

HOW TO MAKE BELIEVERS

by Joseph Newfield

After my freshman year of college I took a summer job as a car salesman. One day somebody brought a magazine to the car lot with a survey we all pored over: "Least Trusted Professions". Right there in the number one spot: car salesman. I was 19 so I thought that was great, a badge of honor. I remember noticing that second was "ad men". *Hey, I thought, I'm even worse than people who make advertising.*





Well, now I'm an ad guy. And I don't trust us either—or at least I don't trust advertising. Who would? Our industry's measure of success is hardly noble: get people to believe us and our work is done.

Of course, nowadays, few people believe anything that sounds like advertising; they filter it out without a thought.

So, how do people navigate the sea of facts and testimonials that inundate our world? Not by attempting to parse individual claims. Rather, most of us decide who we really trust based on their actions. We decide not what we believe, but who we believe in.

If you're a marketer these days, that's your job: create believers. Get customers to believe in companies or products the same way they believe in people: based on what they do.

If this doesn't sound like a job for traditional marketers, you're right, it's not. Which is why the [agencies that matter today](#) do work that looks nothing like traditional marketing.

What hasn't changed is the necessity of stories. Marketers still need to use every trick in the book and dozens that haven't been thought of yet to engage people in great, compelling stories.

The difference today is this: to make believers, the stories have to be true.

Now is the time.

Having spent much of the last 15 years working with great people on ways to get the word out about products, I can attest that we are on the brink of a new era, with exponentially more ways to involve customers in completely new kinds of stories. A few companies and agencies are already there. Here's how you can be, too:

1. [Tell Story One.](#)
2. [Start with beliefs and you'll get believers.](#)
3. [What does Wal-Mart believe?](#)
4. [Just do it together.](#)
5. [Start at the top.](#)
6. [Go, be free.](#)



Tell Story One.

If we weren't so used to it, we'd never dream of marketing things the way it's usually done. Yet most clients and agencies follow the same antiquated process. It goes like this:

A company is born when a passionate innovator (or someone with luck and timing) comes up with a great insight that inspires an [exciting product](#). Then the innovator creates a [company](#) or a division to make and support that product.

That first magical insight, as well as all the experiences customers have with the product and the company, are Story One. Every product and company has Story One. It is always relevant and can be compelling. But Story One is seldom the story that's told. That's because the next step is that the marketing department hires an ad agency to invent a new story—usually a print or online or TV campaign. This is Story Two. Story Two is unneeded veneer. It looks good, but in truth it hides the best part.

An example is the recent launch of the new Chevy Malibu. GM spent \$2 billion developing this car. They had their collective back against the wall, and they pulled out all the stops to make a car that puts them in the ring with Toyota and Honda. We've seen GM try this and fail too many times to count. Will this time be different? Will GM pull it off? If that's not a story, I don't know what is.

To read the automotive press, [GM did pull it](#) off; they created a car for the 21st century.

And then they launched it with a strategy from the 20th century: a contrived message delivered with [\\$300 million](#) of [overwhelming force](#).



This headline reads like the strategy from the brief, unencumbered by inspiration. My instant mental rejoinder: "Watch me." The theme is continued in the [television](#), which while odd enough to make you watch, does little to make you believe in the car. Auto fans at Jalopnik and elsewhere did take note of the ads, but mostly to [mock them](#).



Despite this campaign, there's a great story here ready to be told, if someone could get the ad people and the people who made the car in the same room. Critics say this is [the best car GM has made in years](#). How did that happen? How about an ad where the car tells you its story? Maybe an award-winning documentary about what the car means to the people who designed it. And then run that in banners right in the Car and Driver or GQ or Sundance sites. (I recently worked with the agency [Firefly](#) developing a [campaign](#) for the [Hawaii Convention and Visitors Bureau](#) that illustrates [how well relevant movies can work in banners](#).) Go out and find people living with their new Malibu and film them and broadcast it live in banners. Let people comment live right in the banner, so there's an ongoing discussion right there. Of course, it's risky, but the car and the story really are great, so in the long run GM will come out ahead. Do a web site that profiles every single part in the car, with comments from engineers. Post the sales data, like box office results, so people root for the car.

Big Dull GM has become The Little Engine That Could. It's a true story. Imagine all the ways you could tell it.

