



Stop Selling and Start Storytelling

Jason L. Baptiste

Success as an entrepreneur isn't being great at one specific thing, but being able to weave together unrelenting determination through multiple areas of discipline such as formulating an idea, hiring a team, getting press, building a product, and raising money. Throughout my book, *The Ultralight Startup*, I cover all of these topics and more in a hand-to-hand combat guide for anyone with little clout or capital that wants to get started. After a year of writing the book and over five years of being an entrepreneur, I've tried to find a uniform theme across all of these disciplines.

After a lot of thought, it's pretty apparent to me what the most valuable overall skill is for future CEOs and world changers—the ability to tell a story. We live in a world where we are sold to hundreds of times a day and have become ridiculously blind to those trying to sell us something. But we're always up for a good story. Storytelling is what made us love the advertisements in magazines that, as children, we would rip out and put on our walls and asleep under with inspired awe. Stories are the most powerful form of inspiration and persuasion in the world.

Successful entrepreneurs are never selling, and always storytelling. Throughout this manifesto, I want to focus on how an entrepreneur can use storytelling to persuade four key constituents that can ultimately make or break their startup—the press, team members, customers and investors.

Speak in Sound Bites

Twitter is not only a great invention and tool for the world's social life, but a great tool for entrepreneurs. People only have time to look at things that can be told to them in 140 characters or less, but even that can be way, way too long. Entrepreneurs should focus on how they can sum up their point in a very short, bombastic sound bite that others would want to tweet out. If you catch your audience's attention with the sound bite, then you are going to be able to dive in deeper to the rest of the story. Once you perfect this method you will know with precision what people will remember and tweet out. Let me take you through some examples we've used at Onswipe.

“Apps Are Bullshit”

Onswipe is focused on providing a great experience via the web instead of going the now traditional route of making expensive apps. We wanted to bombastically sum up something that we knew all content creators and magazine publishers were thinking, yet would never have the ability to say themselves. On stage when we launched, the phrase that was heard around the world and still gets repeated to this day is “Apps are Bullshit.” We not only chose something that was retweeted endlessly, but something that our market could empathize with and remember.

“Series Awesome”

Everyday, there is another venture financing of millions of dollars. It’s incredibly difficult to do, but incredibly common as well. When we raised our \$5,000,000, we wanted to make the world remember what was a normally ordinary event. Instead of raising a “Series A”, which is typical

financing speak, we raised a “Series Awesome.” This was unique, different, and memorable enough that everyone would write about the financing. The key to sound bites is to try to take something that happens frequently in a boring manner and turn it into something witty and fun.

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“Tablet is the TV of this Generation”

When the iPad first came out, people really had no clue what to make of it. Was it a bigger iPhone? Was it just a fad? Over time the world realized that it WASN’T either of those two things, but the world still had no clue what it WAS. After 18 hours a day in the trenches of the tablet marketing, especially in the advertising sector,

I came up with an easy way to explain what the tablet was for a normal person—the TV of this generation. It is what the world wakes up with, goes to bed with, connects to the world with, and has a very leisurely lean-back feel reminiscent of the TV. This automatically connected with

people and was a very important sound bite in our arsenal. The key to this sound bite is its ability to be relative to something everyone understands—the television—and why it is a lot like the television. When you are thinking of a sound bite, use the power of relation so the average, everyday consumer can relate to your story.

Those are just three that we have used. Go look at any Apple product launch. With the introduction of every product, Apple constantly uses a simple one to two sentence sound bite that the press will repeat and consumers will remember:

“There’s An App For That”

“1,000 Songs In Your Pocket”

“Apple Reinvents The Phone”

“A magical and revolutionary device at an unbelievable price.”

Have a Sexy and Magical Product

Sex sells, especially when your product is what's sexy and you don't have to dress it up in sexy language or imagery. It's hard to keep the attention of consumers with a boring product, even if its sold well. Do you remember the first time you saw a girl or guy that was way out of your league? That's what your product should feel like... except that it *is* within reach for everyone.

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You should not make people fall in love with your product, but in lust with your product. We chose to do a product on the iPad because it was something that would let us have a sexy demo that people would want to see. Press, investors, future employees, and customers see “neat products” all day long. Very rarely do they have a chance to play with something that is sexy.

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As an entrepreneur you should be able to tell a story that is very similar to a magic trick by using your product. You should be able to have a product that solves a problem, but does so in such a simple manner that the person you are showing it to thinks it is pure magic. A big part of making a product magical isn't the product itself, but the way that you deliver it. Could you imagine an executive from a boring company introducing the iPad or iPhone into the world?

Can You Make Grandma Understand What You Do?

I never thought about explaining a startup this way until I was challenged by David Cohen, CEO of Techstars, on the spot to. Many technology companies get caught up in the story of the technology and the specification accomplishments. As entrepreneurs in the high tech product sector, we often forget how the rest of the “normal world” works. Einstein once said that if you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand the problem well enough.

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As an entrepreneur you have to explain what you do in such a simple way that even your Grandma can understand it. Onswipe, though a sexy product, is difficult to understand—especially as a B2B product that your Grandma will never know she’s using. Here’s an example of dialogue that would be used:

GRANDMA: “So, Jason, what does your company do again?”

ME: “Well, Grandma, remember that iPad I bought you for Christmas?”

