

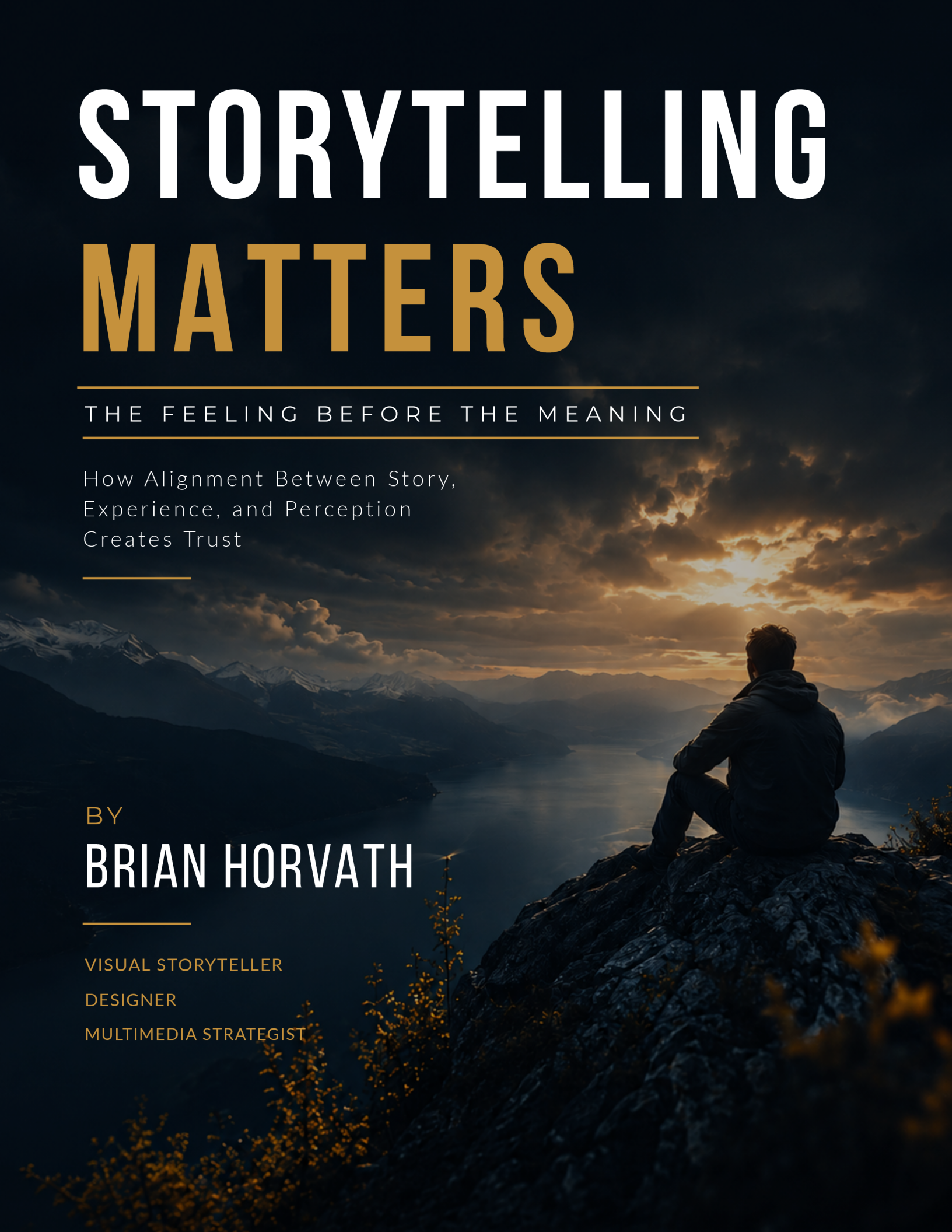
STORYTELLING MATTERS

THE FEELING BEFORE THE MEANING

How Alignment Between Story,
Experience, and Perception
Creates Trust

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Introduction

Before Meaning Comes Feeling

A door slowly creaks open.

