



Why Storytelling Matters to Life Science Marketers

This transcript was lightly edited for clarity.

Chris: Storytelling is a word that gets thrown around a lot in marketing circles these days. But from a company perspective, what does that really mean?

Why do we tell stories? And, as marketers, why do we care?

Joanna Rudnick is an Emmy nominated filmmaker who understands these questions (and the answers), so I thought it would be good to ask her. She is currently the Creative Director at The Linus Group and a masterful storyteller. Joanna Rudnick, welcome to podcast.

Joanna: Thanks for having me, Chris.

Chris: So I'm really excited about this. I think this one's going to be really fun because storytelling is something everybody's into right now. I have two primary goals. I hope we'll hit them both. And one is to help listeners understand the elements of a story and how those fit in the context of creating brand stories. And then the other one is different ways that life science companies can use stories in their marketing.

Joanna: Sure.

Chris: Just so we're starting all from the same place, why do we care about stories at all?

Joanna: That's a big question. We care about stories because they're what makes us human. They're how we relate to things that are inanimate. They're how we think of our work and make sense of our world and make sense of the goals and the visions that we

have. They're why we went into these fields in the first place. There was something that inspired us. It could have been a story we saw, or a story we told ourselves about what it meant to be a scientist, to be a physician, and why we wanted to be in that story and create that story. Ultimately, again, it's just what makes us understand our world.

Chris: I love that because I think it's absolutely true, but we don't think of that. It's so part of our lives that we don't realize the story that we're creating for ourselves, and that everybody you work with has a story that's the reason they do what they do.

So I'm interested in the process, when you're working with a brand, how you find out they either have a story or you're looking for the things that will make a great story. And I'm thinking in the context -- I don't know if you follow Ann Handley at all, but she's always about talking a bigger story than what might first come to you.

Joanna: And that's exactly the same approach I take. And one thing, I think, brands have personalities, and there are people behind every brand, and there's a mission and a vision behind that brand and what that brand wants to be. So trying to tap into that, but I think you hit it for me - it's the bigger story. How do you manifest that brand into a story? What do you want people to feel?

We all feel something when we see Apple. We all feel something when we see a brand that's very consistent, like GE has done a really fantastic job of creating a brand story using storytelling, but a very particular type of documentary verite storytelling to encapsulate that brand. To me, when a brand is so confident to stand back and say, "You can tell our story without actually talking about what we do," so it's not about the products what we sell.

You can look at a poster with "Think different" on it, and it's Gandhi. And it's not a picture of an Apple computer. There's no mouse in that picture. There's no keyboard. There's no hardware. There's nothing about it. But that is the ethos of what that brand is. That's the philosophy. And you feel something. If I think I saw "Think different" with a picture of a computer, I don't know that that emotional register would go off. And I think that's what brands are learning. You can put your logo on the back and tell a bigger story and stand for something.

Chris: Yeah. So the keyword you mentioned there was "confidence." So how do you get a company that's not GE to be confident about what they stand for?

Joanna: That's a really, really good question. And I think that there are trailblazers from other fields that are going there. To me, life science is catching up. I think you can show

them that it works. I think you look at how is a brand successful at having that persona out there. How do other people try it on?

I think just also looking brand lift and other metrics. There are metrics out there, but sometimes it's hard to measure when you are telling that, as you said, more confident story, how does that actually trickle down to how many instruments you sell in a particular division? So I think that's another thing. How do you actually tell a brand, "This is a long term, this is a long term investment that you have"? Again, if someone changes that association of who you are over time, that's going to completely transform the way that you're going to be perceived in the future.

I think confidence is a tough...oftentimes, I say to people, "What moves you? Let's look at these two things. We can present you this way, and this is completely in the details, this is right down to product. Or we can step back and really be a leader and tell a thought leadership story and stand for something, and how does that make you feel? How is that going to make your customers feel eventually, to associate with you in a different way"? How can you really be a partner, and not just in sales, but a partner to these end clients? So I do think a lot about that. It's a relationship, at the end of the day.

