, how is it, there's so many sort of commonalities. So that kind of became, sort of defined my search [00:03:00] really. And, and that became the answer to the question, you know, the answer to the question is that wider. Otherwise smart people believe crazy things is because the brain is a storyteller.

It's not, you know, as Jonathan, he has said it's not a logic processor. It's a storyteller and that, and that, and that counts for the, for the brainiest. So, so that, that, that's, that's why you know, really smart people are gonna end up, you know, believing things that you might think a bit wacky.

Michael Aaron Flicker: Maybe you could talk a little bit more about that.

The brain is a, it is a story processor, not a logic processor. What does that, what does that mean more deeply?

Will Storr: Well so the human brain, you know, uniquely does this thing where it takes reality and it remixes it. Such that, that it turns it into a narrative. So, you know, we, we become the central character in this unfolding narrative.

You know, we have this me, you know, we have memories of the past in story forms stored in our brains. We have visions of the future in story form, which kind of orient us. We don't live amongst other [00:04:00] humans. Exactly. We live amongst this kind of cast of characters. We have this special effect of morality, which turns.

People around us, the heroes and villains with reputations and their own stories. So, so that, that, you know, that's what it does. That's the kind of human really is, is story. That's, that, that's the psychological reality that we live in. And, and that, and that's how the brain has evolved. You know, we haven't evolved to be scientists or mathematicians or that's obviously what some people have become.

You know, universally humans are, are storytellers and, and you know, and, and as you'll know in, in, in the scientific realm, it's, it's, it's not unusual to see. To come across scientists who, who, who were really smart and, you know, completely you know, immersed in the, in the data and in the latest ideas.

But still you can see that they are selecting, perhaps selecting the ideas that suit the story of the world that they prefer, rather than going data first, which is probably what they think of themselves, how they think that they approach this stuff.

Richard Shotton: If people are trying to communicate effectively or persuade others.[00:05:00]

If they buy into this principle that we are story processes rather than logic ones.

Will Storr: Yeah.

Richard Shotton: How, how could they apply that? What, what, what should they, they do differently?

Will Storr: Well there, there, there, there are sort of various kind of parts and pieces and parts to the idea of kind of telling a story for you know, persuasion.

I, I, I think one of the, one of the. Sort of big things that they need to understand is that it, you know, story isn't just something that we tell each other, you know, story isn't just something that we do on a stage in front of a conference or write down story is, is how we live our lives. We are characters and stories.

So if you are a. You know, if you, if you are somebody that's gonna walk into a room trying to get investment, you, you are, you are a character in the story of

the life of the potential investor. So it, so it's under, I call that story being, it's not just storytelling, it's story being, it's understanding that, that, that we, that the story is, is what we live, not just how we communicate.

Richard Shotton: And do you think there are examples in the, [00:06:00] in the commercial world of, of people that have believed that approach and then applied it very well.

Will Storr: Well, I'm not sure that there's many sort of who, who consciously kind of, you know, have pursued that approach because they understand this stuff about storytelling.

But I think there are lots of people who kind of really instinctively get it. And, and, and one of my favorite examples to talk about is it's probably Elizabeth Holmes. From, from from Tara. It's just a really, just an extraordinary thing there where she. You know, she was a character in a story. She, she emerged at a time, at the time that was still in where, where, where people wanted, they love, they completely fell in love with the story of this female tech genius, this female Steve Jobs, the world had been waiting for her female Steve Jobs.

And, and now here she was even dressing like Steve Jobs. And people wanted to believe this story so badly, you know, that they, you know, she, she, she was kind of lauded by the press for a while. You know, magazine covers Ted Talks, you know, Washington Post conferences, this, that, and the other. [00:07:00] And she managed to get just huge amounts of investment.

You know, hundreds of millions of dollars from you know, people like the Walmart family, people like Rupert Murdoch. She managed to get the support of. An incredible, a, a array of people to a board of directors, including he, Henry Kissinger and the former director of the Center of Disease Control.

And the extraordinary thing, I mean, there's a couple of extraordinary things that mean, you know, the first thing obviously, as everybody knows is that it was the fantasy. Like she, she said she had this device. That could do a, do a complex blood test with just one prick of blood instead of a huge two vials, which is what it used to take.

And she, the machine didn't exist. There was no machine. And, and what was amazing was that lots of people, including Rupert Murdoch didn't do any due diligence. You know, it was Rupert Murdoch's largest investment outside his family of companies and, and, and Murdoch and, you know, numerous other investors and.

These board of directors didn't actually stop to actually check that she [00:08:00] was telling the truth. They were so swept up in the story of Elizabeth Holmes and Theranos Theranos that that, that, that, that they just sort of gambled with their money and with their, with their reputations to, you know, which is obviously sort of a disastrous decision.

And, and I like that example because it just shows the Paris story. You know, these aren't stupid people. These are some of the smartest, most strategic people in the world. And, and you know, but when confronted with this very seductive story of this female tech genius. They just folded.

Michael Aaron Flicker: It's a, it's a, it's a particularly compelling example because you would've, not only were they sophisticated investors, not only when you invest your own money, you're extra thoughtful and extra diligent.

But it, it, it almost adds, it begs the question for me. Was it filling the story that they had of the next Steve Jobs? Or was it filling this desire to invest in the one in a million? The, the, the, the, the moonshot [00:09:00] idea. Which story do you think will that, was it was Elizabeth Holmes filling in this example?

