BRANDED ENTERTAINMENT

Distributed Storytelling in a Digital World

By Troy Hitch and Doug Worple
Overview

Digital and interactive media have created a new breed of media consumers. They have an incredibly short attention span, high standards and strong opinions. They are immune to traditional advertising tactics and they don’t want their content to be interrupted. They no longer think in terms of TV or movies or channels or formats. They want to be entertained on their terms – where, when and how it suits them best. They want to engage in something that they can talk about. They want to share something that, in the very act of sharing, defines who they are. They want to discuss it, change it, mark it, make it their own. They are no longer viewers; they are participants. Entertainment is no longer a broadcast; it’s an experience.

Since the early days of sponsored radio and TV programs, the Brand has successfully exploited entertainment to deliver its consumer message. But leveraging entertainment to connect with today’s media consumer has required the Brand to assume a new role. Seeking a deeper connection with its audience, the Brand has become the storyteller, the studio, the producer, and, as referenced in our previous paper “Marketer v Media,” even the distributor or publisher. The result is an entertainment experience that can engage the Brand’s consumers in ways more relevant and meaningful than ever before.

This whitepaper will examine the new face of branded entertainment, the importance of great storytelling, the roles the Brand can play in the entertainment experience and best practices for using new media to distribute the story.
WHY STORY IS IMPORTANT

One of the greatest mistakes brands make as they execute branded entertainment efforts is that they intentionally or inadvertently create disposable content. Advertising is disposable—even the most effective, award-winning ads; it’s supposed to be. Its singular purpose is to meet a marketing challenge: to get someone to recognize a brand, to try a product, to buy a product. The content in advertising is simply a delivery mechanism and whether or not that content lives on is secondary to the objective of generating the advertising result.

However, when a brand creates entertainment and not just entertaining advertising, there is an opportunity for the consumer to participate in a long-term experience. Consumers will connect with content when it is relevant, when it makes an emotional impact and when it delivers a tangible value—practical knowledge, entertainment or social currency. When those criteria are met, the consumer will come back for more. Again and again. If that connection is strong enough, they’ll bring others along with them. If executed responsibly, the brand can participate as well. And it all begins with a great story.

Story is the fundamental component to great entertainment. Just ask Pixar. Director John Lasseter explains “The Rules” of the studio like this:

1. Tell a compelling story with humor and heart that keeps people wondering what will happen next.
2. Populate it with memorable characters. If audiences invest in your main character, they’ll travel that character’s journey. Even the bad guys have to be likable.
3. Finally, put the story and characters into a believable world.

THE PIXAR RULES
Regardless of format, style, duration, or audience target, a commitment to these rules has resulted in record-breaking box office success for Pixar. There is no exception to the importance of a great story when it comes to branded entertainment.

A compelling plot activates basic human programming: the Consumer wonders “what happens next?”, and becomes invested in the experience. For the Brand, this can result in loyalty and frequency of interactions throughout the experience.

When the Consumer can relate to a character and situation, she is much more likely to connect with the content in a meaningful way. In the context of the Brand, the character can establish a relevance and pathos that gives the Consumer the sensation that “they get me.”

A believable world or immersive environment provides the Consumer with new and impactful ways to engage in the story. The Brand deploys its story in the new media universe, and the number of touchpoints becomes infinite.

It doesn’t need to be a sweeping epic – a great story can be told in thirty seconds; it’s all about creating drama and a reason to care about how it turns out. And when the Brand gives story priority over its own business objectives, the resulting experience can truly be dramatic.
THE ROLES OF THE BRAND AND THE CONSUMER

It’s vital to identify the roles that both the Brand and the Consumer play in the branded entertainment experience. If possible, the Brand’s role should be a driving force in developing and producing the idea. The following role definitions are broad and it’s assumed that, from concept to concept, the roles will be unique to the particular circumstances.
The Brand as Proud Sponsor

This is the simplest and least invasive way the Brand can provide value in the consumer entertainment experience. The Proud Sponsor’s “brought to you by…” approach has been around as long as entertainers have been funded. But just as entertainment media has evolved from radio to TV to internet, so too has sponsorship. The proliferation of cable networks and online programming has broadened the spectrum of content sponsorship options, allowing Brands to engage highly targeted audiences with relevant content.

Branded entertainment in the digital space offers even more opportunities for the Brand to strengthen its position with the content and ultimately the Consumer.