Chris: So content marketing is all about that long game. The question popped into my head and now I have to ask it. A newer company or a younger company who may feel confident and have a story to tell, there are still priority is about budgets and when they're going to see a return, and so on.

Joanna: Exactly. I think those companies, to me, are the more difficult companies to have these conversations with, because it's a very frightening time. You don't have that money, and you're thinking, "Should I be putting this into marketing? Should I be putting this into my sales force? And what is the return on investment?"

Oftentimes, what I see, though, I see those companies taking this, kind of putting very little money into it, so doing their brand video that they haven't really thought through, and they just want to have a video on their homepage or they want to just have a story. Then they actually come back to us at Linus and say, "You know what? We don't really think we got it right the first time." Or "This video really isn't telling who we are. And we're not even sure we're really that company." These are just talking heads.

To me, the idea is to do it right originally. That investment, if you actually figure out who you are and what that story is, that story should last and grow with you. You shouldn't be having to retell your story every two years. That's what I see over and over again. That to me is if you just stop and do it right the first time from inquiry, from the process that we go through talking to your customers, doing all of that qualitative research that we do, and then really getting at the heart of "What do you stand for?" asking those big questions and

not being afraid to answer them. Then, to me, once you get that umbrella right, you're going to be able to be cohesive in all your product marketing. And you're going to still be able to support that bigger story.

Chris: Right, okay. So that answered my next question which is what's that first step for those newer companies, that they should be thinking about?

Joanna: Yeah, and here's where I want to bring in my background. I'm a trained documentary film maker. I was a science journalist, and then I worked at PBS, and that was where I grew my career in social issues documentary, and ultimately, at the end of the day, I think about what's a good story. I want people to actually be invested.

Linus has a particularly model. What is persuading scientists and we think a lot about what is the psychology of that customer and how do you go out with a provocation and an insight that somebody cannot ignore? To me, that's what storytelling is, ultimately, is if I don't provoke you in the right way, and I don't tell you something you want to hear, you're going to go right by me. You're not going to be interested to hear the story.

At the end of the day, it has to be a good story. It's why product videos have the lowest number of views. Product demos, I should say, have the lowest number of views when you look at it. You know what has the most views? Your holiday video. Why? Because you're not afraid to be funny, because you're showing some personality, because you're going off script. So to me, that confidence to take those chances is where...so ultimately, to go back to your question, I start with story. What is going to make a good story? And at the end of the day, what do you want to stand for? And tying those two things together, but you have to really have a story that takes people through from the beginning to the end.

That's not only video storytelling - I do come from video - but that's also interactive. I think about what sort of a delightful experience, when I'm drawn in, what's going to keep me there, what's actually going to speak to my interest. You have to put yourself in the body and mind of your customer and to think about what they actually want to hear. It may not be what you want to tell them, but what do they want to hear?

Chris: Absolutely, I love all that. Now we're into the story part of it, and I would like to go under the hood. So you mention you're a documentary filmmaker. And we've talked about this a bit before and you mentioned that you're trying to take someone someplace. You film without a script, and the magic, you say, is in editing. So what are you looking for when you're filming without a script to find how to push someone's empathy button and make them feel something?

Joanna: Sure, so that's a good question, and we do come at it here as a slightly different approach. A lot of people script everything. And we do script live action. So that is a place where, of course, we do script.

We prepare like crazy. So even though we come at it and we take more a verite approach, we think about what the story that we're trying to tell and what the ultimate goal is and how we're going to tell the story in an absolutely rigorous, pre-production process, where we are casting the people who are going to be in the story, we're thinking about what we're shooting every day, down to the equipment that we're using, and the emotion you're going to feel from a dolly shot. So we're really taking almost a more cinematic approach to setting all of that up.

Where we sort of let, what we say, the serendipity or the magic happen is when we're in the field and we've set up a situation. We do actually allow things to unfold a little bit. So I do go into the questions. I'm actually notorious for writing out all my questions, putting them under my leg, and then sitting and having a conversation with you, just like we're having now, because I think people actually, when you let them speak and you let them speak from the heart will, again, give you that motivation.

