Digital audiences have created a new breed of media consumer. They have incredibly high standards and strong preferences, immune to traditional advertising. 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 anywhere – where, when and how it suits them best. They want to engage in something to talk about. They want to share something that, in the very act of sharing, they are. They want to discuss it, change it, mark it, make it their own. They are not simply consumers; they are participants. Entertainment is no longer a product; it's an experience.

In the days of sponsored radio and TV programs, the Brand has successfully leveraged entertainment to deliver its consumer message. But leveraging entertainment to reach today's media consumer has meant the Brand must assume a new role. Seeking connection with its audience, the Brand, in this new media, is no longer the storyteller, the studio, the media – it has been referenced in our previous media,” even the distributor. The result is an entertainment experience that engage the Brand's more relevant and meaningful than before.

This 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 biggest mistakes brands – even the most effective, and when they execute branded entertainment efforts is disposable content. Advertising is disposable it's supposed to be. Its singular purpose is to create a brand, to try a product, to buy a product. The content in advertising result.

However, when a Brand creates an opportunity for the Consumer to connect with content when it "delivers a tangible value" – practice, when those criteria are met, the Consumer get entertainment or social currency. When connection is strong enough, they want back for more. Again and again. If that's along with them. If executed responsibly, the Brand can participate as well. And it begins with a great story.

Story is the fundamental component to branded entertainment. Just ask Pixar. Director John Lasseur explains "The Rules" of the studio like this:

THE PIXAR RULES

Tell a compelling story with heart that keeps people wondering what will happen next.

Populate it with memorable characters. If audiences invest in your main character, they'll track their character's journey. Even the bad guys have to be likable.

Finally, put the story and characters into a believable world.
creation, or audience target, a commitment to these rules for success for Pixar. There is no exception to the rule to branded entertainment.

Why? the Consumer wonders "what does it mean?" For the Brand, this can result in a consumer experience.

When the Consumer feels a situation, she is much more likely to connect with the story 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 an epic — a great story can be told in thirty seconds. It’s about creating drama and a reason for how it turns out. The story gives a common business perspective, 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 execution, the roles will be unique to the particular circumstances.
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The least invasive way the Brand can participate 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 targeted audiences with relevant content. Branded entertainment in the digital space offers even more opportunities for the Brand to strengthen its position with the consumer and the Consumer.

FELICIA DAY'S "THE GUILD"

The season of the series was originally launched as a sponsored show, but after gaining a sizable audience 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 downloads. Microsoft was also able to attract other sponsors, including髡 for upfront (a rare feat for web video.) Most importantly, the show's identity presence is now that of a sponsor to the targeted 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.

**as Lead Character**

The role which the Brand plays a character is particularly challenging to branded entertainment. Unless the Brand is integrated 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 play the part of “hero,” the role of Lead Character simply means that the Brand’s participation is fundamental to the story telling.

**HERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS TO ENSURE THE INTEGRITY OF THE BRAND AND EARN THE RESPECT OF THE AUDIENCE**

In the case of Illeana and the “Ikea: Time to Assemble” series, benefactor involvement was key, and it had to be embedded in the walls of their brand. It was natural and essential. Most importantly, Illeana and her team listened carefully, working closely with the show’s creators to engage in truthful observations about the benefits and the sometimes unfavorable, sometimes satirical – that make the integration that much more effective.
The Brand as Short Film

What if a Brand could use property and completely disappear from the result, rather than for strategy of entry or leading up. The opinion of the

THE SHORT FILM

In this regard, TIBCO anonymous - below the surface, their Stevie in entertainment "The Architect." responsible for deciding upon solutions, the figure puppet becomes a the typical decision.

TIBCO's "Greg the Architect"
THE OTHER EQUAL PARTNER IN THE CREATION OF A BRAND EXPERIENCE IS THE CONSUMER

In a digital age saturated with data and technologies that demand an active participation for brands, it’s not surprising to discover that the majority of the interaction with a brand is still passive viewing. But it’s an important point to note that more and more, the consumer experience is active participation, and so it’s highly important for a brand’s content to be of the highest storytelling quality. Aonne, not at a number; she has a great deal of power. She has the ability to choose how much or how little to watch. She has the power to rate, to vote “like.” And most importantly, she has the power to share. The fate of a property is in the hands of the consumers, and that’s a mighty power to wield.