Will Storr: Well, I, I, I think it's notable that you know, if you look at the board of directors, they were a hundred percent male. They were all men. You know, most of the people that, most of the investors were all, all men. So, so I, and I think especially if you look at the political and give of the time, people were, you know, these men were desperate to be seen, to be helping, you know, give women a, a, a left in support women, you know, that's very much the a, a a a, a dominant story in our culture.

Then it's a dominant story in our culture now. So I, and I, I think if it was, if it was a purely sort of strategic moneymaking thing, they would've done their due diligence. They would've, they would've gone well. This is what she's saying, you know, is she telling the truth? You know, and some people did do due due diligence.

Google, I, somebody from Google Ventures went off to actually get to, to, to, to Walmart where they had this, you know, sorano boos where they're doing blood tests. And to his absolute shock and horror, they, they sort of proceeded to take two massive vi of blood out his arm. And he's just [00:10:00] like, a bit, this, this what we were promised.

So Google didn't. Didn't invest. So, you know, some people did do their due diligence and saw very, very easily just, you know, very easily that this stuff

was, is just not real. So, so, so, yeah, I, I, I think it was the, I, I think it was the story.

Richard Shotton: I mean, the other alarm bell that should have been ringing people's ears was the name.

I always thought, Theranos, if, if Bond villains were real, that's what they would've called their company. It sounds like.

Will Storr: Yeah. Like a doctor who kind of get the dog name, isn't it? Yeah.

Richard Shotton: As, you know, expect from a someone who's writing a book about stories. You know, one of the things that I loved about the science of storytelling is you have this amazing gif for kind of analogies and, and images and the one that really struck with me.

Is that you've said humans are part ape and part ant and I thought that was fascinating. Could you, could you explain what you you mean by that?

Will Storr: Yeah, so, so obviously, you know, humans are kind [00:11:00] of a, a, a really unusual species of ape. We are, we, you know, we're not some people, we we're not descended from the apes.

We're not like an ape. We are an ape. We are, you know, one of five, these species a great ape. But obviously we're completely different from, well, not completely. We're very different from the, from the other, the other species of apes. And that difference is that we are highly social, we are highly cooperative.

Just like so, so, so, you know, ant and ant colonies sometimes known as a super organism because it's these, it's, it, it's all the ants working together, doing their various roles that keeps the, keeps the, keeps the ants, you know, surviving and reproducing. So, so, so it's the. The, the, you know, the colonies, the, is the, is the, is the organism that, that makes that happen.

And, and humans are the, are the same like other ape species, although they live in troops, they tend to solve the problems of survival individually, whereas humans don't. We are like ants. We, that we'd have this super organism thing going on where we are, we solve the problems of survival cooperatively.

So it's the groups, you know and everyone sort of. Of knowing their role and playing their [00:12:00] role, that that's how we solve problems. And that's true. You know that's true in the hunter-gatherer tribe. That's true. In the modern

world. And if you look at everything from a football team to a political party, to a corporation, that, that, that's, that's, you know, that that's how we do it.

So it, so, so we are kind of, as I say, part eight, part T, we're very ant like. And and that, and that's where story comes in. I mean, that, that, that's, that's really the root of storytelling. And that's how you can understand storytelling is this is incredibly powerful persuasive technology because, you know, how do you do that?

How do you get all these. These individualistic apes working together. And what, and the answer is you do it with storytelling, you do it with story. 'cause what, what what story does is it gives you this collective vision of the future. It gives you you know, if we all do this and work together, we can have this amazing, we can build this huge heart so we can make a trap, the, you know, say to, to trap the leopard or whatever it might be.

Your story also gives us this concept of heroes and villains gossip, which is very important in human evolution because gossip [00:13:00] is, is, is an incentive and punishment system that, that that compels people to work for the benefit of the group and punishes people that work, you know, only for themselves and against the benefit of the group.

So, so, so, so, so it's storytelling that enabled us to become ant like and therefore take over the world. And when you understand that, you understand, you know, why storytelling is so persuasive, because that's its original. Function is to persuade individual apes to work together for the good of the group.

Richard Shotton: And it certainly seems to reflect the kind of body of behavioral science experimentation. Now, if there's one consistent theme in experiments is that we are a social animal, that we're deeply influenced by what others are doing. And I think one of the techniques that can be applied in advertising or communications really effectively is if you want to encourage a behavior.

Try and create the sense that lots of other people are doing that thing, you know? And if you can do that successfully, it, it tends to often work better than than rational persuasion.

Will Storr: [00:14:00] Yeah, that, that's absolutely right. I mean, there, there's a, there was a sort of quite a famous study that I write about in the book.

A story is a deal that looked at how to persuade people to use less energy. And they, they distributed a series of kind of flyers, I think, or like a door handle hanger things with various kind of appeals to, to, to, to, to, to, to, to, you know, participating people to use this energy. And there, there are various.

Ways they try to do this including, you know, here's, here's how much money you're gonna save, here's how good it is for the environment. And, and the one that, that, that, that won by Country Mile was all your neighbors are doing it, so you should do two. So that, that's what works. So, so, so, yeah, when, when we feel, you know, we're very sensitive to the idea of norms, you know, what's everybody else doing and, and, because that's what I should be doing too.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. And, and, and some of those stories that sounds like it's got a tini one, the, the nuances that we're often, 'cause you mentioned the word neighbors. Yes, we are influenced by what the country is doing, but we're most [00:15:00] influenced by people like ourselves. So much more influential to know what our neighbors doing than, than, than someone, you know, five counties away.

