



Building a StoryBrand

Clarify Your Message So Customers Will Listen

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

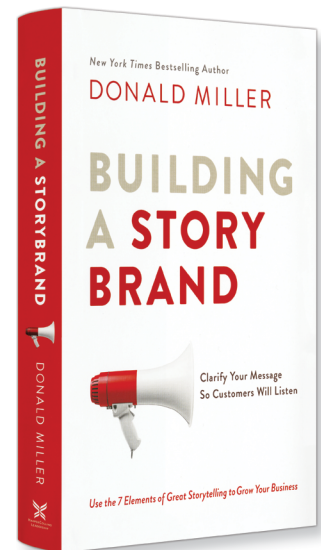
Too often, marketing efforts yield little or no results. In *Building a StoryBrand*, best-selling author Donald Miller offers a solution that works, by teaching companies how to dramatically improve how they connect with customers and grow their businesses.

Miller's StoryBrand process is a proven solution to the struggle business leaders face when talking about their businesses. This revolutionary method for connecting with customers provides organizations with the ultimate competitive advantage, revealing the secret for helping their customers understand the compelling benefits of using their products, ideas or services. *Building a StoryBrand* does this by teaching readers the seven universal story points all humans respond to; the real reason customers make purchases; how to simplify a brand message so people understand it; and how to create the most effective messaging for websites, brochures and social media.

Whether you are the marketing director of a multibillion dollar company or the owner of a small business, *Building a StoryBrand* will forever transform the way you talk about who you are, what you do and the unique value you bring to your customers.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The seven elements of the StoryBrand Framework and how to use them.
- Why your customers, not your company, are the real heroes.
- Why all great stories and brands are about survival and transformation.
- To use your StoryBrand script to transform your organization.



by Donald Miller

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: BUILDING A STORYBRAND

by Donald Miller

The author: Donald Miller is the CEO of StoryBrand, a company dedicated to helping individuals and organizations clarify and simplify their marketing. He has helped more than 3,000 businesses clarify their marketing messages so their companies grow. He is also the cohost of the Building a StoryBrand Podcast and the author of several books, including the best-sellers *Blue Like Jazz* and *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*.

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PART I: WHY MOST MARKETING IS A MONEY PIT

The Key to Being Seen, Heard and Understood

Most companies waste enormous amounts of money on marketing. We all know how mind-numbing it is to spend precious dollars on a new marketing effort that gets no results. When we see the reports, we wonder what went wrong, or worse, whether our product is really as good as we thought it was.

But what if the problem wasn't the product? What if the problem was the way we talked about the product?

The fact is, pretty websites don't sell things. Words sell things. And if we haven't clarified our message, our customers won't listen.

The first mistake brands make is they fail to focus on the aspects of their offer that will help people survive and thrive. All great stories are about survival — either physical, emotional, relational or spiritual. This means that if we position our products and services as anything but an aid in helping people survive, thrive, be accepted, find love, achieve an aspirational identity or bond with a tribe that will defend them physically and socially, good luck selling anything to anybody. These are the only things people care about.

The second mistake brands make is they cause their customers to burn too many calories in an effort to understand their offer. When having to process too much seemingly random information, people begin to ignore the source of that useless information in an effort to

conserve calories. There's a survival mechanism within our customers' brain that is designed to tune us out should we ever start confusing them.

The most powerful tool we can use to organize information so people don't have to burn very many calories is story. Story is a sense-making device. It identifies a necessary ambition, defines challenges that are battling to keep us from achieving that ambition and provides a plan to help us conquer those challenges. When we define the elements of a story as it relates to our brand, we create a map customers can follow to engage our products and services.

The narrative coming out of a company must be clear. Our customers have questions burning inside them, and if we aren't answering those questions, they'll move on to another brand. If we haven't identified what our customer wants, what problem we are helping them solve and what life will look like after they engage our products and services, for example, we can forget about thriving in the marketplace.

To clarify our message we're going to need a formula. A serious formula. This formula needs to organize our thinking, reduce our marketing effort, obliterate confusion, terrify the competition and finally get our businesses growing again. ●

The Secret Weapon That Will Grow Your Business

To grow your company, you can simplify your message into soundbites that come from seven categories. Once you have these seven messages down, any anxiety you



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experience talking about your brand will subside, and customers will be more attracted to what you offer.

