



Strategic narratives and competitive positioning:
How telling your story will help set you in
the right direction and away from the crowd

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Business leaders must look to narratives and storytelling as a more effective way to explain complex strategies.

Many executives spend weeks and months crafting the right business approach that will set them apart, only to leave their audiences scratching their heads when they convey it in complicated, meaningless corporate language. What they really need is a simpler, more compelling narrative that explains their **strategy** and how it will beat the competition.

Business leaders fall short in articulating a clear corporate strategy

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TALKING TOO MUCH BUSINESS

People can't seem to tell a good story anymore. Waiting for a flight recently, I overheard two executives chatting before we started to board. One of the guys says to the other, "Can I run you through two decks while you're still munching?" "Sure," his colleague replies. What else could he do with his mouth full of a McDonald's breakfast burrito?

His travel partner dives right in, hitting all the business buzz words with print out in hand: framework, value prop, 4 Rs (rate, risk, reward and relationships), diagrams, bullet points, x-y axis, buyers, radars, true strategic relationships, deal making, and a win-win thrown in for good measure. He even attempts an analogy, "We're like a procurement organization for value." Throughout his verbal download, he continues to excuse the length of his PowerPoint deck, skipping slides here and there, even saying at one point, "This is where the color printer went bad."

LOST IN TRANSLATION

I actually overheard this exchange at Midway Airport in Chicago when I started writing this white paper; it was like a gift from above. If I were a spy, I wouldn't have known how to steal their corporate secrets – it was completely unintelligible. His colleague nodded his head, but it wasn't clear if he was agreeing, nodding off or just being nice.

These exchanges are typical and harm an organization's ability to succeed. Great ideas are being buried by words packaged in meaningless messages delivered in meeting after meeting, in press releases heavy on boilerplate and light on substance, and in brochures that nobody reads. People can't seem to simplify complexity or speak without the constant aid of a 40-slide presentation. It is reaching a point where simultaneous translation is now a business requirement.



Businesses mistakenly feel that something that is complex needs to sound complicated.

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KEY DEFINITION

Strategy: A strategy is an elaborate and systematic plan of action designed to achieve a particular goal.

Strategic positioning undermined by complex messaging

If you said “market leadership” or “innovation” was the key component of the strategy, would your organization know what that meant?

GREAT STRATEGY, UNCLEAR POSITIONING

Smart organizations work hard to determine what differentiates them from their key competitors. Unfortunately, many craft a **positioning** statement that lacks meaning. At some point during the planning process, they call in the communications team to articulate their strategy. The goal is to simplify all of the research, planning documents and notes, and start building a message that makes sense.

Usually, this is left until the end of the process, and there isn't much time allotted for developing a solid storyline. In many cases, the communications team simply hammers out a list of key messages to share the strategy. These messages are then interpreted by marketing writers, translated by sales executives and ultimately confuse the organization's audiences.

People may understand the positioning, but they can't explain it. They default to the language of business speak and end up sounding like everyone else. Throughout this process, the strategy becomes diluted and loses its meaning and impact.

SEARCHING FOR UNDERSTANDING

About a year ago, I got off a plane in Mexico and stepped right into this reality. One of the country's largest real estate development firms was losing revenue in the midst of an economic downturn. As a result, investment analysts had just downgraded the company's stock.

In the minds of the firm's senior management, however, they were guiding the company perfectly through an anticipated market downturn. They were following a well formulated plan. Internally, they used the term “adaptive business model” to identify their strategy, but they didn't have a simple way to explain it outside the organization. And so they couldn't share their story beyond the walls of their boardroom. The firm looked like just another victim of the economy and analysts responded accordingly.



KEY DEFINITION

Positioning: The process by which marketers try to create an image or identity in the minds of their target market for a product, brand or organization. In some cases, re-positioning involves changing the identity of a product, relative to the identity of competing products, in the collective minds of the target market. De-positioning involves attempting to change the identity of competing products, relative to the identity of your own product, in the collective minds of the target market.