A snake hisses.

A low growl emerges from darkness.

Two musical notes play.

Nothing has happened.

Yet your heart rate changes.

Your imagination begins filling in the blanks.

Before you understand what is happening, you begin to feel something.

Anticipation • Curiosity • Excitement • Concern • Fear • Wonder

The story has already begun.

Not because someone explained it.

Not because you analyzed it.

But because your mind instinctively started creating meaning from the signals around you.

This happens every day.

A movie score creates emotion before a character speaks.

A photograph tells a story before a headline is read.

A website creates impressions before visitors understand what a company does.

A restaurant, hotel, store, or business begins shaping perception long before a purchase is made.

People experience something before they evaluate it.

Before meaning comes feeling.

Before understanding comes anticipation.

Before logic comes emotion.

The most effective communicators understand this.

They recognize that storytelling is not simply about words.

It is about experience.

Images • Sound • Motion • Environment • Interactions • Expectations

The countless details that influence how people feel, what they remember, and the stories they tell themselves.

For businesses, this matters more than ever.

Every day, customers are forming opinions, making decisions, and choosing between competitors.

Many will never contact you.

Many will never explain why they left.

Many will never tell you what influenced their decision.

They simply move on.

The challenge is that businesses often focus on the story they are trying to tell.

Customers focus on the story they are experiencing.

Those stories are not always the same.

The strongest brands understand that great storytelling is not about creating an impressive message.

It is about creating alignment.

Alignment between promise and reality.

Alignment between intention and perception.

Alignment between what a business wants people to experience and what they actually experience.

This guide explores how storytelling, design, communication, experience, and perception work together to influence trust, connection, and decision-making.

More importantly, it explores what that means for your business.

Because people don't remember everything you say.

They remember how you made them feel.

The Feeling Before The Meaning

Most of us like to think we make decisions logically. We gather information, compare options, evaluate facts, and then decide. Reality is often much messier.

Long before we consciously evaluate something, our brains begin forming impressions. We notice a tone of voice, a facial expression, a photograph, a sound, a colour, a piece of music, or an atmosphere. Hundreds of tiny signals quietly influence how we feel before we fully understand why.

Think about your favourite movie. Remove the soundtrack, the sound effects, and the subtle audio cues that create tension, excitement, anticipation, or wonder. The story may remain the same, but the experience changes dramatically.

The same thing happens in everyday life. Children laughing can sound joyful and heartwarming in a playground on a sunny afternoon. Place that same laughter in a dark hallway during a horror movie and the feeling changes completely. The sound is identical. The experience is not.

Context creates meaning. Emotion shapes perception. Perception influences decisions.

Businesses often focus on communicating information—features, benefits, services, specifications, and pricing. While all of these matter, customers experience something long before they process that information. They are already asking themselves questions:

- Can I trust this company?
- Does this feel professional?
- Do they understand people like me?
- Is this worth my time?

Most of these questions are not answered through logic alone. They are answered through experience.

Design, imagery, tone, motion, sound, and countless small details work together to shape how people feel. The strongest brands understand this. They do not simply communicate information; they create experiences that influence perception before a single feature or benefit is evaluated.

That is the feeling before the meaning.

Business Application

What emotions do people experience within the first few seconds of encountering your business?

Confidence? Trust? Curiosity? Excitement? Comfort?

Whether you intend it or not, people are already forming impressions. The question is whether those impressions support the story you want to tell.

The Story You Tell vs. The Story They Hear

One of the greatest challenges businesses face is that they become deeply familiar with their own story.

They know their intentions. They understand the effort that went into creating their product or service. They know what makes them different, what they stand for, and what they hope customers will notice.

Customers arrive without any of that context.

They don't experience your intentions. They experience the result.

A restaurant owner may proudly talk about the quality of the food, carefully sourcing ingredients and perfecting recipes over many years. Yet a customer might leave remembering something entirely different. Perhaps the room was uncomfortably hot. Maybe the music was too loud to have a conversation. A fly landed on the table. Parking was frustrating. The food may have been excellent, but the experience told a more complicated story.