Here is nearly every story you see or hear in a nutshell: A CHARACTER who wants something encounters a PROBLEM before they can get it. At the peak of their despair, a GUIDE steps into their lives, gives them a PLAN and CALLS THEM TO ACTION. That action helps them avoid FAILURE and ends in a SUCCESS.

That's really it. You'll see some form of this structure in nearly every movie you watch from here on out. In the first *Hunger Games* movie, for example, Katniss Everdeen must compete in a twisted fight-to-the-death tournament forced upon the people of Panem by an evil, tyrannical government called the Capitol. The problem she faces is obvious: She must kill or be killed. Katniss is overwhelmed, underprepared and outnumbered.

Along comes Haymitch, the brash, liquor-loving, grizzled winner of a previous *Hunger Games* tournament. Haymitch assumes the role of Katniss' mentor, helping her hatch a plan to win over the public. This gains Katniss more sponsors, thereby equipping her with more resources for the fight and increasing her chances of winning.

The fact that nearly every movie you go see at the theater includes these seven elements means something. Simply put, this framework is the pinnacle of narrative communication. The further we veer away from these seven elements, the harder it becomes for audiences to engage.

The Three Crucial Questions

The greatest enemy our business faces is the same enemy that good stories face: noise. At no point should we be able to pause a movie and be unable to answer three questions: 1. What does the hero want? 2. Who or what is opposing the hero getting what she wants? 3. What will the hero's life look like if she does (or does not) get what she wants?

Just like there are three questions audiences must be able to answer to engage in a story, there are three questions potential customers must answer if we expect them to engage with our brand. And they should be able to answer these questions within five seconds of looking at our website or marketing material: 1. What do you offer? 2. How will it make my life better? 3. What do I need to do to buy it?

When customers finally understand how you can help them live a wonderful story, your company will grow. With that, let's take a look at the StoryBrand Framework. ●

The Simple StoryBrand (SB7) Framework

Let's fly over the SB7 framework so you can understand, in summary form, all that it can do to simplify your marketing and messaging.

- 1. A Character. StoryBrand Principle One:** The customer is the hero, not your brand.
- 2. Has a Problem. StoryBrand Principle Two:** Companies tend to sell solutions to external problems, but customers buy solutions to internal problems.
- 3. And Meets a Guide. StoryBrand Principle Three:** Customers aren't looking for another hero; they're looking for a guide.
- 4. Who Gives Them a Plan. StoryBrand Principle Four:** Customers trust a guide who has a plan.
- 5. And Calls Them to Action. StoryBrand Principle Five:** Customers do not take action unless they are challenged to take action.
- 6. That Helps Them Avoid Failure. StoryBrand Principle Six:** Every human being is trying to avoid a tragic ending.
- 7. And Ends in a Success. StoryBrand Principle Seven:** Never assume people understand how your brand can change their lives. Tell them.

How do you narrow down your message so your marketing material starts working again? The StoryBrand BrandScript is a tool to simplify the process, and it's going to become your new best friend. The next seven sections walk you through these seven elements and help you create your BrandScript. ●

PART II: BUILDING YOUR STORYBRAND

A Character

A story doesn't really pick up until the hero needs to disarm a bomb, win someone's heart, defeat a villain or fight for their emotional or physical survival. And then the question becomes: Will the hero get what she wants?

As a brand it's important to define something your customer wants, because as soon as you define something your customer wants, you posit a story question in the mind of the customer: "Can this brand really help me get what I want?"

One university defined their customer's desire as a "hassle-free MBA you can complete after work." A caterer in Los Angeles defined his customer's desire as a

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“mobile fine-dining experience in the environment of your choice.” When you define something your customer wants, the customer is invited to alter their story in your direction. If they see your brand as a trustworthy and reliable guide, they will likely engage.

Open a Story Gap. Identifying a potential desire for your customer opens a story gap. The idea is that you place a gap between a character and what they want. Defining something your customer wants and featuring it in your marketing materials will open a story gap.

Pare Down the Customer’s Ambition to a Single Focus. The most important challenge for business leaders is to define something simple and relevant their customers want and to become known for delivering on that promise.