Narratives are an effective way to create complete context

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THE NEED FOR CONTEXT

What the real estate firm in Mexico was failing to convey was the **context** for its strategy. Without the right context, a business strategy has very little meaning or immediate interest. On its own, “adaptive business model” can mean anything to anyone. It fails to communicate in compelling detail exactly what specific business approach the real estate development firm is pursuing, why they chose it, where they stand on implementing it and what it means to their stakeholders. They left the job of filling in the details to their audience, and their audience got it wrong.

Many years ago, I met someone in Chicago who was running for U.S. Congress. When I asked what his campaign message was, he told me a story. His rival was a second-generation incumbent, who felt he was entitled to office because of his last name. My friend spoke passionately about how government positions were not something to be inherited. And he recounted examples of how an expectation of entitlement often results in failed leadership.

It’s interesting how politicians shape their message through narratives. In fact, we often ask: what is a candidate’s narrative? In other words, how can we synthesize the essence of their message into a short story? Is it about taxes, fairness or some other issue? When a politician’s message can be framed so clearly and simply, it gives the voting public a way to understand the deeper meaning behind the message.

Many businesses today need to take a lesson from the field of politics. In fact, the real estate development firm I met in Mexico did just that. The company created a narrative that provided the context for its “adaptive business model.” They explained why they created it, how they were executing it in the current economy, and how they were faring better than their competitors because they were poised to adapt to sharp market turns and remain profitable. Soon the market got it. Their positioning was understood, and they recaptured the favor of influential analysts, investors and potential partners.

Context is created when messages start to mean the same thing to everyone involved.

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KEY DEFINITION

Context: The parts of a written or spoken statement that precede a specific word or phrase, usually influencing its meaning or effect: *You have misinterpreted my remark because you took it out of context.* The set of circumstances that surround a particular event, situation, etc.

A narrative delivers clarity

Within a narrative, messages fall into place like the bricks and mortar of an idea.

BREAKING THROUGH

Several years ago, I met a graphic artist and illustrator who works for *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. He stood out nationally among thousands of highly accomplished designers and illustrators. His secret was he had a way to immediately explain and show what sets him apart. It wasn't simply his creative talent, but his ability, as he explained, to "take tough, hard-to-define concepts and boil them down into simple, easy-to-understand visual ideas." I was sold because it matched the very issue that I battle as a communications and marketing professional. Together, we collaborated on many rewarding projects.

For the graphic artist in St. Louis, the real estate development firm in Mexico and the congressional candidate in Chicago, framing their strategy and positioning in the context of a **narrative** was the key to success. It's what enabled them to connect with their audience and establish immediate understanding and differentiation.

MAPPING IT

So why don't organizations share the broader context of their strategies? Why don't they take the time to communicate their ideas more clearly to their audiences? Maybe it's because they think the reasons are already obvious. Or maybe they even fall in love with their answers and somehow just skip the question. Or even more likely, they can't simplify their message.

For most organizations, developing a strategy is extremely time-consuming. It is easy for executives to get so deep in the details that by the time the plan is ready to launch, they have lost the ability to explain it concisely. So before the shift from strategy development to communications outreach, they need to get back to basics. They need to assume that their audience knows nothing and really isn't interested in deciphering another list of key messages and data points. They need to erase the whiteboard and map out the compelling story behind their differentiation.

A strong, simple narrative can answer many questions that key stakeholders have in mind.



KEY DEFINITION

Narrative: A story or account of events, experiences, or the like, whether true or fictitious. It creates interest through conflict-resolution devices that help audiences understand and appreciate why.

Creating a “Strategic Narrative”

GETTING STARTED

A Strategic Narrative is a story that succinctly explains the business context of a strategy in a way that the organization can easily embrace and act on. It is a critical tool to help senior executives sell their approach effectively and win the buy-in necessary to turn a vision into measurable success.

Organizations need to create a Strategic Narrative as a framework for sales and marketing to get the positioning right. A Strategic Narrative will bring the story of a strategy back to its original form, reconnecting elements of the strategy so that the direction gets clearer.