Several months ago, I stayed at a beautiful Airbnb while visiting my mother. The room itself was attractive, comfortable furnishings, and thoughtfully designed. The host had clearly invested considerable effort into creating a welcoming space.

But before reaching the rental, guests had to walk through a garage filled with garbage bins. The smell was overwhelming.

It was the first thing I experienced.

The room was lovely. The host's intentions were good. Yet that first impression became part of the story I carried with me.

The host saw the destination. I experienced the journey. Would I stay there or recommend it ?
No.

Neither perspective was wrong, but one had a greater influence on perception.

This happens in businesses every day. Owners naturally focus on the things they spend the most time thinking about. Customers rarely do. They experience everything surrounding the product or service as a single story.

The website. The booking process. The parking lot. The email confirmation. The cleanliness. The atmosphere. The friendliness of the staff. The ease of getting help when something goes wrong.

Customers don't separate these experiences into neat categories. They combine them.

The challenge is that familiarity creates blind spots. The longer we work within our own businesses, the harder it becomes to see them through the eyes of someone encountering them for the first time. Things that seem normal to us can stand out immediately to a customer. Small details that feel insignificant can quietly influence trust, confidence, and decision-making.

This is why perception matters so much.

The story you tell is important. But the story customers hear is shaped by every interaction they have with your business. In many cases, it is that story—not your intention—that influences whether they return, recommend you to others, or choose a competitor instead.

Business Application

Imagine experiencing your business for the very first time.

What would a customer notice during the first five minutes?

What would reassure them?

What might create doubt?

What assumptions would they make?

More importantly, are those assumptions aligned with the story you want to tell?

Because customers don't experience your business the way you do.

They experience it through fresh eyes.

And those first impressions often become the foundation of the story they carry forward.

Every Detail Tells A Story

Most businesses focus on the big things.

The product. The service. The marketing campaign. The website redesign. The grand opening. The major investment.

Those things matter.

But customers often make decisions based on something much smaller: a detail.

A seemingly insignificant moment. A tiny inconsistency. A small piece of evidence that either reinforces trust or quietly undermines it.

I was recently at a movie theatre that offered a VIP experience. The branding promised something elevated—comfortable seating, food service, a premium atmosphere, and an experience that felt a little more special than a typical night at the movies.

The theatre delivered on much of that promise. The seats were excellent, the food was good, and the movie experience itself was enjoyable.

But before entering the theatre, I sat in a chair in the lobby that wobbled noticeably. Later, I visited the washroom. Two urinals were plugged and nearly overflowing. The sinks looked like they hadn't been cleaned recently, and there was an unpleasant smell in the room.

None of these issues were major problems on their own. The experience wasn't ruined.

But it was changed.

Each detail quietly chipped away at the story the theatre was trying to tell.

That's important because customers rarely evaluate businesses using a scorecard. They don't assign separate grades for operations, facilities, customer service, cleanliness, and marketing. Instead, they combine everything into a single impression.

The story becomes:

"This place feels premium."

Or:

"This place feels neglected."

"This company pays attention."

Or:

"This company cuts corners."

The smallest details often have an outsized impact because they reveal what happens when nobody is watching.

A luxury hotel with dusty baseboards.

A beautiful website with broken links.

An expensive restaurant with sticky menus.

A friendly company that never returns phone calls.

The detail itself is rarely the problem.

The detail becomes evidence.

Evidence that either supports the story or contradicts it.

This is where many businesses unintentionally create friction. They invest heavily in attracting customers but overlook the small moments that influence trust after people arrive.

Customers notice more than we think.

They notice the chipped paint. The delayed response. The confusing instructions. The outdated information. The missing follow-up. The strange smell in the lobby. The little things that suggest a larger truth.

Every detail quietly answers the same question:

Can I trust these people?