Choose a Desire Relevant to Their Survival. In their desire to cast a wide net, brands often define a blob of a desire that is so vague, potential customers can’t figure out why they need it in the first place. Here, survival means that primitive desire we all have to be safe, healthy, happy and strong. Survival simply means we have the economic and social resources to eat, drink, reproduce and fend off foes.

Desires that fit under this definition include conserving financial resources, conserving time, building social networks, gaining status, accumulating resources, the innate desire to be generous and the desire for meaning. ●

Has a Problem

Now that you’ve entered into your customers’ story, how do you increase their interest in your brand? You borrow another play from the storyteller’s playbook; you start talking about the problems your customers face.

Identifying our customers’ problems deepens their interest in the story we are telling. Every story is about somebody who is trying to solve a problem, so when we identify our customers’ problems, they recognize us as a brand that understands them.

How to Talk About Your Customers’ Problems

Every story needs a villain. The villain is the number-one device storytellers use to give conflict a clear point of focus. How sympathetic would Batman be without the Joker? Luke Skywalker without Darth Vader? Harry Potter without Voldemort?

If we want our customers’ ears to perk up when we talk about our products and services, we should position those products and services as weapons they can use to defeat a villain. And the villain should be dastardly.

A villain is the antagonist because the villain causes the hero serious problems. What’s less obvious is that in a story, there are three levels of problems that work together to capture a reader’s or a moviegoer’s imagination.

1. External Problems. In stories, the external problem is often a physical, tangible problem the hero must overcome in order to save the day: a ticking time bomb or a runaway bus. Most of us are in the business of solving external problems. We provide insurance or clothes or soccer balls.

2. Internal Problems. Companies tend to sell solutions to external problems, but people buy solutions to internal problems. The only reason our customers buy from us is because the external problem we solve is frustrating them in some way. If we can identify that frustration, put it into words and offer to resolve it along with the original external problem, something special happens. We bond with our customers because we’ve positioned ourselves more deeply into their narrative.

If we own a house-painting business, our customer’s external problem might be an unsightly home. The internal problem, however, may involve a sense of embarrassment about having the ugliest home on the street. Knowing this, our marketing could offer “Paint That Will Make Your Neighbors Jealous.”

3. Philosophical Problems. The philosophical problem in a story is about something even larger than the story itself. It’s about the question why. Why does this story matter in the overall epic of humanity? Brands that give customers a voice in a larger narrative add value to their products by giving their customers a deeper sense of meaning.

For Tesla Motor Cars, the villain is gas-guzzling, inferior technology. The external problem is, “I need a car.” The internal problem is, “I want to be an early adopter of new technology.” The philosophical problem is, “My choice of car ought to help save the environment.”

When these three levels of problems are resolved in one shot, the audience experiences a sense of pleasure and relief, causing them to love the story. ●

And Meets a Guide

If a hero solves her own problem in a story, the audience will tune out. Why? Because we intuitively know if she could solve her own problem, she wouldn’t have gotten into trouble in the first place. Storytellers use the guide character to encourage the hero and equip them to win the day.

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You've seen the guide in nearly every story you've read, listened to or watched: Frodo has Gandalf, Katniss has Haymitch and Luke Skywalker has Yoda. Hamlet was "guided" by his father's ghost, and Romeo was taught the ways of love by Juliet.

Just like in stories, human beings wake up every morning self-identifying as a hero. They are troubled by internal, external and philosophical conflicts, and they know they can't solve these problems on their own.

The fatal mistake some brands make is they position themselves as the hero in the story instead of the guide. If we are tempted to position our brand as the hero because heroes are strong and capable and the center of attention, we should take a step back. In stories, the hero is never the strongest character. Heroes are often ill-equipped and filled with self-doubt. They are often reluctant, being thrown into the story rather than willingly engaging the plot.

The guide, however, has already "been there and done that" and has conquered the hero's challenge in their own backstory. The guide, not the hero, is the one with the most authority. Still, the story is rarely about the guide. The guide simply plays a role. The story must always be focused on the hero, and if a storyteller (or business leader) forgets this, the audience will get confused about who the story is really about, and they will lose interest. People are looking for a guide to help them, not another hero.

The Two Characteristics of a Guide

The two things a brand must communicate to position themselves as the guide are empathy and authority.

Oprah Winfrey, an undeniably successful guide to millions, once explained the three things every human being wants most are to be seen, heard and understood. This is the essence of empathy.