Will Storr: Well, that's right. And, and that again goes back to our cooperative nature. Part of being this highly cooperative kind of ant like ape is that we are constantly looking for other people to cooperate with. That's what we do. We go around our lives in, you know, what I call a, a detect and connect mode, and that we're constantly looking for people who are a bit like us.

And so that, that, that's our friends, that's our lovers, that's our colleagues. You know, that, that, you know, we we're constantly unconsciously sort of searching for people who are like us. So we, we, and that means we're also broadcasting information about. Ourselves and our values and our identities to other people.

And, and the purpose of that is that we, so we draw people like us, towards us and repel people who aren't gonna corporate us away from us. So, you know, that, that's why we are so obsessed with our appearance. That's why, you know, you know, so if you think about the global market for kind of identity markers, including.[00:16:00]

Haircuts clothes, you know that, that, that kind of thing, you know, artistic choices. It's just, it's basically limitless. It's billions and billions and billions and billions hundreds of billions. I mean, you can't sort of calculate it that, that like how important it is for humans to project information about their identity to each other.

And again, that's, this goes back to that idea that with this cooperative April, and we're constantly looking for people like us with whom to connect with.

Richard Shotton: And you've talked about. The commercialization of that. Mm-hmm. One of the fascinating things you've mentioned before is that the most powerful ads make a appeal to identity.

So have you've got an example of that? Or, or, or what, what would that look like in practice?

Will Storr: Yeah, exactly. So, so what, you know, one of the things that really struck me when I was doing my research was that, was that, was that there are, that there are really successful ad adverts that, that all they're doing is, is, is describing an identity.

And, and that's enough because, because you know, if subconsciously people will see a product. And, and, and, and they're made to feel, oh, that product is, is for exactly [00:17:00] me, for my people. They're gonna wanna buy the product because the product then becomes part of their. Projection of identity. Probably the most famous one is Apple's Think different campaign.

Mm-hmm. You know, like, like a lot of these really successful ad campaigns, there's zero information about the product in there. There's not even a picture of the product in, there's, there's nothing. It's just a picture of Gandhi and yeah. Rod Lennon and Mother Terraza and, you know that kind of thing.

And the idea is, is that if you. You know, the, the story they wanted to tell was, if you are a kind of a boring office drone, I think at the time it was IBM was their, was sort of pre Microsoft. I think IBM was their big competitor. But if you're a creator, if you're a creative, if you're a world changer, a rule breaker, then you choose Apple and, you know, massively successful.

And perhaps one that's sort of a bit less well known is the Mol some beer ad for, took from 2000 from Canada, which I, which I really liked that one. It's, it was. At the time, Mol were in a bit of trouble. They were the market leisure in Canada. And they were being challenged because there was you know, people drinking one more wine [00:18:00] in Canada.

And there's also a trend for microbrewery, you know, like nerdy beers was was, was eating away at there at their dominance. And so they they came up with this ad. I mean the, the guy from the, a ad agency was Canadian and was very aware

that Amer that, that how annoyed Canadians get at being mistaken for Americans.

So he, so he decided to do a whole ad campaign, a a, about this. And, and the ad was called I am Canadian in All Capital Letters. And all it is, it's a very ordinary looking guy in a plaid shirt and jeans listing all the things that are Canadian like and not American. Like we, we, you know, we, we, we, we believe in, we peacekeeping not policing.

It's Z, not Z, you know, that, that kind of thing. And, and, and, and he's listing all these things, getting, you know, getting more, you know, we say about not a boots, you know, and he's getting more and more passionate and more, more. You know, into it as he, as he, as he is getting into it. And then at the end he just says, ol some beer.

You know, that's it. He said, again, there's no information about the beer. It's just all, it's all an appeal to [00:19:00] identity. And one of those real genius things to that was they was, when they debuted the ad, they debuted the ad. At the, in an advert break, during the Academy Awards, just after South Park had done the song Blame Canada.

So you had Blame Canada and then it would cut to ads and, and then it had this Iron Canadian and it became this, this is kind of pre-social media, but it became effectively viral. That that ad, it's you know, it became just immediately well known all around the, the country and kids would recite it on Parliament and on Canada Day.

And I forget the number exactly, but it, but it put millions onto their bottom line in, in, within six weeks. You know, like we've had a huge effect. And again, that, that all that is, is an appeal to identity. All that is, is them saying, look, we see you, we know you and we are for you. And so, so, so, you know, it's just like the think different campaign in, in that respect.

MichaelAaron Flicker: In what ways is it you know, that it feels like, some of [00:20:00] the most base ad insights in advertising is to be clear about your target and, and speak to your target. But in what ways is it, do you have to be believable? If they had done it wrong, it would've been very off putting. If Apple had chosen the wrong people in the ads, it might have not connected.

Is it, you know, can you maybe speak to how to make it believable? How to, how to, how to make that connection real.

Will Storr: Yeah, you have to be, well, I mean, firstly, you obviously you have to, you know, you get it right, but you, you have to be I think really specific, I, I, I think there's, there's something in that, in the absolute specificity with the, with, with the, especially with the Molson campaign, you know, they, they, they really knew the things that, that, that, that made Canadians annoyed about, about, yes.

Be about, about being Katie. You know, the, the other thing that was sort of, you know, subconsciously going on with the, with the Molson beer adverse status y you know, was was that sense of we, we are kind of restoring status to [00:21:00] an insulted demographic who are just constantly infuriated by being mistaken for Americans.