The opportunity I see:

1. Commit to Story One. Ask, What insights inspired this product or company at the very beginning?
2. Don't think of advertising. Think about how you can get your customers participating in that original story.
3. The ideas above are just a hint of the potential, churned up by me in a few minutes. Once you're telling a true story there's no limit to what impassioned filmmakers, programmers, writers, carpenters, singers—anyone—can pull off.

Start with beliefs and you'll get believers.

Most marketing plans center on product objectives and audience insights. But there's a much more powerful way to connect with people: beliefs. Here, then, is my marketing system for 21st century businesses:

1. Believe
2. Do

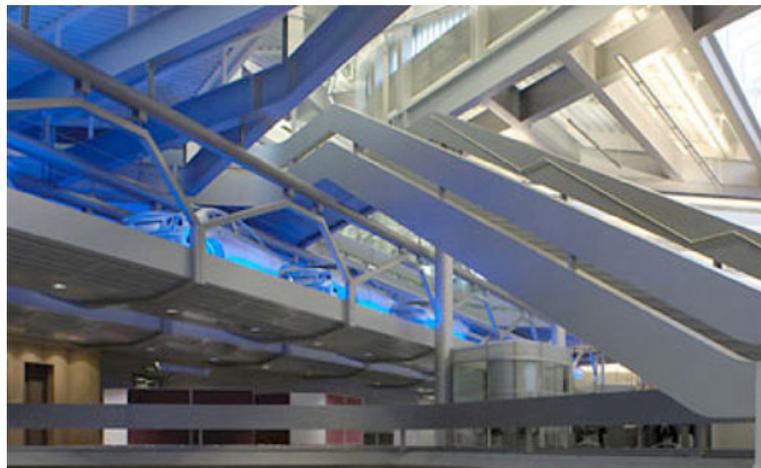


This approach posits that Story One is what matters, and challenges companies to make Story One great. That means getting down to a company's reason for existing, aligning the company's actions—hiring, compensation, product development—everything—to support that reason for existing, and then telling that story, in chapters.

This also happens to be the most effective way to brand companies. Because, while brands are sometimes described as promises, in truth brands are opinions. A company's brand is simply what customers think of the company. “Branding” is everything a company does that influences customer opinions—good and bad, intentional and not. Companies like Southwest, Apple, Target, Google, and others are able to tell the same story at every point because it springs from their beliefs. Along the way they turn customers into believers.

Importantly, beliefs also drive the way these companies are organized. What most companies do after they figure out how to make a profit is set themselves up to repeat that money-making process as efficiently as possible. In contrast, belief-driven companies are organized to consistently deliver their mindset, their approach to their industry. Southwest provides freedom, not travel. Apple produces inspired tools, not technology. Target makes design available for everyone. Google makes information useful (accomplished, it's worth noting, not through efficient repetition, but with the opposite, their much-celebrated requirement that employees [spend 20% of their time doing things not in their job description](#)).

Committing to beliefs can be the most persuasive internal marketing at well. Two dramatic examples are the extraordinary factories built in the last few years by Boeing and BMW. Both [NBBJ Architects' Boeing 737 manufacturing site in Renton Washington](#), and the jawdropping [BMW Plant in Leipzig, Germany](#), designed by [Zaha Hadid](#), unite manufacturing with management, and employees with the products they design in ways that completely re-imagine the way companies function and people do their jobs.



I'm sure the usual workplace politics still exist in these factories, but when the dust settles I can't imagine a more effective way to make believers of employees than to invest in inspired, unconventional workplaces that enable them to do their best work.



The opportunity I see:

1. Beliefs have to be defined and known to everyone in a company. If you're a marketing agency you should position yourself as an inspired advocate for those beliefs.
2. Don't worry that things aren't "appropriate for the brand." That's an excuse that stifles innovation. If it's true to the beliefs it will enhance the brand.
3. Partner with companies to structure and manage themselves to keep delivering their values, not just their products.
4. Beliefs make believers inside companies as well as outside.

What does Wal-Mart believe?

Few brands are easier to dislike than Wal-Mart, for reasons with which we're all familiar ([captured](#) with typical brilliance by Jon Stewart).

Attempting to improve their image, Wal-Mart has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on traditional ad campaigns, only to have critics [conclude](#) "It sure looks like Wal-Mart is going on the defensive rather than trying to do the right thing" and "[Wal-Mart management is in a situation where they need to be working and sleeping with flack jackets on.](#)"

In September 2007, Wal-Mart introduced [the first campaign from The Martin Agency](#). In a hint of how Wal-Mart's beliefs were evolving, the company abandoned its 19-year-old tagline "Always Low Prices," for "Save Money. Live Better."

