

Public Speaking and Strategic Narratives for Leaders

Example Strategic Narrative

Review: What is a Strategic Narrative?

Remember that a strategic narrative is a special kind of story. It says who you are as a company. Where you've been, where you are, and where you are going. It says how you believe your company creates value and what you value in relationships. It explains why you exist and what makes you unique.

It should be a story that inspires employees, excites partners, attracts customers, and engages influencers. All these groups are audiences for your narrative: a story that is concise but comprehensive, specific but with room to grow, one that defines the company's vision, communicates the strategy, and embodies the culture.

It is possible for a strategic narrative to replace both mission and vision statements. It accomplishes similar things to these, but within the context of a compelling story that personalizes the message and makes it real for the audience.

Most marketing staffs or agencies aren't equipped to help craft a strategic narrative. They can create taglines and messaging campaigns once you've developed the company's story. But a good strategic narrative doesn't come out of the usual competitive landscape, customer interviews, and whiteboard sessions marketing people are used to employing. It takes a different approach and a shift in thinking, which must be led by the leadership team.

Finally, remember that people don't fundamentally change, and neither do companies. When they are founded, a kind of DNA is created that persists for the life of the company. A strategic narrative must align with this brand DNA or it will be perceived as inauthentic. And dishonesty is fatal to any storyteller.

A Real World Example

CRM software company Salesforce has a strategic narrative about the "end of software." It was a radical statement and seemed unrealistic when they unveiled it. However, by working to deliver CRM software as a web service, rather than as an app you installed on your own computers, Salesforce made the vision happen. And the narrative, "end of software" (in the classic sense) perfectly embodied what made Salesforce distinctive, what gave Salesforce its unique selling proposition.

An Example of How to Build Your Own Strategic Narrative

Typically, you start building a strategic narrative by gathering key people in the company to find out what your DNA is and what challenges you face. In the example below, you are a rising young department head at Kwiky Mart, a local Vancouver grocery chain. You have been tasked with leading the change management team to replace your company's mission and vision statements with a new strategic narrative. The company is just over ten years old. It grew rapidly for its first decade, but recently growth has slowed — perhaps because of price resistance as you're not seen as sufficiently different from lower cost competitors.

You have received your direction from the board, and you have interviewed senior management. You have also led brainstorming sessions with employee groups at each of the chain's three stores. You believe that this process has enabled you to find what's unique about your company's DNA and its purpose for existing.

As a locally owned company that sources most of its produce and other supplies locally, your company promotes sustainability and support for the local environment. Social responsibility is in your DNA. Your prices aren't the lowest, but your emphasis is more on quality than on the absolute lowest price.

Presentation Outline: A Strategic Narrative for Kwiky Mart

After gathering all this information you've prepared a proposal for a new strategic narrative for Kwiky Mart to implement. There are many different companies and many possible strategic narratives they could choose, but the example below shows what such a narrative could look like.

<p>INTRODUCTION</p>	<p><i>Kwiky Mart is more than just a grocery store: it's a Vancouver institution, long known for quality products. But, in the face of new challenges, we need to change if we are to survive. This effort will need everyone to get involved.</i></p>
<p>MAIN BODY – 01</p> <p>Our DNA (Who are we and where are we coming from?)</p>	<p><i>For ten years Kwiky Mart has been a Vancouver institution: locally owned, sourcing our produce locally, and serving the local market.</i></p> <p><i>We are known as a quality brand, with an emphasis on products that promote healthy eating.</i></p>
<p>MAIN BODY - 02</p> <p>What challenges do we face: external and internal?)</p>	<p><i>Now we are facing new, lower price competitors. Years of trying to match their prices by cutting costs has left some of our stores looking a little shabby.</i></p>
<p>MAIN BODY - 03</p> <p>How do we respond?</p>	<p><i>We differentiate ourselves from the budget stores by investing in our brand. This will include: renovations to make our stores more attractive with more modern décor; better labelling to emphasize the quality and environmentally friendly nature of our products; and better staff training so they can promote advantages of our products and advise customers on making better choices.</i></p>
<p>MAIN BODY - 04</p> <p>What are the consequences if we don't change.</p>	<p><i>The future is continuing slow decline if we don't change. Although investing in these improvements will cost money, our customers will pay for a quality product and quality experience if we tell our story well. We must show that we're more than a store by showing (in our marketing) how we support local farmers and help our residents lead healthier lives. As a member of the Vancouver community, we'll pledge to becoming carbon neutral by 2030.</i></p>

<p>MAIN BODY - 05</p> <p>What is everyone's role in our story?</p>	<p><i>Our employees will be more than low skilled stockers of shelves; they'll be advisors for our customers and ambassadors for our brand. Management must support staff training and the necessary spending at store level to emphasize quality in everything we do. The Board will get us listed in BC Government's BuyBC initiative.</i></p>
<p>CONCLUSION</p>	<p><i>Kwiky Mart has a bright future, but only if we remember who we are. We must emphasize quality and our membership in the community. This can be our story, but it will need everyone to take part.</i></p>