And, and, and for that, that idea that they're just the 51st state, you know, the of the USA so, so, so there's that going on as well. And I, and I think, you know, the, the main thing is, is, is to understand your target audience. To, to understand, you know, what I call their story world. Who are their heroes?

Who are their villains? Why? You know, you know what, what, what, what is their vision of, the happy ending, the happy ever after. What does that look like specifically and visually? You know, and I, it is one of those golden rules of storytelling. You know, vagueness is always the enemy of storytelling.

You're always wanting to go for specificity and that, and that, that and that. That's true if you're an novelist and you are, you're trying to conjure a scene. Specific detail is what, is what really matters, what makes things come alive and feel real and authentic.

Richard Shotton: Yeah, because could you thing there about visuals as well, and I wonder if there's something.

The specifics there. 'cause one of the studies that Michael Clara and I have discussed before is this [00:22:00] famous study from a Canadian actually called Ian Beg. He runs this experiment back in 1972, reads out this long list of phrases, and half of the phrases were what he called abstract phrases. So it's things like basic truth or impossible.

These are intangibles, concepts you can't visualize. And the other half of the phrases he reads out are what he calls concrete phrases, white horse square door, things that you can and visualize, reads out 22 word phrases, puts his list down, and then he asks all the participants to write down as many of these words as they can.

And what he finds is that on average, people remember 9% of the abstractions.

Will Storr: Wow.

Richard Shotton: But 36% of the. Concrete. Concrete words. Concrete. So you get this massive fourfold difference. I haven't seen many studies, but you see quite a bigger difference. Yeah. And I wonder if some of it is, if you firstly stay in this kind of realm of distractions.

You talk about being a tasty beer, refreshing beer. It's [00:23:00] just completely forgettable. And then that idea of a, of a novelist setting a scene, you know, talking about a very specific time and place and giving detail, it may be there again, creates this mental image and it's that mental image that sticks in people's mind, not vague, abstract ideas.

Will Storr: Yeah, that's definitely true. And, and that's certainly true, especially when you look at leadership and, and, and ways of inspiring people that there was a really interesting study done of the internal culture of NASA in the sixties. Be before. You know, the JFK era, NASA had a number of different missions, like stated missions, all quite complex and abstract.

Wanna do this, that and the other. And along comes JFK and I think it was in 61, and says, by the end of the decade, we want to have sent a man. To the moon and returned him safely. So, so it's a very simple specific kind of visual message. And you know, the, the study looked at how just incredibly galvanizing that was for NASA as an organization and they had interviews with like, you know, the people cleaning the toilet and the secretaries just saying everybody came to work obsessed with [00:24:00] this mission, this idea that we were gonna you know, send a man to the moon return safer by the end of the decade.

So, so, so yeah, these kind of very visual, simple. Scenarios that you can see are, are much more inspiring. Other famous examples are bill Gates with his, I want to have a future in which there's a PC on the desk of every home in America. I think that was it. I might be getting that slightly wrong.

Martin Luther King,

Richard Shotton: no, I want to ship 300 you know, fix 7 million units.
Sustainable

Will Storr: You know, you know, technological project. You know, MLK Martin Luther King with his, you know, vision of, I want to see a future where the former sons of slaves and the former sons of slave owners can sit around a table and break bread or whatever he said.

So again, very, it is a very visual image. And the advice is really to, you know, to, to imagine that future that you want to see as if you're a screenwriter. Like if it was a movie, what would it look like? And then that's [00:25:00] what you describe and, and, and that's found to be much more kind of inspiring.

These kind of very visual kinda story images. The, the more abstract things that you, you, you very commonly read, especially in the kind of era of the mission statement, simply out, out of the era of the mission statement these days, but that we drew, it was a long time when people was having these mission statements and it was about, it wasn't, they were using words like sustainability and, you know, all that kind of stuff.

It's just, it's very, very abstract, very boring, very forgettable, kind of meaningless really,

MichaelAaron Flicker: to the point of memorability. How do you think you can make a story memorable? I mean, it, it, this is a clear way. Make it concrete. Is there other ways you can help make stories even more memorable?

Will Storr: Yeah, I, I, I think I, I, I think, you know, there's, there's a couple of sort of big, big, big things and, and I, one of the sort of big breakthroughs I had when I was writing a Stories a deal was we go back to the idea of story's original purpose, which was to help.

It was to enable human sort of groups to get together and work cooperatively, cooperatively to overcome obstacles in pursuit of [00:26:00] their goals. I mean, that's what story is for. And then that, that, that, that, again, that was one of those moments where what I was seeing in the scientific literature was to, same as what you see in, in this story literature, because that, you know that that's what story is.

A story has to have, have an obstacle in the goal. So that gave you this sort of definition. Of story that I think is useful for, you know, the, the marketing leadership motivational space, which is, it's a unit of information which describes the overcoming obstacle in pursuit of a goal. That's what the story is.

And if your story doesn't have a clear obstacle and a goal, somebody wanting something and something's standing in the way of getting it, that it's not a story. If it has got that thing, it's gonna be memorable, it's gonna be emotional, especially if you are. Audience is identifying with that character. I mean, those are the sort of two ingredients really.

If your audience identifies with the character and that character is, has an obstacle in the way of a goal, you, you've got a compelling, memorable story.

Richard Shotton: You've stressed identifiability there, which is the more important identifiability or. Or like likability when it comes to [00:27:00] a, a kind of key character,

Will Storr: I think identifiability is, is, is is much more important.