An excellent example of the Brand as Proud Sponsor role is Microsoft’s partnership with Felicia Day’s “The Guild.” The first season of the series was originally launched independent of sponsorship, but after gaining a sizable audience and because of its spot-on parody of online gaming, it was a perfect fit for Microsoft to promote its many new media platforms. Season Two premiered on Xbox Live, MSN Video, the Zune mobile platform and other proprietary Microsoft venues delivering millions of views, downloads and Twitter followers. Microsoft was also able to leverage its distribution to attract other sponsors, like Sprint, whose contributions allowed production costs to be accounted for upfront (a rare but coveted business model in web video.)

Most importantly, Microsoft’s brand identity presence is minimized in the content experience itself—a sign of respect to “The Guild’s” dedicated audience.

The second and third seasons of “The Guild”...
While the series certainly generated successful business results, the return on investment for Microsoft is the goodwill generated for supporting and sustaining a beloved entertainment property.

The Brand as Lead Character

Telling a story in which the Brand plays a character is perhaps the most challenging approach to branded entertainment. Unless the Brand is positioned in a way that is immediately believable, accepted and embraced by the audience, the whole thing can stink of advertising and may be perceived as one big, long commercial. One of the misconceptions is that the Brand needs to solve a problem or “save the day.” While the Brand can sometimes successfully play the part of “hero,” the role of Lead Character simply means that the Brand’s participation is fundamental to the story telling.

There are several ways to ensure the integrity of the brand and earn the respect of the audience.

In the case of Illeana Douglas’ highly successful “Easy to Assemble” series, benefactor Ikea embraced the story and allowed lots of fun to happen within the walls of their brand. Because the story takes place in and around Ikea, their presence is natural and seamless. Most importantly, Illeana and her team never pand to their sponsor, but rather engage in truthful observations about the Ikea experience – sometimes favorable, sometimes satirical – that make the integration that much more believable.
The Brand as Shadow Conspirator

What if a brand creates an entertainment property and completely disassociates itself from the result? Not in the interest of mitigating the risk of the property's reception, but rather for strategic purposes? For instance, an apparel company funds a documentary film whose only purpose is to start an honest conversation in the marketplace as a point of entry for the company's new product launch—or even just as insight during research and development. Or, an original short film series that's part of an alternate reality game leading up to a movie premiere. The role of Shadow Conspirator allows the brand to affect opinion or evoke a reaction without muddying the proverbial waters.

The shadow conspirator doesn't need to be subversive. A brand can assume the shadow conspirator role with the intention to reveal its participation at a prescribed time. In this regard, TIBCO Software remained anonymous—at least several layers below the surface—when they launched their Stevie award-winning branded entertainment campaign “Greg the Architect.” Targeting software architects responsible for recommending or deciding upon enterprise technology solutions, the series used low-fi action figure puppetry and irreverent humor to become an instant buzz-generator in the typically dry tech industry. TIBCO’s decision not to stamp the episodes with a logo, but rather tease the viewer to learn more about Service Oriented Architecture at their (still unbranded) reference site TIBCO’s “Greg the Architect.”
SOANowJournal.com paid off: key industry bloggers, like Joe McKendrick of ZDNet, impressed with the non-sales-y, non-solution-oriented story of Greg and his challenges implementing complex and expensive software credited TIBCO for its fresh approach. Subsequently, software architects were driven to the property to discover something made just for them by a company who understands how difficult the job of evaluating SOA really is.

While TIBCO's "shadow" presence was short-lived, it served the distinct purpose of establishing credibility and honesty: two criteria essential to the process of selecting a technology partner.

There are many factors that should be considered before the role of the Brand is determined. A brand with broader awareness and reach may be able to leverage the benefits of Shadow Conspirator role, whereas a challenger brand may find the Lead Character role provides more opportunities for positive exposure. Regardless of which level of participation best suits the Brand, defining its role at the genesis of the concept is essential.
The Consumer as Viewer

In a digital age saturated with gadgets and technologies that allow all manners of active participation including chatting, sharing, self-publishing, video editing and more, it’s somewhat surprising to discover that the majority of interactions with a branded entertainment experience are passive viewing. But, it’s an important point of entry that can lead to much more active involvement, and so it’s highly important that the core content in a property be of the utmost storytelling quality. The Consumer as Viewer is not just a number; she has a great deal of power. She has the power to choose how much or how little to watch. She has the power to rate, to vote and to “like.” And most importantly, she has the power to share. The fate of a property rests in the hands of the Viewers, and that’s a mighty power to wield.

The Consumer as Contributor

The moment the Consumer shares a piece of content, she has become a Contributor. And her act of passing the experience along to a friend in an email or posting it on her Facebook wall actually changes the content itself. Her impression of the property is interpreted by others and sets the context through which they will experience the content themselves. When a Brand can understand and embrace that power, the Contributor becomes more and more valuable. Her comments on an episode, her dialogue with one of the characters on Twitter, her vote for a story ending, her mash-up of video clips – all forms of personal expression that, simultaneously, transform the greater entertainment experience. And when guided and rewarded by the Brand, the Contributor can become even more powerful.