So certainly, the empathy button, as you said, we shoot things that we think are going to move you. We try to get it, you have to get it in the field, but how you construct the story is in the editing. And that's the same way it is in documentary, and in Hollywood, and just in the edit of two things together.

So one of the things that a video, and we can certainly even play a clip if you can, is a video that we did for GE is an example that I like to refer to. When we set out, we told the story of a GE scientist who is also a photographer to talk about the move to more automated Western blotting. But what happens when you have an art form, like Western blotting, where there's a lot of voodoo to it and magic to it like black and white photography, but then you move to a more automated world? Can you still be an artist? Very different than just coming in and saying, "Western blotting needs to be automated to make it more reproducible," right? We're actually telling you a story.

But when we set out to shoot it, I thought, wouldn't it be neat if...because everyone knows the feeling of looking at the report out of a Western blot. If we actually put that on a photo subject of what he was photographing because you're in his mind then, because that makes you feel something and it ties it together. So we picked this amazing place in Wales that had this incredible rock formation, and we're actually using animation, which is another emotional element and can further your story. It can deepen your relationship with that

content. We knew going into it that we were going to use animation. We didn't know exactly how.

So that's how much preparation we're doing, down to... You can't really do those things just in the editing. You have to plan for them. But how that animation came in, and it comes in a wave from left to right, I wish you could see it, but how that animation comes in is emotional. It works with the music, so we're really using cinematic elements to move you more emotionally.

What I think about the other side of that is the talking head, as we say. That's the person shot, medium shot in interview who's talking at you. Even if they're saying the most compelling thing, you need to really edit that with other things around it to bring you into what that person's thinking. So we're trying to bring you as close as we can.

Does that answer the question?

Chris: Yeah, I think so. It's fascinating that it is in the preparation. So you do have a plan for what you're trying to get. Obviously, you have enough experience to look for those things and let them happen and capture them and look for opportunities, it sounds like.

Joanna: Absolutely. I go into the edits. I'll come out of the field and I'll go into the edit with the real idea of what the story should be. And I'll even think, usually, like maybe we start in this scene and we go here, and then work with the editor to get there. But serendipitous things do happen. You do get just that right look from someone. That's the way you're thinking about it is what is the expression right now that I can show from you that's actually going to give that audience that feeling that we want? And that's down to the level of details in the edit that we're thinking of things.

But going back to preparation, we prepare like crazy at the beginning. We really do. We talk a lot with the people we're going to film before we get into the field with them. So we try to do a lot of conversations with them. I need to understand the way you normally do things. So what I say to a scientist, for instance, to be more concrete, I'm going to film a scientist.

Rather than say, "I want you to stand in a lab and do X," I say, "Tell me about your day. You come in, what kind of coffee do you drink in the morning? How do you come in? What door do you come in through? What's the first thing you do when you get into the lab? Who do you check in with?" I want to understand how you really do it, rather than tell you what I want you to do. Not that I don't ever tell you what to do, but I understand what you normally do. So that's the level of preparation we're doing ahead of time.

Chris: Nice. So I'm going to pause here for a second. When I think of story, I'm looking for either some element of uncertainty, because you want to know how something will turn

out, and you want to know what that transformation is, and sometimes maybe it's both or it's one or the other. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Joanna: Sure. You always have to have something that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And that's sort of the basic of storytelling. We have to start somewhere with you. We've got to keep you interested, and oftentimes, there's a turn of events, right? And then we have to end somewhere that you feel satisfied that you have watched something unfold, and that you feel you're right there with it, and you don't know everything.

A lot of times, that's also when do you introduce information? One of the things that I think that people often fall into, which can be a very big mistake, is they want to give you all the set up right in the beginning, so you get a big text card at the beginning that's telling you everything you need to know. They feel like if they pluck you into an environment, you're going to be so confused and so uncomfortable, you're going to want to jump out of it.