The Consumer Has Changed

The moment the Consumer share a piece of content, she has become a Collaborator. And her act of passing the experience along to a friend in an email or post to her Facebook wall actually changes the content itself. Her impression of the content and her attitude and sets the created a story in the mind of the consumer. Her comments on a Brand embrace the story and make it more and more valuable. Her comments on a Facebook “like” or a Twitter “retweet” become the dialogue with the content. Her vote for a story on a social network or a forum is the greater engagement of the content experience. And when guided and rewarded by the brand, the Consumer can become even more powerful.

The Champions

If the makings of a brand are alive and well, Consumers can become so inspired or incented to participate that they become Champions and may even begin doing

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After interacting with Sienna and other users, submitted creations are featured in subsequent episodes of the show, spreading the word of the campaign. Not a contest, not a sweepstakes, the goal is to give eager viewers a chance to earn a unique social currency and become part of the story.

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

Understanding of the essence of a great story and the roles the Consumer play in bringing it to life, we can begin to answer the question, "What's in it for me?"

The very nature of entertaining content needs to be symbiotic, and it's often most harmful to both the Content and the Consumer. An effective branded entertaining experience will allow the Brand to deliver the desired results for the Consumer.

Enter

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

Emotion

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

Knowledge

"I learned." The Consumer gets a real, tangible learning experience. It is not necessarily a tutorial or course as the experience can be something as simple as "Wow, I didn't realize the band had released that song.

These components—value quotient for branded entertainment. A great story is the foundation for the Brand to add the other three ingredients—entertainment, emotion, knowledge—are blended 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” is evolving at an incredible rate. The broadcast model continues to tumble with 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, iPads, iPhones, 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 business has forced traditional entertainment businesses to consider the silver bullet business model for content distribution. The entertainment industry has 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.
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 very 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 pets, then how will you ever get any better at Photoshop?

This simple character became the focal point of an epic story: an everyman who 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 ex-wife, Donnie undergoes a series of unfortunate events causing every disaster imaginable to happen to him.
A compelling storytelling experience. Inspired by the}

challenges of video content on

And when viewers discovered

it, it was only

one part of the series' unique approach. "You Suicide"

production was

appended. The viewer never sees any of the characters

flow in a simple screen-cast of

as told in voiceover,

Facebook chats, intercoms and emails all do.

At the same time, the episodes are a

compelling storytelling experience. But there is a lot more

Through the use of social media interaction, audience
gags and audience contributions, "You Suicide"

became a transmedia darling and

success.
Vivian's episode reached critical mass. In the comments on YouTube began to turn to the identity of the people who were Photoshop and hoping to become web famous. It was being voiced by a celebrity, the comedian named Douche. Cook into a comedy series that happened to use Photoshop as a background.
Amusingly, within four hours of the episode, over 50,000 viewers set piece in the ride. Donnie Hoyla visited the eBay seller and began to explain their own. The logs and aims the ride. "What video?"

photo to.
OTHER VIRTUAL THEATRES

With each character who is restricted through their technology, Donnie used Facebook to his advantage. For the first days of Sandy’s appearance, he and Donnie collected 12 Facebook friends each. While the 24 hour cycle for series characters isn’t something which viewers arrived at out of habit, they weren’t driven or motivated, but in curiosity to discover if it was a part of the story.

Similarly, Donnie’s Sn4tchBuckl3r character did take a chance and receive a call from an unknown number, floor to find out that he was the character who would man the Skype and would engage fans. It’s clearly not a serious conversation, but those brief conversations quickly turned into 24 hour a day conversations with thousands more views from new fans, and turned the fever first hand.
...on that the audience could explore new ways to contributory participation. The episode, Donnie working with a photo of a sperm (which he named “Ronnie”) that’s been victimized as proof.

In the following episode, Donnie opens by warning that some overzealous viewers defaced his photo of the defaced photo 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.”
The series that defined the mockutorial genre and pushed the limits of narrative storytelling ended in the ultimate salute to its audience—a direct response to what it had learned from the very first episode.

**THE AGENCY/STUDIO HYBRID**

This new digital landscape of branded entertainment that’s a blend of brands to serve as content creators, producers, and distributors has required agencies to reevaluate their business models 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 to clients. At Proximity, we believe the secret to delivering unique and effective branded entertainment is to partner with brands, 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 deploy the creative talent as the film studio. We’ve come approach by staffing a full-time in-house branded entertainment specialists who have also been winning filmmakers, writers, producers, and technicians who are also experienced in advertising creative and who, ultimately, are able to create work that serves the story and the brand.
Perhaps you and your Brand have begun to explore the possibilities of delivering an enterprising experience or currently seek to integrate an enterprising experience into your strategy. Please contact Barefoot Proximity Branded.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

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