The Consumer as Champion

If the right mechanisms are put in place, Consumers can become so inspired or incentivized to participate that they become Champions and may even begin doing...
For instance, an educational web experience with a series of instructional videos that establishes a social ranking system: when a Contributor earns a certain number of contribution points and a certain rank by her peers, she reaches a Champion level of authority within the system that permits her to actually create and publish her own videos – not simply as user generated content, but as a qualified part of the core content. Of course, not only does the Champion add value within the experience, but by her nature, she typically will have a strong social presence and can become a chat leader/key influencer for the experience driving even more participation.

Adobe Systems’ “Agency of Record” is a branded entertainment experience that allowed consumers to participate as Champions. This interactive series explored the struggles of advertising creatives in the twilight of their careers and established the Brand as Lead Character with the intent to deliver on Adobe’s core message of “revolutionizes how the world engages with ideas and information.” Each episode was based on a client pitch that creative directors Dave and Rick and their designer Sienna prepared and performed to differing results each time. Early in the series, the team’s creative efforts were threaded into the story and executed as screencasts of Adobe products hard at work. However, as the audience began to grow, and as Sienna’s exasperation with her bosses increased,
The doors to the story were opened to the audience. With a dedicated microsite, Sienna created a place where she could vent about her CDs and seek the help of the creative community to get them back on track. Each week, the character would post a challenge, include a link to Adobe's Creative Suite 4 trial, and invite participants to submit concepts. Hundreds of Champions interacted with Sienna and other users, submitted creations which were featured in subsequent episodes of the core series, and spread the word on blogs and forums. Not a contest. Not a sweepstakes. Simply a chance for eager viewers to earn a little social currency and become a part of the story.

The Consumer is an independent player in the experience, and her role is defined not by the Brand but by her actions. However, the Brand can create touchpoints throughout the experience to influence the choices the Consumer makes and invite her to take on more a more meaningful role.
WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Understanding the Value

Now that we have a solid understanding of the importance of a great story and the roles that both the Brand and the Consumer play in bringing it to life, we can begin to answer what is perhaps the biggest question: What's in it for me?

The value of a branded entertainment experience needs to be symbiotic, and it's often most helpful to look at it through the eyes of the Consumer. An effective branded entertainment experience will allow the Brand to deliver three key takeaways for the Consumer:

**Entertainment**

"I laughed." Or "I cried." Or "I just had my socks knocked off." It's a quality entertainment experience, and the Consumer appreciates that it was delivered by the Brand.

**Emotion**

"I cared." The experience was highly relevant to the Consumer–she has a reason to watch it–and the Brand makes a deeper connection with the Consumer because she thinks "they really get me."

**Knowledge**

"I learned." The Consumer gets a real, tangible learning value from the experience. This is not necessarily a tutorial or course as the knowledge could be something as simple as "Wow. I didn't realize the band had released a third album."

These components comprise the value quotient for branded entertainment. A great story is the foundation, but it's vital for the Brand to assure that these three ingredients—entertainment, emotion, and knowledge—are blended appropriately to create the most effective experience.
The Evolution of Storytelling to a Distributed Model

It's difficult to broadly define branded entertainment in the interactive space for several reasons. First, the migration of entertainment companies from the bosom of broadcast to the wild west of the internet has been rocky to say the least. Struggling to understand what the web video-watching market will bear, media giants have created hit-or-miss business models, most of which have been misses culminating in repurposed TV and movie content wrapped in very old media advertising packages.

Second, the concept of “content consumption” is evolving at an incredible rate. The broadcast model continues to fragment with many TV owners abandoning appointment viewing and watching what they want, when they want with DVRs and internet-connected set-top boxes. But many digitally savvy consumers have foregone the “TV experience” altogether, turning to their computers, iPods, iPads, and mobile phones to watch shorter-form content in places and times that better suit their increasingly busy lives. These people, though completely dissatisfied with the passive and cumbersome experience of viewing content, still seek entertainment; of course, it's just that it's in interactive form – video games, location-based mobile apps, even Twitter feeds, Facebook walls and Flickr streams.

