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## **What TED Can Teach Us About Marketing**

### *Make your next campaign inspire people like a TED Talk — without actually giving a TED Talk*

TED Talk videos have been viewed billions of times. I'm not gonna lie: there's a good chance a healthy percentage of those views have been by me. I'm one of those people who says "that reminds of this TED Talk..." as part of everyday conversation in the same way some people talk about the weather.

In other words, I'm a total TED Head. My love of the Technology Entertainment and Design Conference and its many regional permutations crosses all platforms: I subscribe to the TED Radio Hour (shoutout to host Guy Raz), I watch and share videos on a near-daily basis, and the highlight of 2016 was when I attended the live Minneapolis TEDx event (you should watch Amelia Franck Meyer's talk on the foster system and the human need for belonging — but be armed with tissues) .

So it should go without saying that I've done my fair share of analyzing what makes a great TED Talk. And I've come to the following conclusion:

**What makes a great TED Talk is the same thing that makes a great marketing campaign — and vice versa.**

As marketers for conscious brands, we want our ideas to inspire the right person to share, act and become a loyal follower.

TED's whole reason for existence is to spread ideas. The most popular talks inspire movements, from offering more nutritious lunches in public schools to embracing vulnerability and empathy as leadership qualities.

*I want to inspire a movement, don't you?*

Another thing: as conscious brand marketers, we need to emotionally connect with our audiences. We need our audiences to personally identify with our messages and change some aspect of their buying behavior to better help the world. We want our audiences to use the word "love" in reference to our brands and products and to proudly announce "I'm a [Brand X] person" or "I only buy my [Product X] through [Brand

X] because (insert positive impact benefit here).”

Many TED viewers never heard of business luminaries like Brené Brown, Simon Sinek and Seth Godin before they gave their seminal speeches. Now claiming “I’m a fan of Brené Brown” is shorthand for a certain type of spiritually conscious, emotionally intelligent entrepreneur. Simon Sinek’s books, *Start With Why* and *Find Your Why* have sparked a purpose-driven entrepreneurship movement. And Seth Godin is an action figure, FFS.

TED speakers may appear to be master storytellers, but in many cases, they come from tech or science backgrounds and have never given a presentation in such a large venue before. The curators behind TED help speakers to craft their talks using a carefully designed framework built on the foundations of storytelling and the art of persuasion.

So what does this mean for us as marketers? It means that if we break a TED Talk down into its fundamental elements, we can accomplish for our brands the same things the great TED Talks have done: captivate an audience, get them to share content with peers, motivate people to action, and inspire a loyal following.

The beauty of it all: if you understand how to weave the fundamental elements together, everything falls into place.

The TED format can be applied to creating persuasive content for a multitude of marketing and fundraising applications, including landing pages, blog posts, email campaigns, marketing videos, sales presentations and VC pitches.

So let’s take a look under the hood, shall we?

## 1) What’s the Big Idea?

I dug up a playlist of the 20 most-watched TED talks:

Don’t worry, you don’t have to sit through all of them right now (in fact, please don’t — not until you’ve finished reading this post!). I did all the TED binge-watching for you. Like I said: TED Head.

Here’s what I discovered: **around 90 seconds into each presentation, the speaker has uttered an essential phrase that encapsulates the message he or she wants the audience to take away.**

*Their “Big Idea.”*

I’ll make it easy for you and list the Big Idea of some of the videos and where they happened:

1. Sir Ken Robinson, Are Schools Killing Creativity? (01:31): “Everybody has an interest in education.”
2. Jill Bolte Taylor, My Stroke of Insight (00:30): “I can take my dreams, I can connect them to my reality, and I can make my dreams come true.”
3. Pranav Mistry, The Thrilling Potential of SixthSense Technology (00:43): “We use gestures not only to interact with objects, but also to interact with each other.”
4. David Gallo, Underwater Astonishments (01:50): “We don’t know much about this planet at all.”
5. Pattie Maes, Unveiling Game-Changing Wearable Tech (0:19): “We can develop or evolve a sixth sense that will...help us make the right decisions.”