GRANDMA: “Yes, I love it. I use it to email and surf the web all the time.”

ME: “Great, well what is your favorite site to read news and content from?”

GRANDMA: “I really love reading Style.com”

ME: “Well, if Style.com used us, we’d make it feel a lot more like a magazine in a swipeable format. You as a reader don’t have to do anything. You can see what we do in action at Refinery29.com”

GRANDMA: “That’s great. But how do you make money?”

ME: “If the content is a lot like a magazine, so are the ads. We put in beautiful, full page magazine-like ads and take a small cut of that revenue.”

How Will Your Company Reach \$1,000,000,000?

As an entrepreneur, it seems easy to go for a small vision that seems simple to handle, but in reality, it is just as difficult as going after a very big problem. Investors and the press love to hear stories that are the equivalent of “epics.” Epics are stories that are grandiose and have you attacking a problem that could make your company worth a billion dollars one day. The story should not talk about Point A, which is zero, and then Point Z, which is your company worth a billion dollars. The story should logically walk through every step of how you can build momentum to get to be a billion dollar company. Look at Facebook for example. Their first step was just connecting college kids together at Harvard. Over time there was a logical progression that built them from being worth millions to billions. Here’s a shortened timeline of building around the social graph:

1. Available at Harvard
2. Available at more Ivy League schools
3. Available at all colleges
4. Available at high schools

“It seems easy to go for a small vision that seems simple to handle, but in reality, it is just as difficult as going after a very big problem.”

5. Available to everyone
6. Facebook newsfeed released
7. Facebook platform released letting people access the newsfeed and build inside the Facebook.com domain
8. Facebook connect released, letting others build on the Facebook social graph
9. Facebook like button released, letting others not only build, but easily publish back into the social graph

If Mark Zuckerberg had just said “We’re going to network the world together,” people would have thought he was crazy. Instead, he logically took things step by step. Stories are not told in a single chapter.

Journalists Need A Catchy Headline

The goal of a journalist or blogger is very simple: to write a story that people want to read. The more people that read the story, the more advertising or subscriptions they can sell. If you are pitching a journalist, you should be telling them a story that they can turn into a headline that their readers will want to know about. You have to understand that bloggers and journalists get pitched hundreds of times a day. Many of those pitches come from larger companies and more well-known startups that they are going to write about already. You have to be able to stand out in the crowd with something that is going to captivate their audience. Here is some food for thought as to what gets a journalist and their audience's attention:

David vs. Goliath Story:

Can you provide a David vs. Goliath type of story with your product?

Current event relevancy:

Is your product relevant to something currently happening in the press?

Get Others To Believe In And Tell Your Story

Great stories are ones that others want to retell. Think about folklore, urban legends, or other stories you have heard. Most of those stories are not from your own experiences or ones that you have created. They are often stories that have been passed along to you by somebody else, who has also gotten it from another person. Could you ever imagine a sales pitch that traveled from person to person the way a story does? No one wants to “re-sell” something, but people certainly do want to retell a great story.

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The best way to get investment is to have others want to introduce you to investors and retell your story to them. If your story is compelling enough to a trusted individual, they will introduce you to the person you are trying to reach. If your product is great, your users will retell your story to other new potential users. The emotion that a story evokes is the single greatest way to make a story spread and in turn grow your company.

Be On a Mission Bigger Than Yourself

You have to be fighting for a mission bigger than your actual company. Your story needs to be a part of a larger universe. Star Wars was never just about Luke Skywalker, but his mission to help destroy the Empire that was ruling the universe. As an entrepreneur, what is your mission that is much larger than yourself? Many companies are started with no specific mission other than to make something cool, but most companies are already making something cool. Companies that have missions that are bigger than themselves attract people who want to change the world, and enhance the ability of your company to do so. Salesforce had a mission of ending software. Google had a mission of organizing the world's information and making it universally accessible. Microsoft had a mission of putting a PC on every desk in the world.

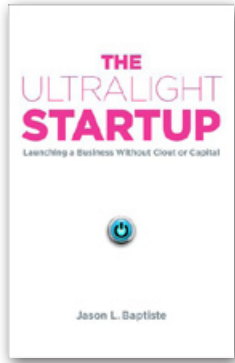
We at Onswipe have a mission of changing the way the world experiences the web.

When you have a mission that is much larger than yourself, you are able to attract employees, investors, and press. People don't want to be a part of a company, they want to be a part of a mission. The story you tell should be inspirational and give people a purpose.

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Change the way you do business. Change the fact that you are constantly selling and pleading for attention as if you are screaming in the face of someone who does not want to listen. Start telling a story where your audience wants to listen and fall into a magical trance with your mission. Stop selling and start storytelling—**you CAN change this world with a story.** 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Jason L. Baptiste is currently the CEO and co-founder of Onswipe, a platform for tablet publishing and advertising. In 2011 Jason was named to the *Forbes* 30 Under 30, *Businessweek's* Top 25 Under 25 entrepreneurs, *Inc.* magazine's 30 Under 30, and Onswipe has been named one of *Time Inc.'s* 10 Best Startups. Jason's book, *The Ultralight Startup*, is being published by Penguin Books. Jason also starred in Bloomberg's TV Show *Techstars* that chronicled the first 6 months of Onswipe's history.

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