When is it best to conduct a Strategic Narrative in the planning process? Typically, the answer is in the middle or at the end. Organizations that choose to do it in the middle want to capture the story while it is still fresh, are confident with people’s ability to think and react quickly and

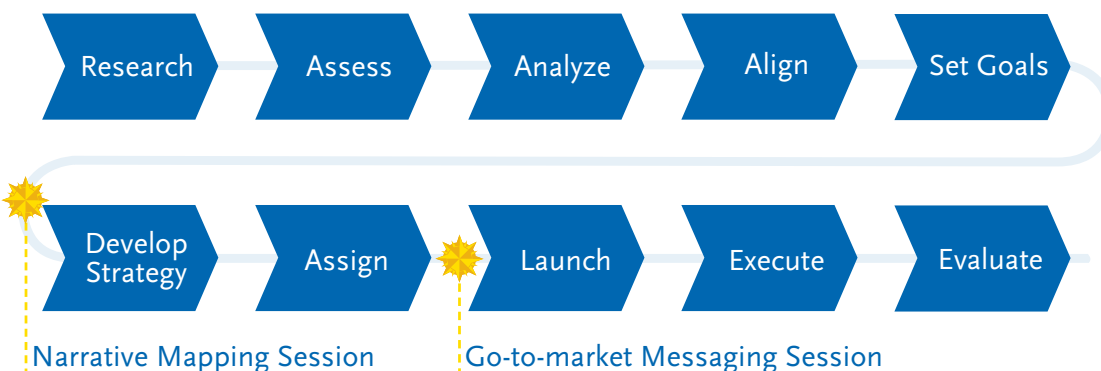
possibly lack a formal messaging process. Those that do it at the end typically have a more formal messaging process and pull all the pieces together as a final step to planning.

GAINING FLUENCY: GIVING EXECUTIVES A CLEAR VOICE

Once business leaders define and understand their plan as a Strategic Narrative, however, most will not be comfortable telling it like a story for fear that they are oversimplifying or missing key points. Fluency can be achieved by helping executives reference points on a Narrative Map as they would introduce characters in a joke and a punch line. And it ensures all of the participants have a common way to explain the plan using similar language and the same messages.

Organizations have two distinct moments to establish narrative messages.

Strategic planning process: when to craft the message



Most organizations that have a strategic planning process need to determine the right moment to conduct a Narrative Mapping session: either mid stream, at the end—or both.

Mapping your strategic narrative

SIMPLE PROCESS, STRONGER STORY

Narrative Mapping™ (or Message Mapping) is Sheffield's signature service. This is a distinctive approach to message development where the focus is to create a clear and concise visual storyline. Small groups are led by an experienced facilitator through a four-hour session in which they openly discuss the key elements surrounding a topic (i.e., a new strategy, product launch, service, business unit, brand position, mission/vision, etc.). The objective of the workshop is to incorporate the thinking of a variety of key stakeholders to form consensus regarding the essence of the story they want to tell. Unlike other approaches to messaging, these sessions gather both logical and creative elements that can serve as the basis for broad initiatives where the message really needs to stick.

Narrative Mapping sessions help establish a clear hierarchy of messaging quickly. After only a few hours, the group agrees on what needs to be said and can use the visual map storyline to guide the creation of a variety of materials to communicate the core story to distinct audiences in different ways.

During the session, the group answers such questions as:

- What's the focal point of what we're doing?
- What is distinctive about us?
- Why is this needed now?
- What are the main challenges and opportunities our market faces?
- How do we deliver on our promise and address these needs?
- What are our strengths and weaknesses when compared to others aiming to tackle the same issues?
- When have we succeeded and what do people attribute to our success?
- How do we define success?
- What's the payoff?

Narrative Maps are a powerful technique when embedded in a planning process. They help key stakeholders identify the essence of strategy, articulate key components (messages) and explain how success will be measured.



Case Study: A strategy unlocked and simplified in a commodity market

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ISSUE:

The banking industry is filled with competitors that all basically say the same thing. A few years back, with the market getting hit hard, a large bank wanted to unveil a new strategy based on delivering an exceptional customer experience as the core foundation of what set it apart from its rivals.