Most of these sound like material for pretty good taglines, don’t they?

Also, note that nearly all of these ideas are expressed in the first person plural: we.

*We’re all in this together*, the speaker infers with a single pronoun.

It’s a different approach than the typical second person singular “you” used in persuasive copywriting. But in the context of a speech, the speakers are seeking to unite the audience in a common cause. **These first moments of interaction in great TED Talks and great marketing are about building a community rather than seeking action on an individual level.**

### **There’s no “I” in content strategy**

As digital marketers, we’re learning the power of building communities over jumping into the cold water of direct sales. More companies are investing in content strategy and inbound marketing and pulling budget from interruptive advertising campaigns because they’re realizing the long-term impact highly engaged customers can have on their bottom line.

An example of a brand whose community in many ways outshines its own products (and they’re okay with that) is events industry software platform, HoneyBook.

A few years ago, some friends in Annapolis, MD decided to organize Tuesdays Together networking events to help promote “community over competition” for creative professionals. The Rising Tide Society was born.

The meet-ups caught fire and soon spread to over 300 cities nationwide. After sponsoring the San Francisco Tuesdays Together event, Honeybook decided it wanted to leverage the highly engaged Rising Tide community of creative professionals. So

they bought Rising Tide. While they don't require Rising Tide members to be Honeybook users, they have a wealth of access to target users for their products from wedding planners to professional photographers. Their marketing strategy is tied directly to their community.

### **Exercise: What community are you seeking to create?**

Using first person plural, write down your Big Idea — the thing that makes your product or service worth putting into the world and building a community around — in a sentence of 15 words or less.

Here's mine: *When we stop marketing to consumers and start telling stories with people, human connections happen.*

## **2) What Inspires You?**

After unveiling their Big Ideas, it's now up to the speakers to convince their audience why the ideas are worth spreading. Their first task is to get the audience emotionally engaged.

You should know by now where I'm going with this. The most effective way to create an emotional connection with an audience is to — drumroll, please...

Tell a story.

Most TED speakers share origin stories or reveal mind-blowing examples from history.

Simon Sinek's legendary whiteboard presentation, *How Great Leaders Inspire Action*, exemplifies this.

First, he asks the central question of his talk: *"How can we explain when others are able to achieve things that defy all the assumptions?"*

Then, he uses the examples of Apple, Martin Luther King, and the Wright Brothers. They were all able to achieve levels of excellence in their respective fields despite the fact that they weren't the only ones out there doing what they did. What was their magic formula?

Sinek then reveals his theory, which is particularly relevant to this post: Apple, MLK and the Wright Brothers were all great communicators. They all identified the "whys" of what they did, and shared their motivations first, then discussed the "hows" and the "whats." In other words, by revealing what inspires you, you will inspire others to action.

### **Exercise: WHY???**

Why does your company or brand do what it does? What inspired your company to be different from everyone else?

When my copywriting mastermind group challenged me to draw my business plan for 2018, I decided to start with my Why. Here's what I came up with:

### 3) What Information Do You Have?

After you share your Idea and Inspiration with your audience, it's time to present the Information: evidence to support the Big Idea.

This is the part when a TED talk turns into a lecture, but it doesn't have to feel like a lecture. The best TED speakers have a knack for humanizing even the driest of statistical numbers.

Witness Hans Rosling's presentation of third-world life-expectancy stats: the guy manages to turn logarithmic graphs into breathtaking portraits of our planet. How? *He turns the data into stories.*

Rosling would never have been able to create the sense of drama about his stats were it not for the graphics he created. Even though TED talkers are at center stage, they typically rely on a well-designed series of slides to help (literally) illustrate their points.