Empathetic statements start with words like, "We understand how it feels to . . ." or "Nobody should have to experience..." Empathy is more than just sentimental slogans, though. Real empathy means letting customers know we see them as we see ourselves. Customers look for brands they have something in common with.

Also, when looking for a guide, a hero trusts somebody who knows what they're doing. The guide doesn't have to be perfect, but the guide needs to have serious experience helping other heroes win the day.

Once we express empathy and demonstrate authority, we can position our brand as the guide our customer has been looking for. ●

Who Gives Them a Plan

When a customer is deciding whether to buy something, we should picture them standing on the edge of a rushing creek. It's true they want what's on the other side, but as they stand there, they hear a waterfall downstream. What happens if they fall into the creek? What would life look like if they went over those falls?

To ease our customers' concerns, we need to place large stones in that creek. When we identify the stones our customers can step on to get across the creek, we remove much of the risk and increase their comfort level about doing business with us. It's as though we're saying, "First, step here. See, it's easy. Then step here, then here, and then you'll be on the other side, and your problem will be resolved."

In the StoryBrand Framework, we refer to these "stones" as a plan. In nearly every movie you can think of, the guide gives the hero a plan. The plan is the bridge the hero must cross in order to arrive at the climactic scene. Rocky has to train using nontraditional methods, Tommy Boy has to embark on a national sales trip, and Juliet must drink the potion the apothecary gives her in order to trick her family into thinking she's died and to be free to be with Romeo.

The plan tightens the focus of the movie and gives the hero a "path of hope" she can walk that might lead to the resolution of her troubles.

Plans can take many shapes and forms, but all effective plans do one of two things: They either clarify how somebody can do business with us, or they remove the sense of risk somebody might have if they're considering investing in our products or services.

A **process plan** can describe the steps a customer needs to take to buy your product, or the steps the customer needs to take to use your product after they buy it, or a mixture of both. For instance, if you're selling an expensive product, you might break down the steps like this: 1. Schedule an appointment. 2. Allow us to create a customized plan. 3. Let's execute the plan together.

If process plans are about alleviating confusion, **agreement plans** are about alleviating fears. An agreement plan is best understood as a list of agreements you make with your customers to help them overcome their fear of doing business with you. The best way to arrive at an agreement plan is to list all the things your customer might be concerned about as it relates to your product or service and then counter that list with agreements that will alleviate their fears. ●

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And Calls Them to Action

At this point in our customers' story, they are excited. We've defined a desire, identified their challenges, empathized with their feelings, established our competency in helping them and given them a plan. But they need us to do one more thing: They need us to call them to action.

The reason characters have to be challenged to take action is because everybody sitting in the dark theater knows human beings do not make major life decisions unless something challenges them to do so. Tom Cruise's character would never have journeyed to pick up his brother in the movie *Rain Man* unless he'd received a call explaining his father had died. Romeo wouldn't have climbed into the Capulet courtyard unless he'd fallen sick with love for Juliet.

Bodies at rest tend to stay at rest, and so do customers. Heroes need to be challenged by outside forces.

Two Kinds of Calls to Action

StoryBrand recommends two kinds of calls to action: direct calls to action and transitional calls to action. They work like two phases of a relationship.

Let's say we ask a customer to buy, but they don't. Who knows why, but they don't. There's no reason to end the relationship just because they aren't ready. You may want to deepen the relationship so that whenever they need what you sell, they will remember you. The way you deepen that relationship is through transitional calls to action.

A direct call to action is something that leads to a sale or at least is the first step down a path that leads to a sale. Direct calls to action include requests like "Buy now," "Schedule an appointment" or "Call today."

Transitional calls to action, however, contain less risk and usually offer a customer something for free. Transitional calls to action can be used to "on-ramp" potential customers to an eventual purchase. Inviting people to watch a webinar or download a PDF are good examples of transitional calls to action. ●

That Helps Them Avoid Failure

A story lives and dies based on the question, will the hero succeed or will they fail? Throughout a story, storytellers foreshadow a potential successful ending and a potential tragic ending. The audience remains in suspense as long as the storyteller keeps the hero teetering on the precipice of success and failure.

We sat on the edge of our seats in *Jaws* because we knew the citizens of Amity Island might be killed by the shark if Chief Martin Brody didn't do something.

