

Problems Worth Solving

By David Altschul, president and founder, Character

Most new products are originally designed to serve a functional need. Marketers are brought in—often after the fact—and charged with fashioning a veneer of emotion to elevate the status of the product and embed its brand in the minds of prospective buyers. It is not surprising that the resulting communications often seem artificial and inauthentic. What consumers really want to know is, What does this new product mean to me? What role might it play in my life, and why should I care? This search for meaning is the most powerful driver of human behavior.

Many smart, young managers are hamstrung by a belief that creativity is just making stuff up and that innovation is just problem solving. But lots of problem-solving muscle is wasted if you don't know how to determine which problems are worth solving. For many successful CMOs, story is the key, because if you really understand the story your brand is living in, you can use that story as an aid to navigating the uncharted waters of innovation.

Consider Starbucks: If its story were simply about the conflict between quality and price, Starbucks never would have broken out of the old coffee paradigm. In fact, the Starbucks story seems to be about the conflict between everyday needs and special indulgences. If you frame the story that way, a lot of the aspects of Starbucks that seemed out of the box when they initially debuted begin to fall into place: the couches and overstuffed chairs, the secret language, the specially curated CDs of popular music and even the price of the coffee itself.

To tell your story, you need to answer the foundational questions: What is this brand about? What does it want, over and above making money for its shareholders? What are the underlying conflicts that make its story engaging? And what is the deeper human truth that connects the story of this brand to something that its consumers can identify with on an emotional level?

Story has power because it is the principal tool by which the human mind comprehends meaning. The trick, however—and the reason why this part of the process demands creativity—is that meaning cannot be expressed effectively in words alone. It must be experienced. A good story well told communicates to the mind and the heart at the same time. That's why, if you want to consistently harness the power of creative process to drive innovation, it helps to begin with a deep understanding of your brand's story. It can set the context for innovation and help you choose which new ideas are most in character for your brand. It can help you describe that sweet spot between incrementalism and pie in the sky. And it can help you answer what is perhaps the greatest challenge to innovation: knowing where to start.