The evolution of the entertainment consumer continues to complicate the business of entertainment. While most entertainment organizations have yet to discover the silver bullet business model for content on the web, brands have discovered a different “ROI” and, as such, have the distinct advantage of looking at interactive channels from a different perspective. The Brand doesn't necessarily need to realize revenue from its entertainment property – in fact, a paid model may be counterintuitive to its purpose. In many cases, the real return for a Brand is simply quality exposure with the right people and greater potential for loyalty.
Distributed Storytelling Case Study

YOU SUCK AT PHOTOSHOP

In early 2008, a video created by this document's author Troy Hitch entitled "You Suck at Photoshop" made a splash on Digg.com, spearheading what would become a web video phenomenon: two seasons, twenty episodes, three Webby awards, one of Time Magazine's Top 10 TV Episodes of 2008 and nearly 30 million views later, "You Suck At Photoshop" is considered one of the most original and inventive digital entertainment experiences of all time. What made this seemingly disposable mock tutorial series last? It all started with a character named Donnie Hoyle.

Donnie Hoyle teaches you how to use Photoshop because he's better than you. And because Photoshop is the only way he can express himself. And if he doesn't vent about his failing marriage to an unfaithful wife, his dead-end job, his hirsute Facebook stalker, his World of Warcraft guild and his problems with fertility, then how will you ever get any better at Photoshop?

This simple character became the focal point of an epic story: an everyman whose world is crumbling around him – and who's powerless to do anything about it – who's on a crash course with destiny. In Season One, Donnie reluctantly agrees to dissolve his marriage to his unfaithful wife only to slip into another disastrous relationship. In a desperate attempt to leave his miserable world behind, Donnie uses Photoshop's vanishing point tool to remove himself from existence. Season Two followed a similar plot: failing to prove that he is too infertile to have impregnated his exwife, Donnie triggers a series of unfortunate events causing everyone in his life to threaten to kill him. The series concludes in a thrilling finale when Donnie is murdered by a mysterious assailant.
"You Suck At Photoshop" is an unexpected entertainment experience. Inspired by the fact that Photoshop tutorials are one of the most searched genres of video content on the web, the series lived in a space fertile for discovery. And when viewers discovered it, they were surprised, delighted and confused: "this is hilarious, but I actually learned something about Photoshop too. WTF?" Its ability to entertain and educate was only one part of the series' unique approach. "You Suck At Photoshop"s lo-fi production was arresting. The viewer never sees any of the characters; the story is told in voiceover, Skype calls, Facebook chats, intercoms and emails all overlapping simple screencasts of Donnie's computer desktop. On their own, the "You Suck At Photoshop" episodes are a compelling storytelling experience. But there is much more to the story. Through a series of social media interactions, alternate reality gaming threads, audience contributions and the full surrender of the series' ending to the whim of the audience, "You Suck At Photoshop" became a transmedia darling and a runaway success.
LISTEN TO THE AUDIENCE

When the first episode reached critical mass, the conversations in the comments on YouTube began to turn to the identity of the main character. Many viewers were certain that Donnie was a real, albeit screwed up, person who was really trying to teach people how to use Photoshop and hoping to become web famous in the process. Others were convinced that he was being voiced by a celebrity, the comedian and actor Dane Cook in fact, and that this was a comedy series that happened to use Photoshop as a background.

The debate raged on, exacerbated by the fact that in episode two Donnie had photos of Dane Cook in his project folder. Donnie (and his producers) not only listened to the thousands of conversations that were happening around the videos, but actually responded to them in a way that only served to escalate the intrigue.
In episode four, following the departure of his cheating wife, Donnie gathers the courage to sell his wedding ring. Using Photoshop, he preps a photo to use on eBay. In real time in the video, Donnie uploads the photo to what viewers would eventually discover out of pure curiosity to be a real eBay auction listing entitled "Ring of Infinite Sorrows." Donnie concludes the lesson. There's no link to the auction. No call to action at the end of the video. No promotion whatsoever. It was simply another set piece in the ongoing saga of Donnie Hoyle.

Amazingly, within four hours of the premiere of the episode, over 50,000 viewers visited the eBay listing, bid the ring up to $800 and began to ask the "seller" questions. Donnie responded in kind, and within a few more hours there were hundreds of questions and answers posted for everyone to see. The eBay listing exploded into a flash mob event that drove the story forward but only for the Champion fans who connected the dots and came along for the ride.

That sense of exclusivity compelled the Champions to claim the status of discovery and post the Q&A on over 14,000 blogs and forums before eBay eventually shut the operation down.
Throughout the series, Donnie interacts with several key characters who are restricted to communicating with Donnie through their own specific technology. Donnie's love interest, Sandy Mehlig, meets him by posting a request to his Facebook page, and subsequently only ever communicates with Donnie using Facebook chat. Within a few days of Sandy’s first appearance, both she and Donnie collected over 2,000 Facebook friends each. While using Facebook profiles for series characters isn’t novel, the method by which viewers arrived there was. Like the eBay auction, they weren’t driven or invited there, it was their own curiosity to discover if it was possible to participate in the story.