Where I actually believe a little confusion at the beginning is okay, and when you tell people information is when they're starting to ask that question. So that's also a timing and a dance. I don't have to give you a big text card in the beginning that tells you everything we're doing and everything, because why watch if I'm giving you everything? But as soon as you have that question, I need to make sure that I'm answering it.

So that timing is a lot about how I think about storytelling is that when you provide information and when you hold it back and when you deliver it is all the arc of the story that I'm going for, and that's exactly what we're thinking about in the editing room.

Chris: Nice, now I feel like we're looking at the secret sauce.

Joanna: Yeah, that is a little bit of the secret sauce. I think it's also one of those pitfalls to avoid. I feel like people often say, "But I didn't understand exactly where we were at that moment," and they don't give their audience enough credit to understand that they'll still go with you a little bit. As soon as they really have the question is when you have to answer it, certainly. You don't want people to be confused. But if you give them everything right away, why are they staying?

Chris: Yeah, curiosity is essential.

Joanna: Exactly, curiosity is everything. You pique their curiosity, they're going to come along with you. They're interested in the story you're telling them. If you give them everything and you answer every question, you are maybe, actually, going to actually get their skepticism right, is what's going to come up, and that's what you don't want. Right? That's very much how we think about that is when do you introduce information? And that's what you control in the edit. That's sort of what's such a beautiful part of it.

Even though we talked about verite filmmaking, we're very much building out how we put things in and how we use that, what we captured in the field, as I said to you early on, is all in the editing. When people come to us and talk to me about making a film, they say, "I'm going to script it all, and then I'll just have an editor put it together," then the editor is not really playing that role. Your editor should be your secondary storyteller.

Chris: Linking that back to other kinds of marketing, I watch a lot of marketers, and you talk about, and copywriters, opening an information gap. Have you heard of that phrase? You're trying to create a gap in someone's knowledge that they feel compelled to fill. And you can do that in copywriting. You can do that in filmmaking as well. And that's the thing that makes people want to keep going.

Joanna: Exactly. I think that I probably, just because I approach everything from that other, coming from the other side of it, which is interesting too is I've actually really enjoyed coming into marketing but with a different set of eyes and realizing how much overlaps, but also realizing how much we can learn in marketing from traditional storytelling.

Going back to just the roots of how people tell stories and everything we've heard that you asked about heroes' journeys. All of those roots are what we're trying to use. And I think that the idea of the information gap is absolutely a lot of what I was saying there. There's something you want to know.

You also want to know how something ends. How is this story going to end? Why do I want to watch this? I know everything about this subject. Why would I watch this? Maybe we're going to tell you about it in a different way. We're going to make different connections that you haven't made. We're going to allow you to hear from people who don't normally talk to each other or work with each other. So we have to set up a situation, in my mind, that provides you with that information, as you said, that information gap, that information you can't get elsewhere or you don't think you have. Because you will not pay attention to us if you feel like you already have the answer.

Every time we do any storytelling here, any single campaign, the question I always ask my entire team is why would anyone want to know this? What are you telling me that I don't know? What am I interested? Why is this helping me out? Why is this furthering my understanding here? I think we have to continually ask that question, or else marketing becomes fluff, and it's so easy not to pay attention to it.

I am actually really committed, personally, to giving people interesting information in a new way, and to entertaining them and move them. I actually think it can be like filmmaking. We hold filmmaking up here and marketing down here, and I don't think they have to be so far away from each other. Good marketing can feel like really good filmmaking and good storytelling. I shouldn't say filmmaking, I should say storytelling,

because it's not always video, but video does, when you pair imagery with sound and all of those things, you kind of have a great toolbox.

You can do that in writing. Good copywriting is emotional, so emotional. The best copywriting, it's amazing. You get the right two words together with the right image, and you have an emotional experience. I love that. I love that.

Chris: Well, it's the art. One of the things that I like to...the mission or the vision of my business is that we make marketing as innovative as the science we're trying to sell.