The strongest brands understand that trust is rarely built through a single grand gesture. It is built through hundreds of small confirmations—small signals that consistently reassure customers they made the right choice.

Over time, those signals become part of the story people tell themselves and the stories they share with others.

That is where storytelling becomes truly powerful.

Not because of what you say.

Because of what people experience.

Business Application

Take a walk through your business as if you were seeing it for the first time.

Not as the owner.

Not as an employee.

As a customer.

Look for the details you've stopped noticing. The email that could be clearer. The sign that's showing its age. The page on your website that no longer works. The process that feels more complicated than it should.

Then ask yourself a simple question:

If this were my first experience with the business, what story would these details be telling me?

The answer may reveal opportunities that have been hiding in plain sight.

The Story Must Survive Reality

Storytelling is powerful because it creates expectations.

Before a customer ever walks through your door, visits your website, or speaks with your team, they have already begun imagining what the experience will be like. Your photography, messaging, reviews, branding, and reputation all contribute to a story that exists in their mind.

In many ways, your marketing is making a promise.

That promise doesn't have to be explicit. It can be subtle. A polished website suggests professionalism. Beautiful photography suggests attention to detail. Friendly messaging suggests a welcoming culture. Every decision you make helps shape what customers expect to experience.

The challenge is that expectations don't disappear once someone becomes a customer.

They become the standard against which reality is measured.

Imagine buying tickets for a concert you've anticipated for months. You've listened to the music, watched the videos, and heard friends rave about the performance. By the time you arrive, the experience has already begun in your mind.

If the performance exceeds your expectations, you'll probably tell everyone about it.

If it meets your expectations, you'll leave satisfied.

But if the sound is poor, the event is disorganized, or the performance feels rushed, those disappointments often outweigh everything that came before. The anticipation that once worked in the event's favor now works against it.

Businesses experience the same phenomenon every day.

Many assume customers judge them based solely on the quality of their product or service. In reality, customers compare what they experience with what they expected to experience. The greater the gap, the greater the disappointment.

This helps explain why a modest neighborhood restaurant with simple décor and honest service can develop fiercely loyal customers, while a beautifully branded establishment with lofty promises struggles to earn repeat business. The first consistently delivers what people expect. The second asks customers to believe a story that reality cannot fully support.

The goal of storytelling, then, is not to create the most impressive narrative.

It is to create an honest expectation and then exceed it.

The strongest brands understand that marketing and customer experience are not separate disciplines. The advertisement, the website, the phone call, the invoice, the product, and the follow-up all belong to the same story.

Customers don't experience them individually.

They experience them together.

And that story must survive reality.

Business Application

Take a moment to list the promises your business is making today. Some are obvious, while others are implied through design, language, pricing, imagery, and reputation.

Now imagine a customer experiencing your business exactly as it operates today.

Would they say, "This is exactly what I expected"?

Better yet, would they say, "This is even better than I expected"?

If the answer is no, the solution may not be better marketing.

It may be better alignment.

Because trust is not created when people hear your story.

Trust is created when reality confirms it.

Customers Finish The Story

Every business likes to believe it controls its own story.

After all, you choose the logo, write the website, design the advertising, create the messaging, and decide what you want customers to know about your company.

Those things matter.

But they are only the opening chapters.

The ending belongs to your customers.

Think about the last time someone recommended a restaurant, hotel, mechanic, or contractor to you. Chances are they didn't recite the company's mission statement or repeat its marketing slogan. They told you a story.

"The owner stayed late to help me."

"They treated my kids incredibly well."

"They never called me back."

"The food was amazing, but the service was terrible."

Stories are how people make sense of experiences.

They are also how experiences spread.

Long after a customer has left your business, the story continues. It may be shared over coffee with a friend, mentioned during a meeting at work, posted online, or become the deciding factor in someone else's purchase.

The remarkable part is that these stories are often built around moments the business never considered important.

A delivery that arrived earlier than expected.

An employee who remembered a customer's name.

A confusing invoice.

A phone call that was never returned.