Similarly, Donnie’s friend and online gaming addict Sn4tchBuckl3r only ever communicates with Donnie via Skype calls. When curious viewers would take a chance and make a Skype call to see if Sn4tchBuckl3r was really out there, hundreds were floored to find that he really was. The actor portraying the character would man the Skype account nearly 24 hours a day and would engage in one-on-one conversations with fans. It’s clearly not a scalable solution, but those hundreds of brief conversations converted quickly into thousands and thousands more views from new fans who had caught the fever first hand.
User contributions

After it was proven that the audience could be activated, Season Two explored new ways to drive contributory participation. The Season Two opener sees Donnie working with a photo of a sperm (which he named “Ronnie”) to illustrate his infertility. In the following episode, Donnie opens by warning that some overzealous viewers had taken his photo of Ronnie and had defaced photos on sites all over the web. Donnie scrolls through a popular website that’s been victimized as proof and then, in an effort to stem any further digital vandalism, commands “Please don’t download Ronnie. Dot com.” When curious users navigate to pleasedontdownloadronnie.com they are delighted to find the photo. In the following episode, Donnie warns “Stop emailing your Ronnie photos to me trying to become web famous. Dot com.” And you guessed it... stopemailingyourronniephotostometryingtobecomewebfamous.com led to another page where a submission form allowed fans to upload their Ronnie photo creations. Other site clues followed, until fans found a shrine of their Ronnie photos, many of which were featured in subsequent episodes. Without a single link, banner ad or pitch, Donnie drove his Champions to be a part of his story in a way that respected their time, made them feel like they were part of an elite group of insiders and rewarded them with social currency.
got a great story? good.

now, let it go.

Throughout the series, the debate on the character of the nightmeye sky was a critical point in the development of the story. It created a sense of mystery and anticipation, as viewers wondered whether the true identity of Donnie Hoyle was indeed revealed. The decision to invite Dane Cook to participate in the story was a masterstroke. In a mind-bending twist, the only time Donnie Hoyle actually appears on screen, he is revealed to be Dane Cook, who is then promptly shot in the face and killed.
we believe that the secret to delivering unique and effective branded entertainment is to partner with the client and, together, foster its development from start to finish. To that end, our agencies are evolving. In some offices, we've employed a hybrid agency/studio model that allows us to understand the Brand’s need and develop a strategy as their advertising agency, but also produce and deploy the original intellectual property as the film studio. We've committed to this approach by staffing a full-time team of branded entertainment specialists: award-winning filmmakers, writers, producers and technicians who also have extensive experience as advertising creatives and who, ultimately, are able to create work that serves both the story and the Brand.

This new digital landscape of branded entertainment that's driven brands to serve as content creators, producers, and distributors has required agencies to review their business model as well. Still trying to manage the universal shift to “digital,” many agencies are uncertain about what role they should, or can, play in delivering a successful branded entertainment experience for their clients. At Proximity, The Agency/Studio hybrid

The series that defined the mockutorial genre and pushed the limits of distributed storytelling ended in the ultimate salute to its audience: a direct response to viewer feedback from the very first episode.
TAKING THE NEXT STEP

Perhaps you and your Brand have begun to explore the possibility of employing an entertainment strategy or currently seek to integrate an entertainment experience into your marketing mix. How do you get started? Please do not contact Proximity Branded Entertainment for more info. Dot com.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

TROY HITCH

Troy Hitch is a creative director at Barefoot Proximity and leads the branded entertainment practice. As the founder of new media studio Big Fat Brain, he created the hit series “You Suck At Photoshop” and the breakout branded entertainment successes TIBCO’s “Greg the Architect,” Adobe Systems’ “Agency of Record,” Autodesk’s “Teknochronicles of Z,” among others. Troy is a three time Webby Award-winner, and his work has been featured in Time, Wired, The Washington Post and The LA Times. He can be reached at thitch@barefootproximity.com

DOUG WORPLE

Doug Worple is the founder and CEO of Barefoot Proximity and the chief architect of the firm’s transition from a traditional agency model to one focused on content. He identified the white space opportunity for the firm’s ManOfTheHouse.com property and several other content plays now in development. He has earned many creative honors and has been featured in Fast Company, Advertising Age and The Wall Street Journal. He can be reached at dworple@barefootproximity.com

thitch@barefootproximity.com
dworple@barefootproximity.com