You know, it's not that you can't do, you know, likability, but it's gonna be much more bland. It's gonna be much, much kind of less memorable. I mean, what, what, what we, what we want in story is somebody facing a problem who feels like that's me. Yeah. Like, that, that person is, is like me. I can really relate to that person.

That's why underdogs are so. Universally identifiable because un the underdog is the default state of human cognition. Unless you're a narcissist, you, you, you, no matter how successful you are in the world, you feel like an underdog. You know, you feel like the obstacles arranged against you and, oh my God, how am I gonna, how am I gonna solve this next problem?

You know, that, that, that's how we set up that is the storytelling brain in action. So that, and, and again, that's why. You know, if you look all around in every culture of storytelling, from Africa to Asia, to Russia, to to Europe underdogs that you see underdogs over and over and over and over again, it's a universally identifiable archetype

Richard Shotton: Do you ever [00:28:00] identifiability through that positioning as an underdog is fantastic. Are there any other tactics for creating identifiability in a, in, in a, in a story?

Will Storr: Yeah. So Mean underdog is a massive one, but, but, but the other thing is that, is that kind of tribal identification is a big one. You know, I think different thing again, it's the Molson beer thing again, it's understanding, understanding who, who, who are your audience, what do they want?

I mean, what, what the think different campaign was really good at was saying. How does our audience measure status? You know, we're all playing status game. Every human group we can see them as a status game and, and every human group has its own unique kind of local version of what is status. So, so a Wall Street banker plays a different status game to a Buddhist monk, but they're both playing status games.

So they're both have this game they're playing where they're better, they're better, they get at the rules of their game, the higher. The more status they earn. And, and, and the Think different campaign was a great example of them, them understanding really instinctively this, this is who our users want to be.

They wanna be seen as artists. They don't wanna be seen as computer nerd. They wanna be [00:29:00] seen as creatives as, you know, musicians and skateboarders and painters and all that kind of stuff. So I, I think that's that's really important. And you know, it reminds me of, you know, as I was saying before, you know, Substack, my wife works for Substack and I think one of the brilliant things that Substack did when they launched was they spent a lot, lot of money getting very high status people onto the platform. People like Patti Smith and Sam Rushie and, and, and, and as soon as you do that, all the other musicians and writers want to go on there. You know, it, it suddenly, Substack wasn't just a new medium, bloody hell, Sam Rusty's on there. You know what I mean?

Wow. You know, George Sawers is on there, so, so, so, so, you know, I think they've got a bit of stick for, for, for, for that because they spent a lot of money doing that. But it was for, as I'm concerned, worth every penny because it was brilliant use of status psychology. You know, we, we want to be in the club that.

The, the, the, the, the, the, the cool people are in. And if as say, pat Smith and, and Sam and Rusty and people like that, you know, and res here on there, then, then, then God, we wanna be on Substack.

Richard Shotton: And the, the flip of that just thinking, because there's been a [00:30:00] whole wave of augmented reality glasses coming out now, but that technology was around about 10 years ago.

But I think Google, one of the reasons people. Have suggested that their augmented reality glasses failed, was this phrase of glass holes that Yes. You know, who, who was associated with the product was not someone, Ty or Picasso, whichever state symbol you want. It was kind of it gigs That's slightly

Will Storr: creepy.

Yeah. With the camera, you know. Well, you, yeah, yeah, yeah. It was, it was an absolute. Disaster that that thing and, and, and I think as soon as they come up with that phrase, glass holes, it was over, wasn't it? It was done. Yeah.

Richard Shotton: I, I found, I think the idea of everyone wants status, but what type of status people want I is fascinating.

So how, kind of, how do you understand what that status goal is for your audience? I mean, is it as simple as questioning them or do you have to use a bit more lateral thinking to get there?

Will Storr: No, I don't think it's that [00:31:00] difficult because the, the thing about status symbols is that we want to broadcast them.

We want, we want to tell people what these things are. So, so you, you've just got to go into, if you wanna find out what motivates a swiftie, go into the Reddit and, you know, look, look at what the swifties are saying. And, and, and if you're, you know, who is Taylor's latest fuse against? Well, that's the person that you don't wanna be a fan of.

Yeah. Who is Taylor collaborating with? Or Sabrina Carpenter. We like Sabrina. So, so, you know how many, how many. Dates on the ERAS tour. Did you, did you, did you go to, how many variants of her latest album have you got? You know, you'll see it all there laid out. Can't, you know, simply because we, you know, people want to broadcast this stuff.

That's the whole point of it. So, so, so, so it's not that difficult. You just got to, you just got to listen to what they're saying. And again, it's, you're looking at value and anti value. You know, what are the things that, that give status in a status scale? And what are the things that take status away?

Richard Shotton: I mean, I wonder the you, you say it's like easy, easy to listen. I wonder if [00:32:00] when we go back to, rather than advertisers but kind of team leaders or you know, company heads too often they assume status is money and they don't look at all the other things that could, could motivate. And maybe the problem there is perhaps that they're just not.

Even considering there could be another driver than, than money.

Will Storr: No. And they're missing a massive trick because study after study after study shows that money is a very poor motivator. What, what you find is that money motivates in the short term but in the long term it's a very poor motivator. And, and when I read that, I just thought, yeah, I thought back to the time when I was employed and when I had pay rises and you, you get a pay rise, you feel great for about four days.