A simple gesture that made someone feel valued.

Or one that made them feel ignored.

Businesses spend enormous amounts of time crafting messages, yet customers often create their own based on a handful of experiences. Those experiences become evidence, and evidence becomes a story.

That story has incredible power because people trust other people. We are naturally skeptical of advertising, but we pay attention when someone says, "I used them, and here's what happened."

This is why customer experience and storytelling cannot be separated.

Your marketing may attract the customer.

Your experience determines the story they tell afterward.

The businesses that grow through loyal customers and enthusiastic referrals understand this principle. They don't view the transaction as the finish line. They view it as the beginning of a new conversation—one that takes place without them in the room.

The question is no longer, "What story are we telling?"

It becomes, "What story are our customers telling for us?"

The answer to that question may be the most honest measure of your brand.

Business Application

Imagine that your next ten customers each sat down with a friend tomorrow morning and spent five minutes talking about their experience with your business.

What story would they tell?

Would they describe professionalism, trust, and attention to detail?

Would they remember how easy you made their lives?

Would they feel compelled to recommend you?

Or would they talk about the friction, confusion, delays, and disappointments that you never realized existed?

Businesses begin the story.

Customers finish it.

The smartest organizations don't try to control that conversation.

They create experiences so consistently positive that customers choose to tell the story they hoped would be told all along.

The Story You Never Hear

Every business owner remembers the customer who complained.

They remember the negative review, the difficult phone call, or the email explaining why someone was unhappy. Those moments demand attention because they are visible.

What most businesses never see are the customers who quietly disappear.

The person who visits your website and leaves after thirty seconds.

The family that chooses another restaurant.

The company that narrows its search to two vendors and picks the other one.

The client who reads a review, notices something that feels off, and simply moves on.

No email arrives.

No complaint is filed.

No explanation is offered.

From the business owner's perspective, nothing happened.

In reality, a decision was made.

One of the greatest challenges in business is that invisible problems rarely produce visible evidence. If a light burns out in a store, someone eventually notices. If a website form stops working, customers may tell you.

But if a potential client quietly loses confidence, they often tell no one.

They simply choose someone else.

That should change the way we think about storytelling.

Many organizations believe storytelling exists to attract attention. They invest in advertising, branding, social media, and marketing campaigns designed to bring people through the door.

Attracting attention is only the beginning.

The real challenge is protecting confidence.

Imagine filling a bucket with water while a small hole in the bottom slowly drains it away. You may work harder to pour more water in, yet the level never rises because the leak remains.

Businesses often operate the same way.

They invest heavily in generating new interest while unknowingly creating moments of doubt that quietly push customers away. A confusing website, inconsistent messaging, an unanswered inquiry, or a process that feels frustrating may never generate a complaint, but each can influence a decision.

The cost of these invisible losses is difficult to calculate because they never appear on a report.

You can't measure the customer who never called.

You can't interview the person who never booked.

You can't ask why someone chose your competitor if they never told you they were considering you in the first place.

Yet those silent decisions may represent the greatest opportunity for improvement.

The strongest organizations understand that every interaction either builds confidence or creates uncertainty. Their goal is not simply to gain more attention—it is to remove unnecessary reasons for hesitation.

That requires seeing your business through the eyes of someone who owes you nothing and knows nothing about the effort behind the scenes.

Sometimes the most valuable insight is not found in the customers who speak.

It is found in the ones who never do.

Business Application

Ask yourself a simple question:

If someone decided not to do business with me today, would I know why?

For most organizations, the honest answer is no.

Now ask an even better question:

What might be creating doubt that no one has ever mentioned?

The businesses that continue to improve are often the ones that spend less time asking, "How do we attract more customers?" and more time asking, "What might be quietly causing us to lose the ones we almost had?"

The stories you hear can help your business grow.

The stories you never hear may determine whether it does.

The Experience Is The Story

Ask most business owners what their story is, and they'll usually describe their history.

How they started.

Why they started.

What they believe.