Brands that don't warn their customers about what could happen if they don't buy their products fail to answer the "so what" question every customer is secretly asking. The obvious question is, what will the customer lose if they don't buy our products?

The last thing you want to be is a fearmonger, because it's true that fearmongers don't do well in the marketplace. But fearmongering is not the problem 99.9 percent of business leaders struggle with. Most of us struggle with the opposite. We don't bring up the negative stakes enough, and so the story we're telling falls flat. Remember, if there are no stakes, there is no story.

If you're a financial advisor, for example, the list of what you're helping customers avoid might look like this:

- Confusion about how your money is being invested;
- Not being ready for retirement;
- A lack of transparency from your financial advisor;
- A lack of one-on-one interaction with your advisor;
- Hidden fees.

We can even imagine a tragic scene that might befall our customers if they don't engage. A financial advisor might write something like this: "Don't postpone your retirement. You've worked too hard for too long to not enjoy time with your grandchildren."

Once we've defined the stakes, your customers will be motivated to resist failure. Next, we'll dramatically increase their motivation by helping them imagine what life can look like when they buy your products or services. ●

And Ends in a Success

Successful brands make it clear what life will look like if somebody engages their products or services. Nike promised to bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete. Starbucks offered to inspire and nurture their customers, one cup at a time.

In the final and most important element of the StoryBrand Framework, we're going to offer our customers what they want most: a happy ending to their story.

The ending should be specific and clear. Stories aren't vague, they're defined; they're about specific things happening to specific people. President John F. Kennedy would have bored the world had he cast a vision for a "highly competitive and productive space program." Instead, he

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defined the ambition specifically and, as such, inspired a nation: “We’re going to put a man on the moon.”

Before and After

Ryan Deiss at DigitalMarketer created a great tool to help us imagine the success our customers will experience if they use our products and services. Answer the following questions about your customers’ experience before they engage your brand and after they engage it:

- What do they have?
- What are they feeling?
- What’s an average day like?
- What is their status?

Once you know how your customers’ lives will change after they engage your brand, you will have plenty of copy to use in your marketing collateral.

The next step is to say it clearly. We must tell our customers what their lives will look like after they buy our products, or they will have no motivation to do so. We have to talk about the end vision we have for their lives in our keynotes, in our email blasts, on our websites and everywhere else.

Ultimately, the success module of your StoryBrand BrandScript should simply be a list of resolutions to your customers’ problems. Brainstorm what your customer’s life will look like externally if their problem is resolved; then think about how that resolution will make them feel; then consider why the resolution to their problem has made the world a more just place to live in. When we resolve our customers’ internal, external and philosophical problems, we’ve truly created a resolution that will satisfy their story. ●

People Want Your Brand to Participate in Their Transformation

Everybody wants to be somebody different, somebody better or, perhaps, somebody who simply becomes more self-accepting. When you look closely at your BrandScript, you’ll see it. Your brand is helping people become better versions of themselves, which is a beautiful thing. You are helping them become wiser, more equipped, more physically fit, more accepted and more at peace. Brands that participate in the identity transformation of their customers create passionate brand evangelists.

Heroes Are Designed to Transform

At the beginning of a story, the hero is usually flawed, filled with doubt and ill-equipped for the task set before them. The guide aids them on their journey, rife with conflict. The conflict begins to change the character, though. Forced into action, the hero develops skills and accrues the experience needed to defeat their foe. Though the hero is still filled with doubt, they summon the courage to engage and, in the climactic scene, defeat the villain, proving once and for all they have changed, that they are now competent to face challenges and are better versions of themselves. The story has transformed them.

This is the same character arc for *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Pinocchio*, *Hamlet*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Tommy Boy*. It’s the arc of almost every popular story we can name. Why? Because feelings of self-doubt are universal, as is the desire to become somebody competent and courageous. And all of this matters when it comes to branding our products and services.

When others talk about you, what do you want them to say? How we answer that question reveals who it is we’d like to be. It’s the same for our customers. As it relates to your brand, how does your customer want to be perceived by their friends? And can you help them become that kind of person?

If you offer executive coaching, your clients may want to be seen as competent, generous and disciplined. If you sell sports equipment, your customers likely want to be perceived as active, fit and successful in their athletic pursuits.