But then your brain goes, well, I deserved it because I'm amazing. You know? And then, and then, and then you, you are back to then you, you, you just sort of acclimatize to it very quickly. Status is, is just an enormous motivator for people. If people are feeling. There's a great phrase by I think Dan, his name's Daniel Cable and a British neuroscientist who, who he talks about being, about recognizing the me in we.[00:33:00]

So, so, so it's, it's recognizing that you are part of this group, that we're part of this group, this cooperative group, but, but your individual gifts and talents and work. Are crucial to this group or important to this group, or benefit to this group in this particular way. That's what people love, that, that, that, that recognition of their individuality helping the superorganism is that that's, that's, you know, really motivating to people.

And I think in the, in the most healthy. Groups the most healthy status games, you know, status is kind of available to all In that way. It's you, you know, the, the, the, the most junior member of staff can go to a meeting and leave feeling like the king of the world because they, they, they said something that was applauded and, and, and really helped.

Richard Shotton: Mm-hmm.

Will Storr: And, and in and in companies that are kind of toxic and, you know, not functioning properly, people are kind of hoarding status and they're, they're ly defending it. And they, and they, and they're sort of taking credit for other people's work and all, all, you know, all that kind of stuff.

MichaelAaron Flicker: As [00:34:00] marketers and brand owners, one of the things we're really interested in is how to be persuasive.

And you've stated to be maximally persuasive. It's best to obey the law of simplicity. Yeah. Why do you think so many humans get this wrong? Why do you think so many brands struggle to keep their messaging simple?

Will Storr: Yeah. This is one of those really sort of, sort of fundamental things and. You know, I, I, I find this in my work with brands and, and, and companies.

I, I, I also find that in my work as a ghost writer with people who are. Who, who, who who've been taught, you know, commissioned to write a book and and are going, oh, I've gotta write a whole book. And, and, and, and the the, the, the, the, the default thinking is, oh my God, how am I gonna fill a book?

A book is huge. And, and it takes a while to persuade them, but actually know the, the challenge isn't. How are we gonna find enough material that, how we gonna, how are we gonna hold the material down to make it as simple as possible? So, so, so it's always the thing. And I, and I think it's quite, quite, quite simple.

I [00:35:00] mean, I, you know, most people who are working for companies are, are naturally proud of the work the company does. And they are, they are aware of. 77 different brilliant things about the product. So when you, when you tell them, no, we need to, we need to pick one, they don't like it very much because, because it feels reductive.

Well, why would I pick one when I've got 77? But, but, but no, it's, it's those simple, you know, like if you, one, one of my favorite ever lines about storytelling is James Carville, the political strategist for the demo, for Bill Clinton's particular strategist. And Bill Kinston was you know, before he became.

PR president of the, of the United States was a, was a real policy wonk and a real politics nerd, and would do these endless speeches with full of data and full of this, and full of that for the other. And James Cardwell said to him, if you say three things, you don't say anything. Which I thought is just brilliant.

You know, if you say three things, you don't say anything. And of course, more, even more famously, the one thing they take was it's the economy, stupid. So, and that's the, that's the most famous line that came out of that line of thinking. But that's absolutely true. If you say three things, you don't say anything.

And you know, like, [00:36:00] and so that. When I'm working with, with Ghost, I mean, I'm working with a guy at the moment, a kind of talker, and I'm working on his self-help book and, and, and you know, it's the classic thing where they send you their ideas for the book and it's this massive list of random things and it's like, well no, we need to pick, we, it's one, your book is about one thing, and, and if we pick one thing and everything's about that one thing, your

book is already gonna be better than 90% of other nonfiction books because they, you know, most nonfiction books fail because they are just downloads of

Information under a kind of a broad bracket of this subject area.

Richard Shotton: When you were, when you were mentioning quotes, the one that I thought you might mention is, if it is quill a couch. But I think it was this one of when you're writing, you need to murder your darlings. And it's that idea of the TikTok of having a hundred great things they've done and they might all be wonderful, but to get something that's compelling, you've gotta kill 99 of them.

Will Storr: And I think the trick is, the trick is what you say to them is you say that's the, that's the next book. [00:37:00] That you say just the next, that's another book. So rather, so then they think, oh

MichaelAaron Flicker: yeah,

Will Storr: they don't think they're being murdered. They think this is another opportunity. Yeah, yeah. Two years time. Yeah. So, so, so that, that's how I tend to couch that one.

But I'm really thinking, ah, that's just Don at the bin.

Richard Shotton: So so, so trying to say too much one problem with marketers. Are there any other mistakes that you see occurring again and again when marketers try and create stories?

Will Storr: Yeah, there's, trying to say too much. There's the, the, the vagueness, you know, the specificity is really important.

The there's kind of too much data, you know, I, I think that, that, that can really kill, kill the story. And again, 'cause people are proud of their data. They've got these amazing statistics, they've got these amazing numbers. But really you just want to have the, the minimum amount of data. Really, it's the data.

You tell the story and then the data just comes in, you know, 1, 1, 1, hopefully. Data point just to go bang, you know, just proof that the story is true to towards the end. That that's enough. So, so, so that's [00:38:00] another one that, that, that sort of people tend to struggle with the jargon that the whole thing about the curse of knowledge.

I, I was at a, an event recently in California a couple weeks ago with some, a bunch of crypto and AI CEOs coaching them on their storytelling. You know, like they were, they were giving me their investment pitches and I could understand about one word in 20. It was like, I'm really sorry. I have no idea what you just told me.