What makes them different.

Those things are important. They help define a business and the people behind it.

But they are not the story your customers experience.

Your customer is writing a different story.

It begins the moment they hear your name, visit your website, drive into your parking lot, call your office, receive an email, or walk through your front door. Every interaction becomes another page.

The experience is the story.

That idea changes everything.

Many organizations invest enormous effort into creating beautiful marketing while unintentionally overlooking the customer journey that follows. Yet customers rarely separate these moments into categories. They don't think, "The website was excellent, but the service wasn't," or "The advertising was compelling, but the process was confusing."

Instead, they combine everything into one overall impression.

People remember experiences.

Think about your favorite vacation. Chances are you don't remember every meal or every conversation. You remember how the trip made you feel.

The same is true of businesses.

A customer may forget the exact wording on your homepage, but they'll remember whether finding information was easy or frustrating. They may forget the details of your proposal, but they'll remember whether they felt understood. They may forget the features you listed, but they'll remember whether working with you felt effortless or exhausting.

This is why storytelling extends far beyond words, images, or videos.

It lives in responsiveness.

In consistency.

In clarity.

In empathy.

In the countless decisions that shape a customer's experience long after the marketing has done its job.

The businesses that earn lasting loyalty understand this. They recognize that every department contributes to the same story. Marketing, customer service, operations, accounting, and leadership are not separate experiences from the customer's perspective. Together, they create a single narrative.

And that narrative is remarkably difficult to fake.

A business can write compelling copy.

It can produce beautiful videos.

It can invest in elegant branding.

But if the experience fails to support the message, customers notice.

The strongest brands don't simply tell a great story.

They create one that people are grateful to have experienced.

Business Application

Take a sheet of paper and write down every step a customer takes from first hearing about your business to recommending it to someone else.

Now imagine walking that journey yourself.

Where does confidence increase?

Where does friction appear?

Where does excitement turn into uncertainty?

Where does your business make life easier?

Where does it unintentionally make life harder?

Most businesses spend their energy improving individual moments.

The greatest opportunities often come from improving the journey.

Because customers rarely remember isolated interactions.

They remember the experience.

And in the end, the experience is the story.

Why This Matters

If you've read this far, you've probably noticed something.

This guide isn't really about storytelling.

It's about people.

It's about how people form impressions, make decisions, build trust, and remember experiences. Storytelling is simply the thread that connects those moments together.

For many years, businesses have treated branding, marketing, websites, customer service, design, photography, video, and communication as separate disciplines. Different departments. Different budgets. Different conversations.

Customers don't experience them that way.

They experience one business.

One journey.

One story.

That's why a beautifully designed website can't compensate for a frustrating customer experience. It's why exceptional customer service may overcome a dated logo. It's why a simple act of kindness can create more loyalty than an expensive advertising campaign.

Everything works together.

Or it works against itself.

The most successful organizations understand that trust is rarely built through one spectacular moment. It grows through consistency. Every interaction either reinforces confidence or introduces doubt. Every promise is either confirmed or questioned. Every experience either strengthens the story or quietly rewrites it.

This is also why many businesses struggle to identify the real problem.

Sales may decline, yet the issue isn't pricing.

Marketing may generate traffic, yet inquiries remain low.

Customer service may improve, yet referrals never increase.

The symptoms are visible.

The cause often isn't.

The challenge is that we become experts in our own businesses. We know the history, the effort, the long hours, and the reasons behind our decisions. Customers know none of those things. They judge what they can see, hear, and experience.

That isn't unfair.

It's human.

Sometimes the greatest value an outside perspective brings isn't a better logo, a better website, or a better video.

It's clarity.

The ability to recognize the disconnect between the story a business intends to tell and the story customers actually experience.

Fixing that gap doesn't just improve communication.

It improves trust.

It improves relationships.

It improves loyalty.

And ultimately, it improves business.

That's why this matters.

Not because every company needs better storytelling.