The real news, though, and some basis for seeing this new positioning as more than a tag line, happened two years earlier, when the company quietly did something stunning.

On October 24, 2005 CEO Lee Scott [announced](#) a company-wide commitment to the following:

1. Be supplied 100 percent by renewable energy.
2. Create zero waste.
3. Sell products that sustain our resources and environment.

I'm as wary of Wal-Mart as anyone. Yet in the two years since this announcement, the company's actions have largely supported this commitment. Could I possibly start to believe in Wal-Mart?



In late 2007 Wal-Mart hosted the [Live Better Sustainability Summit](#), a rare example of a usually hollow promise like “Live Better” being followed with actions.

Writing about the sustainability summit, tough crowds like Treehugger have started to believe (“[Greenwash it was not](#)”).

[Joel Makower](#), a consultant who advises businesses on adopting sustainable practices, [detailed](#) the real actions Wal-Mart has taken, “Wal-Mart is using its considerable clout to create almost a competitive atmosphere around ‘green’. In coming months, for example, Wal-Mart will be judging all of its suppliers on packaging, using metrics governing the quantity and environmental friendliness of suppliers’ packaging as a buying criterion. Last month, the company announced that it would measure the energy use and emissions of the entire supply chain of seven product categories, with the likely goal of using climate impact as another buying criterion. And the company has integrated sustainability in the performance evaluations of the stores’ buyers and their managers, which in turn help determine their raises and promotions.”

The company has also enlisted San Francisco sustainability consultancy [Act Now \(recently acquired by the new Saatchi & Saatchi S Network\)](#) to [teach Wal-Mart’s 1.3 million U.S. employees about sustainability](#).

In November, Wal-Mart released its [Sustainability Progress Report](#), which was met with the expected range of responses ([summarized](#) in the New York Times), from [incredulous](#), to tepid, to optimistic. But the mere fact that the report wasn’t completely dismissed as self-serving by most environmentalists is a huge step forward for Wal-Mart.

And a few days ago came news that suggests Wal-Mart is just hitting its stride. In a speech that was actually a social manifesto, CEO Mr. Scott announced [dozens more initiatives](#) to not only improve Wal-Mart’s own sustainability and worker conditions, but also enable other companies to do the same.

By responding to criticism with updated beliefs, and supporting the beliefs with actions, Wal-Mart has written the first chapters in a surprising, compelling new story. When they choose to they can bring in online, print and TV to weave customers into the story and extend their mission. In the meantime, Wal-Mart is for the first time making progress toward maybe the most impossible feat of all: becoming likable.



What we can learn from Wal-Mart:

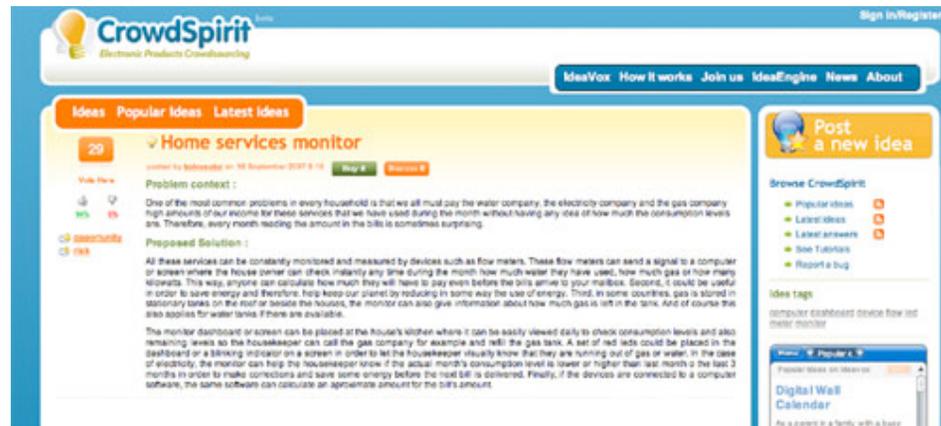
1. Any brand can be turned around if they're willing to take action, not just run ads
2. Change and creating believers takes time. But it also picks up momentum along the way, and pretty soon successes you'd never dreamed of are at hand.
3. If Wal-Mart can become a sustainability crusader absolutely anything is possible.

Just do it together.

While huge companies like Wal-Mart have the resources to spare in pursuit of new ideas, what about everyone else?