And they're like, really? And I was like, yeah, really? Like, I have no idea what you just said. So it was, yeah. So, so, so people forget 'cause they, they, they're lost in their own little worlds and they forget how little other people know about their worlds and that they've got to translate that they've got to go back to first principles.

So that's that. That's a major. Especially when you're looking at tech people, you know, like I, I think that, that, that, that they forget very quickly that, that, that most of the world don't understand what blockchain is and what it means.

Richard Shotton: You know, i, I came across a great experiment that tried to kind of prove that, [00:39:00] and I always forget, I think it was Elizabeth Norton, but it might be Elizabeth Dunn.

And what they do is they get these or it might be Elizabeth Loftus actually it's Elizabeth, someone we'll put it in the show notes. They get pairs of people together. One person's, the the rapper, and one person is the listener, and the rapper is given this sheet of paper that has 10 very famous songs in it, like Happy Birthday or Mary Had a Little Lamb.

They secretly, the rapper secretly look at the, at this list, they pick the tune that they're gonna try and play, and then on the table in front of them, they, with their knuckles, they beat out. Tune. They wrap out the tune. Once they've finished the tune, they stop the rapper's taken away and they're secretly asked.

What do you think is the probability that the listener can guess the song? And most people say, I know 50, 60%. The experimenter then goes [00:40:00] back to the listener and says, what do you think the song was? And it's about one in 50 people. It's like 2% of people who managed to guess what the tune is. Yeah. And l the explanation for this is that when you are.

Beating out that tune as the rapper, you've got the song running through your head. It's obvious in your mind what you are trying to communicate, but for the listener, they don't have that background knowledge. They just hear this completely disconnected, random set of, of beats on the table. And I've always thought that's a.

You know, it, it, it captures very well what's happening in that tech presentation. You know, that tech presenter that you had a few weeks ago, they've got 25 years of knowledge. They can't remember what it was like to be in the state of ignorance that, that, that we are in. And it's phenomenally a hard, I think, for people to think they need to make that leap and then actually, actually do it.

Will Storr: That's right. I think that's exactly right. And that's exactly, that's exactly it. I mean, that's, that's the curse of knowledge just [00:41:00] described really well. So, so, so yeah, they, they, they, they, they can't, they forget how, how did other people know about their world? And, and again, with these people, there was this, there was this constant instinct to, to, to tell you sort of 15 brilliant things about the product when I just wanted to know.

Not what's the best one? What's the best, you know, what's the best one whatcha gonna tell me? So, so, so, so it's, again, that goes back to that simplicity. Again, I mean, you, you, you really wanna tell, you know, one simple story with, ideally with one character, if you can one obstacle, one girl, one takeaway message.

I mean, that's the maximally memorable story.

MichaelAaron Flicker: How do you think that humans who are naturally drawn to storytelling. Aren't so effective at telling good stories. Like, why do you like, if the tech, if the, in this tech example, they love this technology. I mean, they're passionate about it. [00:42:00] Why? Why are we naturally drawn to.

Telling convoluted stories or with lots of, with lots of reasons to believe with lots of you know, with lots of reasons they love it. I'm just wondering, what, what do you think it is about being human that don't make us such great storytellers?

Will Storr: That's a really interesting question. I mean, as I, as I think it, I think it sort of, it shifts on the, on the kind of context.

I mean, I'm always struck by this, you know, the currently dominant theory in psychology. That, that, that basically the first kind of form of storytelling really is gossip. Because, because it's gossip enabled, those, you know, human, human jobs to work together properly because it creates heroes and villains and, you know, us to police the tribe and make sure that people are all putting together.

And I, I think, you know, when people are gossiping, they tend to be brilliant storytellers. You know, that like, that, that there's an obstacle, there's a goal, there's, there's a villain, there's a comeuppance, there's a, you know, like, like it's when we, we, we, but it is when we start [00:43:00] try to tell this kind of more business focused stories, I think everybody gets crowded with all these other.

Jobs. We want the story to do well, I've got these eight things I want to go and communicate and I wanna, and I've got this study and this study and this study, and I've got, you know, so, so, so I, I think we shift out of that kind of natural instincts that we have for telling entertaining gossipy stories about ourselves and the people that we, that we know and move into this kind of other realm where we, we think.

We think we're doing something different when actually we're not. We're not, we're not really doing anything different. We're trying to lean towards gossip, not lean towards the scientific study.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Got it. I was just gonna say, it's super helpful to hear you say that because I, one of the things that we talk about behavioral science, being able to help brand marketers do is have more confidence because of academic studies that what they're going to put into market is gonna be effective [00:44:00] of takeaway From this part of our conversation is.

Naturally, we actually are pretty good storytellers. Yeah. And we let the jobs to be done. The brief, the studies confuse the singular story that could be told. And, and, and so maybe it's a, it's a very helpful reminder to say there is a reason why people like your toothpaste. Shoes, you know, belt, let's say if you stay focused on that primary thing and everything else becomes subservient it can be more effective in the advertising.

Will Storr: Yeah, I think that's brilliantly put. Definitely.

Richard Shotton: Maybe we've got one more time for one more question or one more kind of area for the books. And it's one of my favorite bits from the, the science of storytelling. You talk about information gaps and how they can spark curiosity. Can you tell us a little bit about [00:45:00] what that involves, what the research is and, and how it can be used by brands?

Will Storr: Yeah. So as I think it's a really interesting kind of, kind of area of storytelling. So information gap. What that refers to is if you can imagine the set of information with a piece missing, almost like a jigsaw with a jigsaw piece

missing. And there's a really interesting study that that where they looked at kind of how information gaps generate curiosity, even when.