But because every company deserves a story that survives contact with reality, is reinforced by experience, and is compelling enough that customers choose to continue telling it long after they've left.

A Final Thought

Businesses spend enormous energy asking,

"How do we get more customers?"

A more valuable question might be,

"What experience are we creating for the customers we already have?"

Because people rarely become loyal to advertising.

They become loyal to experiences.

And those experiences become stories.

Stories that build brands, shape reputations, and influence decisions in ways no marketing campaign ever could.

How I Help

Over the years, people have asked me what I do for a living.

The simple answer is that I design websites, create videos, produce photography, develop multimedia experiences, and help organizations communicate more effectively.

The honest answer is more difficult to explain.

I help people see their business the way their customers do.

That perspective changes everything.

Throughout my career, I've worked in healthcare, education, Indigenous organizations, government, communications, film production, eLearning, and branding. Although the industries were different, I kept noticing the same pattern.

The organizations that connected most effectively with people weren't always the ones with the biggest budgets or the most impressive marketing.

They were the ones whose experiences matched the stories they were trying to tell.

That realization changed how I approached my work.

When I design a website, I'm not simply thinking about layout or typography. I'm asking whether a visitor will feel confident, understood, and motivated to continue.

When I produce a video, I'm thinking about pacing, emotion, sound, imagery, and what someone will remember after the screen goes dark.

When I photograph an event or create a visual identity, I'm thinking about the story those images will tell long after they are taken.

When I review a customer journey, I'm looking for the moments where trust is strengthened—or quietly lost.

The tools change.

The objective doesn't.

Everything I create is intended to reduce the gap between what an organization hopes people experience and what they actually experience.

Sometimes that means building a better website.

Sometimes it means improving communication.

Sometimes it means simplifying a process, creating stronger visuals, refining a message, or identifying a blind spot that has been hiding in plain sight.

The medium is rarely the problem.

The experience often is.

That's why I don't see storytelling as a marketing exercise.

I see it as the alignment of perception, expectation, experience, and trust.

When those elements work together, businesses become easier to understand, easier to remember, and easier to recommend.

That's the work that excites me.

Because the goal isn't simply to create something that looks beautiful.

It's to create something that people believe.

And when people believe it, they tell the story for you.

About Brian

If you've made it this far, you've probably realized that this guide isn't the work of someone who simply enjoys design or marketing.

It's the work of someone who has spent a career paying attention.

Over the past twenty-five years, I've had the opportunity to work across healthcare, education, government, Indigenous organizations, film production, communications, eLearning, photography, branding, and multimedia. The industries were different, but the challenge was remarkably consistent.

How do you help people understand something?

More importantly, how do you help them feel something?

I've learned that communication rarely succeeds because of one brilliant idea. It succeeds because hundreds of small decisions work together. A photograph, a colour choice, a sound, a conversation, a website, a process, or a simple human interaction can strengthen trust—or quietly weaken it.

Those observations changed the way I approach my work.

I no longer see websites as collections of pages or videos as moving images. I see them as experiences. Every project tells a story, whether it intends to or not. My role is to help organizations shape that story so it aligns with the experience their customers actually have.

That's why my work often crosses traditional boundaries. Sometimes the solution is a website. Sometimes it's photography, video, motion graphics, messaging, or a customer journey that needs to be simplified. Sometimes the greatest opportunity is simply helping a business see itself through fresh eyes.

Throughout this guide, I've shared observations from movies, restaurants, travel, customer service, and everyday life because storytelling isn't confined to advertising. It's happening around us all the time. The businesses that recognize it gain an advantage that goes far beyond better marketing.

My belief is simple.

People don't remember everything you tell them.

They remember how you made them feel.

And those feelings become stories.

If this guide has caused you to look at your own business a little differently, then it has accomplished exactly what I hoped it would.

Because the best stories don't end when the last page is turned.

They continue in the conversations that follow.

Brian Horvath

Visual Storyteller • Designer • Multimedia Strategist

Helping organizations create alignment between **perception, experience, and trust**—one story at a time.