Thanks to a new crop of sites that act as hubs of collaboration for numerous types of businesses, it's now feasible for companies of all sizes to take on new projects.

For example, I've long believed that the easiest way to get people to use less electricity and gas and water would be to put meters inside houses, so we could see how much it costs to leave the lights on or hose down the driveway. Many people have had this idea; among them is "[boinvestor](#)", who has posted the idea at [CrowdSpirit.com](#), a marketplace for electronics ideas where the masses submit ideas and vote to decide which are most worth pursuing. The site then facilitates collaboration to bring the most popular ideas to fruition. (I'm happy to report that the [Home Services Monitor](#) is among the most popular.) Electronics companies seeking to do something new—even very small ones—can post their ideas here, find eager collaborators and use this to help them evolve.



CrowdSpirit is an example of “[Crowdsourcing](#)”, a term coined by Jeff Howe in 2006 to mean “The application of Open Source principles to fields outside of software.” In other words, letting everyone pitch in with ideas, with the important caveat that only the most effective ones win. Crowdsourcing is a strategy any business can use to pursue new initiatives without making huge expenditures. Businesses can post problems for the masses to take a stab at solving, and reward successful solutions. For details, visit Mr. Howe’s exceptionally compelling [blog](#).

There are dozens of sites devoted to success through collaboration, including [Kiva](#), [Sellaband](#) and the fascinating [Mechanical Turk](#), Amazon’s service that enables anyone to enlist people to “complete simple tasks that people do better than computers such as finding specific objects in pictures, evaluating beauty, or translating text.”

Amazon [explains](#) that, “For businesses and entrepreneurs who want tasks completed, the Mechanical Turk solves the problem of getting work done in a cost-effective manner by people who have the skill to do the work.”



amazon mechanical turk What is Mechanical Turk? [Sign In](#) or [Register](#) | [FAQ](#)

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Choose from thousands of tasks, control when you work, and decide how much you earn.

Do you want to quickly and easily create your own HITs on Amazon Mechanical Turk? [Create HITs now.](#)

If you are a software developer and would like to learn more about using Amazon Mechanical Turk APIs, [click here.](#)

STEP 1
Find
Find HITs to work on

What is a HIT?
HIT stands for Human Intelligence Task. These are tasks that people are willing to pay you to complete. For example a HIT might ask: "Is there a pizza parlor in this photograph?" Typically these tasks are extraordinarily difficult for computers, but simple for humans.

STEP 2
Finish
Work & submit your HIT

How do I work on a HIT?
Once you have chosen a HIT to complete, click the "Accept HIT" button to have it assigned to you. Follow the instructions on how to complete the HIT and when you are done, click the "Submit" button to

STEP 3
Earn
Get paid for your work

How do I get paid?
You are paid when your answer is approved by the person that listed the HIT. The money you earn is deposited into your Amazon.com account, where you can turn it into cash.

Ponoko.com gives individuals and small businesses an opportunity to get their product designs in front of buyers. The site offers a range of products for the home that are produced only after they're ordered—greatly reducing the overhead in getting a product off the ground, and an important nod to sustainability.

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SKIP

So what do you want it to be?

a shop? a tool? a person?

make & sell
Got a great idea? Use our digital tools to make it real - then sell it to the world. [Go make](#)

browse & buy



Another strategy for companies seeking to pursue new ideas is to collaborate in support of shared beliefs. For instance, a company that makes bicycles and is committed to reducing the number of cars on the road could join with student designers to invent a bike rack that tells its story ([here's](#) my nomination for that design). Or a janitorial service could partner with Clorox to support Clorox's new line of [green cleaning products](#) and thereby demonstrate their own beliefs. The janitorial company gets PR, the new Clorox brand comes across as approachable, and the environment benefits.

Collaborations like these are exciting and different, and would pick up buzz coverage through traditional media, contributing to word of mouth publicity, and driving people to websites that expand on the story and invite participation. If the story is good, and true, it will get out there.

The opportunity I see:

1. Don't be daunted because you're small or busy. There are sites out there for many industries that make it very easy to get ideas rolling.
2. Be open to unusual collaborations. Once you know what you believe it becomes easy to see who'd be a good partner. Know that it might not be the usual suspects.
3. If you get it right, people will talk about it and momentum will build.

Start at the top

Conventional wisdom states that if the first thing an ad agency expects to do is talk to the CEO, that agency won't last long.