Joanna: I love that. Absolutely. It should be. We've got the best subject in the world. That's why I'm in life science marketing, because I love the subject matter. This is emotional. This is exciting. It's enthralling. It's what is moving us forward. And we've got the best material ever to work with. We should be able to tell great stories.

Chris: Yeah. And I say this outside of work - the world needs as much art as it does science. And so here's an opportunity where art can help science.

Joanna: I was thinking the same thing.

Chris: Just like science helps art. I don't know if you use a digital camera. I'm assuming you do, right?

Joanna: They need each other.

Chris: There is a science that helped art. Now you take that art and you give it back to science and make something cool.

Joanna: Absolutely. I think they need each other. Some of my favorite projects, and this is something Hamid and I really share, is the idea of scientist and artist working together. I have a project coming up, a storytelling project that's going to bring a designer together with engineers and clinicians. I love that idea of coming together and talking. And that's how innovation brings us forward is when we work together.

Chris: One of my favorite examples of that is, and I think I mentioned this on other podcasts, but do you know Chris Hadfield, the astronaut?

Joanna: Yeah, I do.

Chris: I listened to a podcast with him. I think he's personally the most interesting man in the world. I heard an interview with him. His life story is so phenomenal, but the video he made of the David Bowie song from the space station, Major Tom, called Space Oddity, yeah, and he was talking about that. And the interviewer asked him, what made that thing...

25 million views? He said, "It's the intersection of art and science right there." He's putting art on top of one of the most advanced science projects you can imagine.

Joanna: He's using art to get you close to what he felt. Also, sometimes, to me, my favorite storytellers are physicians and scientists who understand the way to let... it's why I went to journalism school for science and environmental, and health journalism, because I felt like there's so many interesting things to say from scientists and physicians who are so close to the subject matter, but then there's this gap where the public feels like this information is not for them. It's too far away. And I wanted to open that up.

To me, some of my favorite writers are scientists and physicians who found a way to let you into that world. And that, to me, is that example of using David Bowie and the music to bring us to something that's so far away, we can't touch, but allow us to get close to it, to be able to touch it. That is the most amazing thing storytelling can do. And that's what I aspire to everyday is how can you get closer and closer and closer to that?

And that's where science actually has created these incredible tools to allow us, like interactive tools, simulation tools. We're moving towards virtual reality, and I can't wait to start using it, because I think that's really what's exciting now is that the science is allowing us to even get closer. And the art is that vehicle of communication.

Chris: Nice. So I'm going to wrap up with one last question. If you have one piece of advice for marketers who want to tell their own brand stories, what would it be?

Joanna: It would actually be to make the investment and time to be able to do it and finance this. To be able to say, "We want to do this right and we want to actually talk to everyone, and we want to listen, and we want to take the time to figure it out."

More so than that, I would say it goes back to confidence. I'm going to take this full circle. You can be about something bigger, and that's really what's going to last. That's what people are going to remember. And it's really figuring that out, how to be brave enough to say, "Our logo doesn't have to be on every single frame of this or on every single thing. What do we want to stand for? What do we want to convey?" And that's powerful. That sticks with people. That will always stick with people. So to be able to back up and stand for something bigger is my best advice.

Chris: Fantastic. I want to thank you so much for everything you've done. It's so...

Joanna: Thank you.

Chris: For the listeners, they don't know that we're sitting in the same room, which is not how I usually do this. My cheeks hurt, because I'm enjoying this so much. I've been smiling

the whole time. I think we'll link or embed the GE video about the photographer. Will that work?

Joanna: Beautiful. Absolutely.

Chris: Where else can people go to see more of your work?

Joanna: So we're trying to get more of that up on the Linus YouTube channel and on our website. That's coming too. My personal work, my previous work, I should say, "In The Family" and "On Beauty," you can go to YouTube and watch the trailers for those.

Chris: Highly recommended. Do that.

Joanna: Thank you.

Chris: Joanna, thanks very much.

Joanna: Thank you so much. This was a pleasure.

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