CHALLENGE:

After months of exhaustive primary and secondary market research, senior leaders determined that this was a ripe opportunity for the organization to gain market share. No major bank in their market had yet to achieve the status of brands like Lexus and Nordstrom in terms of the customer experience.

APPROACH:

The executive team concluded that exceptional customer service (XCX) was the code word for an internal campaign to bring the bold promise to life through new product offerings, promotions and behaviors. The bar needed to be raised high, and employees needed to know the power

and simplicity of the strategy – and believe in it. Nearly two dozen leaders ranging from heads of finance, marketing, operations, research, corporate communications and other functions convened to craft the “XCX story” in a compelling way. After less than four hours, the team was able to design a simple, yet powerful narrative that explained the bold promise, why it was needed and how the entire organization could embrace it and leave behind confusing language and excessive business speak.

The narrative challenged the organization to be exceptional and gave examples that were real and relatable. Plans were drafted to activate the strategy by weaving powerful narratives in all facets of the organization to give a face and meaning to exceptional service. Corporate-speak terms like pillars, execution, alignment and empower were replaced by words that were direct and filled with context (e.g., obsession to please, understanding of what the client wants, convenient and easy, and their bank of choice).



A strategy with buzzwords like engage, operationalize, empower and execute was too boring and confusing to explain. A strategic narrative about being the “Nordstrom of banking” told a clearer story.



Prior to founding Sheffield, Joe served as senior vice president at Ketchum, a top-five marketing/PR agency in Chicago where he ran the corporate marketing practice. His career accomplishments include starting several stand-alone marketing offerings, running a small marketing consultancy in the late 1980s and serving as regional manager of Latin America for an aerospace manufacturing firm.

About Joseph McCormack

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Joseph McCormack is the founder and managing director of Sheffield Marketing Partners based in suburban Chicago. An experienced marketing executive and entrepreneur, he has developed breakthrough techniques like Narrative Mapping and Fluency sessions to help executives leverage their core story as a way to strengthen and clarify what defines organizations, innovations, products, services and driving market issues.

He has worked extensively with senior-level leaders in the U.S., Canada, Mexico and Europe to identify and articulate powerful messages that simplify what sets their organizations apart. Founded in

2006, his boutique agency specializes in message and content development for a variety of firms in markets like financial services, consulting, technology, transportation and consumer products.

He has spoken at numerous industry conferences such as the Worldwide Public Affairs Symposium, AWA's Mergers & Acquisitions Conference, the Command and General Staff College's Senior Leadership Conference, and numerous universities.

Recently, he founded Navigant Films to expand his vision into short-form video production and visual storytelling.

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About Sheffield Marketing Partners

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Sheffield is a boutique agency that organizations call when they need to create a powerful message and share content that is compelling and tells a story. We work with large companies like Jones Lang LaSalle, Harris Bank, FIS, SAP, iDirect, as well as start ups and non profits.

Sheffield was started in July, 2006 by Joe McCormack. The original vision was to build a small agency that would be adaptive to the changing needs and dynamics of companies trying to find the best way to connect with its key audiences. As technology and the Web continued to make a dramatic impact on the world of marketing and media, the company quickly discovered a niche: the universal value of a story. Sheffield was able to focus attention on that core point, regardless of an immediate concern if PR, advertising, or any other discipline might be involved. Clients wanted help getting their story straight and creating content that told it.

As a niche agency, we are typically considered when an organization is preparing to make an important announcement (e.g., launch a new

product or service), clarify or solidify its market position, or engage an audience in a way that is memorable. We serve functions in the organization such as Marketing, Corporate Communications, Strategic Planning and Employee Communications/HR. Our core focus is to develop a narrative message and packaging content that tells a story in the ways it needs to be shared.

Most of our engagements last from several days (workshops) to a few months (projects and program retainers). Our clients are satisfied with our work because we are passionate about their business, understand it deeply, and want to help them to communicate the essence of their story powerfully and clearly. We are comfortable communicating through a variety of media such as case studies, white papers, press releases, advertorial supplements, design illustrations, newsletters, as well as short-form video, audio podcasts, presentations and Flash. Most of our messaging and content is designed and directed to be consumed online as organizations are leveraging Web content to drive results.