When a brand commits itself to their customers’ journey, to helping resolve their external, internal, and philosophical problems and then inspires them with an aspirational identity, they do more than sell products — they change lives. And leaders who care more about changing lives than they do about selling products tend to do a good bit of both. ●

PART III: IMPLEMENTING YOUR STORYBRAND BRANDSCRIPT

Building a Better Website

We will only see an increased engagement from customers if we implement our StoryBrand BrandScript in our marketing and messaging material.

These days we can get serious traction just paying attention to our digital presence. A great digital presence starts with a clear and effective website. Businesses were once able to post all the small print about what they do

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on their website, but the Internet has changed. Today your website should be the equivalent of an elevator pitch. Here are five things you need to include to see results:

1. An Offer Above the Fold. On a website, the images and text above the fold are the things you see and read before you start scrolling down. Above the fold, make sure the images and text you use meet one of the following criteria: they promise an aspirational identity; they promise to solve a problem; they state exactly what they do.

2. Obvious Calls to Action. While we're in business to serve our customers and better the world, we'll be out of business soon if people don't click that "Buy Now" button. Let's not hide it. There are two main places we want to place a direct call to action. The first is at the top right of our website, and the second is at the center of the screen, right above the fold.

3. Images of Success. Words make up the majority of our messaging but not all of it. Images of smiling, happy people who have had a pleasurable experience (closed an open story loop) by engaging your brand should be featured on your website.

4. A Bite-Sized Breakdown of Your Revenue Streams. You may think your business is too diverse to communicate clearly, but it probably isn't. In most cases you can find an umbrella theme to unite them all. The key is clarity. When you break down your divisions clearly so people can understand what you offer, customers will be able to choose their own adventure without getting lost.

5. Very Few Words. People don't read websites anymore; they scan them. If there is a paragraph above the fold on your website, it's being passed over. Write copy that is brief, punchy and relevant to your customers.

If you think about your StoryBrand BrandScript as a drum kit, think of your website as a drum solo. There shouldn't be a single word, image or idea shared on your website that doesn't come from the thoughts generated by your StoryBrand BrandScript. ●

Using StoryBrand to Transform Company Culture

A solid StoryBrand BrandScript transforms *customer* engagement. But its value doesn't stop there. Your BrandScript can also be leveraged to transform *employee* engagement. And that has enormous implications for large organizations.

The Narrative Void is a vacant space that occurs inside the organization when there's no story to keep everyone aligned. For years, companies have attempted to exorcise the Narrative Void using the most sacred document available: the mission statement. But companies who calibrate their activities around a common story don't just *state* their mission, they operate *on mission*.

A true mission isn't a statement; it's a way of living and being. And it all starts with your StoryBrand BrandScript. When you leverage the StoryBrand Framework externally, for marketing, it transforms the *customer value proposition*. When you leverage it internally, for engagement, it transforms the *employee value proposition*.

All engagement rises and falls on the employee value proposition. To add value to employees, many StoryBrand BrandScripts are created. In these BrandScripts, the team is positioned as the hero and the company leadership is positioned as the guide. Compensation packages, leadership development, organized events and more are all "tools" the leadership creates to help their employees win the day.

Getting your company on mission may be the first step in a turnaround. Not just for the company but for your customers, your team members and even you. When there's no story, there's no engagement.

Business is one of the most powerful forces in the world for good. Businesses provide jobs, a nine-to-five community for our teams, meaningful work for terrific people and, most importantly, products and services that solve our customers' problems.

Getting up every day to grow your company is difficult work. The StoryBrand Framework was created to reduce this stress. It was created so you would be heard in the marketplace, grow your business and transform your customers' lives.

If you confuse, you'll lose. But if you clarify your message, customers will listen. Here's to helping the good guys win. Because in a good story, they always do. ●

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Summary: *Absolute Value* by Itamar Simonson and Emanuel Rosen. Itamar Simonson and Emanuel Rosen answer the question of what influences customers and describe how a company should design its communication strategy, market-research program and segmentation strategy in order to adopt a new way of thinking about marketing in this new environment.

Webinar: *How to Create Strong Relationships with Consumers* by Tim Halloran. In this webinar, branding expert Tim Halloran reveals what it takes to make consumers fall in love with your brand. This webinar will arm you with an arsenal of classic and emerging marketing tools that make best-in-class brands so successful.