Yet, if you saw [December's Creativity Magazine](#) you know that the best work in the industry right now requires clients and agencies to commit to far more than ad campaigns, and most certainly involves CEOs as passionate, invested advocates.

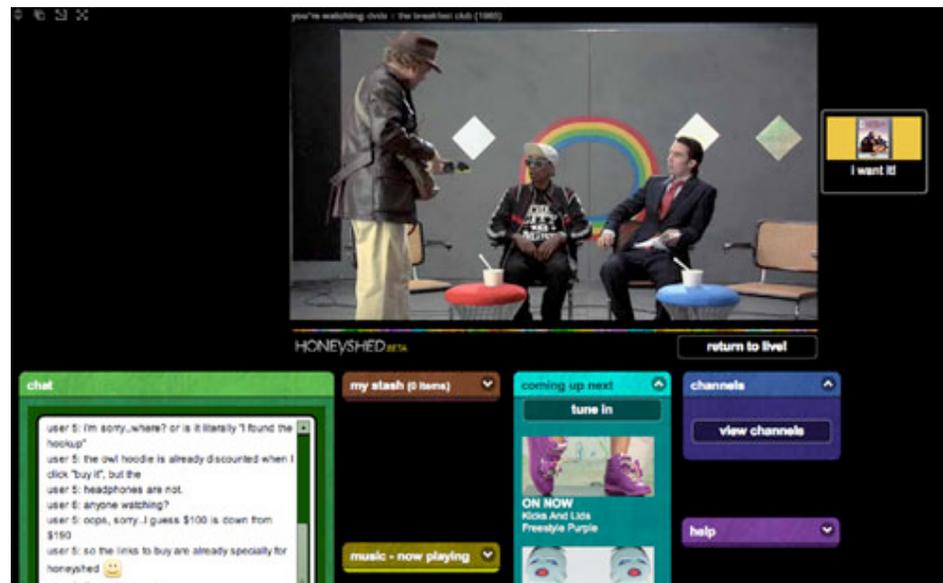
An example is NY agency [Anomaly](#), which is matter-of-factly described in Creativity as "devoting its creative energy to changing businesses." For client Virgin America that includes "everything from the business plan to the airline's website, ticketing, plane interiors and in-flight entertainment."

Agency of the Year [Droga5](#), in an effort to motivate NYC kids to study, developed the Million



project, a solution that went far beyond the usual PSA campaign. The Million project is an initiative to give NYC kids cell phones that work as learning tools during school hours, and regular cell phones after school. The project has its [detractors](#), but that doesn't diminish the exciting backstory: it was born of a meeting between David Droga and Dr. Roland Fryer, a Harvard economist and NY Dept. of Education "chief equality officer". This was not a meeting about ads. It was innovative thinkers developing ideas that solve problems.

Most ambitious among Droga's projects is [Honeyshed](#), a brilliantly conceived and sublimely programmed shopping site that's like QVC done by MTV on HBO. Rather than hide the sale in entertainment, as most video-themed websites do, Honeyshed turns the sale itself into bizarre, captivating entertainment.





The project is backed by holding company Publicis, meaning that in this case the holding company that owns Droga5 is also its client. So it's no surprise that Maurice Lévy, chairman and chief executive of Publicis Groupe, is one of the project's [most visible advocates](#).

Starting relationships by talking with CEOs isn't an imposition—it's a necessity.

What I've learned:

1. Get everyone at the client and agency organized behind one mission. Unless everyone is measuring success the same way, the outcome will be mass frustration and average work (which describes 90% of agencies).
2. If you'd presume to meet with the CEO, then ensure you know the business inside out—not just the marketing.
3. If you don't want to sound like an ad agency when you get that meeting, bring in people who aren't from the agency world. Bring an economist or a fashion designer or an overseas manufacturer—someone a CEO would never expect to see from an ad agency.

Go, be free.

Turns out, I wasn't a great car salesman. I eagerly extolled the cars, but this was not the right approach. I seemed to know too much. People weren't sure whether to believe in me.

I was not unlike all the ads in the world that tell us something, rather than inviting us. Where does the audience fit into that? A headline does not trust create.

This is why I'm so enthused that many clients no longer want ads per se. They see that the goal isn't great ads; it's passionate customers.

It's an opportunity like we've never had before.

When we tell stories that are true, that are founded on beliefs, we're granted the freedom to use anything and everything we can think of to get customers involved.

Damn, I think that's why we got into this business.