Even about nothing, even about something kind of a pointless on tentacle certain information. We've become automatically curious and one, one of these studies, they, they, they, they set some people in front of a confusion monitor with a grid of squares on it. And, and then you press, you were told to press the mouse at least three times, but as many times as you wanted.

And, and, and for one group, every time they press the mouse, a picture of an animal would. Appear. So that's okay. That, that gets boring pretty quickly. I'm seeing an, I'm seeing some animals. Okay, fine. But then the, the other group every time you click the mouse, a small component, part of a greater animal.

Appeared. And so suddenly they were clicking and they, they, they wanted to see, what is this [00:46:00] animal, what is this animal? You know, it was completely meaningless. It, it had no benefit to 'em to find out what this animal was, but they became spontaneously curious 'cause there was an information gap there. And so, so lots of storytelling works this way.

Most obviously, true crime you know, detect police procedural dramas. It begins with information gap. It's a set of information, the set of characters. And, and there's a piece of information missing. Missing, which is, who killed this person? And so the promise of the stories that we are gonna find out is gonna, this information gap is gonna be closed.

And, you know, and again, like the, the animals, it's, we know it's fake. We know it's fiction, we know it's not real. It's true crimes, you know, assuming that it's prime suspect or the killing or something. But we're still interested. We still wanna know, you know, like we still wanna know which fake person killed this fake person.

So, so, so, so, yeah. And, and I think that there are lots of ways that marketers can, can, can use this to create information against, to create certain moments of like, what does that mean? And, and then you leave the reader. Close the gap. And one of my favorite ones is the very famous ad from the World Wildlife Fund, where they had a picture of a, of a [00:47:00] shark's fin in, in the ocean.

And it said scary. And then they had a picture of an empty ocean and it said More scary. And how can a, how can. How can no shark be more scary than Shark? And of course it's, and you look, it's the World Wildlife Fund. They're saying they're, it's about extinction. So, so, so, so it's really effective because it

creates a, a mode of, of information gap because you're like, I don't understand, like, it, I don't that what it means.

And, and, and the information get closes when you, when you look, when you ice scan to the bottom of the image and it, you see the World Wildlife Fund, you get ice. It's an ecological argument.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. There, there's an interesting bit there, isn't it? 'cause I think. There's a, the sciences create an information gap.

The art is, well, how big should that gap be? Yeah. 'cause presumably there's a bit of a balance that if you make it so confusing that it's really effortful, people might just walk away. But if you make, if you just give people the information on a plate. Then you're not tapping into this bias and you're not generating that curiosity.

So are there any kind of [00:48:00] clues about how to navigate that, that balance?

Will Storr: Well, I, I, yeah, I, I, I, I, I dunno if there's any sort of specific clues, but, but it is, it's about you need to allow the give, give the reader just enough. You know, information that they can close the gap themselves. That's the important thing that they're closing the gap themselves.

It's almost like a skilled standup comic. You know, GI gives you just enough information to get the joke. You know, they don't kind of do it too on their nose. They don't hammer at home. They give you just enough. And, and, and that's part of your artistry, that's part of your creativity as a. Your instinct as a storyteller.

And then of course, that's why it's important to, you know, get, get your, get your work seen by lots of people and get feedback just because you wanna be sure that people are getting it. But, but I think you're quite right and I think you, you can't be being David Lynch and, yes. Yeah, that's a nice analogy because, you know, it's not, you're not gonna sell your product.

Richard Shotton: Yeah. Brilliant, brilliant. David pde, not David Lynch. Yes, exactly. Yeah.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Well, one final question for you. If there was one thing you wish more marketers [00:49:00] understood about how stories work in the human brain, what would it be If, if you wanted to improve all product

marketing and advertising, if you could say one thing to brand advertisers and owners, what would the thing you most want them to take home about your work and about the science of storytelling?

Will Storr: Wow. There's lots of different ways I could answer that, but I, I, I think just, just, you know, really that, that kind of fundamental thing was, is the, is the, you know, in this context, you know, the definition of a story is it's a unit of information that describes the overcoming of an obstacle in pursuit of a goal.

That's, that's the most fundamentally important thing. And if you haven't got an obstacle and you haven't got a goal and you haven't got a character negotiating those things, you haven't got a story. You know, so, so you see lots of things that think they're stories but actually aren't stories. So, so you need the obstacle and you need the goal.

MichaelAaron Flicker: It's been a, a lovely, it's a lovely final takeaway for us to all think about and use as we go back to our desks and continue to, to advertise and market. [00:50:00] This has been a wonderful conversation. Will thank you for joining us today. And we want to, as we always do, we're going to drop all of the studies we spoke about.

All of the references into our show notes and will Richard and I were speaking before the show Will has a sub stack feed Will Storr with two rs W-I-L-L-S-T-O-R-R dot sub stack.com where you can follow Will and his thinking on his writing on all of his new projects. And we'd invite everybody to go and sign up for his substack today.

Will Storr: Thank you very much. Thanks for having me guys. It was a really fascinating chat. Thank you so much.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Thanks for being with us. Until next time, I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

Richard Shotton: And I'm Richard Shotton.

MichaelAaron Flicker: Please like, share and follow this and look forward to many other conversations will with you coming up in the future.

Thanks for being with us tonight.

Will Storr: Thanks for your great questions. Thank you.[00:51:00]

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