Anytime you need to use data to prove success, impact or results, visual storytelling can help you stand out and make dry facts seem exciting. I love this example from Enspiral, a social innovations incubator. Their unconventional structure needs some 'splaining, but they've made a complex idea seem simple thanks to an artfully illustrated explainer video:

#### Exercise: Picture This

What statistical information and research do you have to share about your service or product to support your Big Idea? How can you visually represent the findings beyond the typical charts and graphs?

### 4) What's Impeding You and The World?

By now, TED talkers have got the audience jazzed. It's time to create some drama by bringing some conflict to the story. They introduce the Big Problem: the one thing that's been holding the world back from embracing the Big Idea.

In Dan Pink's talk, *The Puzzle of Motivation*, his Big Idea is also his Big Problem: *"There is a mismatch between what science knows and what business does,"* he says. Throughout his presentation, he builds the audience up with a number of examples from sociological and economic research that show that traditional business incentives inhibit the performance of creative problem solving tasks.

You can't help but get caught up in his outrage when he declares halfway through his talk: *"Too many organizations are making their decisions [and] their policies about talent*

*and people based on assumptions that are outdated, unexamined, and rooted more in folklore than in science.”* You can almost hear the audience begging “WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT THIS RIGHT NOW???”

The Big Problem we face as marketers is applying the same approaches to marketing that were created during the Mad Men era. Today’s audience is adept at tuning out interruptive marketing messages. They’re inundated with advertising, so they’ve developed psychological ad-blockers. They feel cynical about any kind of promotional information and they have every right to be: they’re pitched by clickbait articles, weight-loss products and get-rich-quick schemes every time they scroll down their social feeds.

According to Harvard Business Review, over 90% of C-level executives say they “never” respond to cold-calls or e-mail blasts. Yet tired outbound sales tactics like mindless cold-calling, spammy e-mail blasts, and throw-away snail mail campaigns still prevail. And all of it appears to adhere to a hackneyed sales formula that seeks to manipulate audience behavior instead of developing genuine emotional connections.

Think about the last time you bought a car: was it because you found a flyer from your local dealership on your mailbox declaring you should buy it because it goes from 0–60 in 2 seconds and its side-impact airbags will keep your family safe — and by the way, you’ll get 0% financing if you buy today? Did it even inspire you to visit the dealership or Google more information about it?

Hmm. Something tells me no. Yet most marketing copy, no matter the product or service, sounds just like this.

So that’s my Big Problem as a marketer.

### **Exercise: What’s the problem here?**

What’s your Big Problem? What’s the battle you and your audience must partner to fight?

## **5) What Impact Can We Make?**

This is when TED talkers roll out some good news: they have a solution to this problem, and with the help of the audience, they can solve it. Remember the Big Idea? Right! Here’s where we take another look at it now that we’ve been emotionally and intellectually engaged.

In Jamie Oliver’s impassioned talk on the national obesity epidemic, *“Teach Every Child About Food,”* he discusses his anti-obesity project in Huntington, WV and the impact he was able to make in the community by helping school cafeterias find locally sourced, sustainable food for \$6,500 per school. He knows he’s speaking to an audience of our society’s elite tech and business experts: \$6500 per school is pocket change.

He's a master salesperson as he tells his audience, "There are angels around America doing great things...the problem is, they all want to roll out what they're doing to the next school and the next, but there's no cash." At this point, you can almost hear the audience pulling out their checkbooks.

### **Exercise: Deep impact**

How can you and your audience work together to solve a Big Problem in your industry?

## **6) What Is Your Audience Invited To Do?**

So here's the big close: the TED speaker has shared their ideas, told their story, revealed their challenges, and imparted what they need to move past those obstacles. Now it's time to ask for help.

Remember how in the first section the speakers typically use the first person plural? "*We're all in this together*"?

Now the language changes to the second person singular: "You."

As in, "**we're** all in this together, but we can't do this without **you.**"

The TED audience is invited to complete the journey with the speaker by taking action. In digital marketing terms, you can visualize a TED talk as a beautifully designed landing page with great copy and eye-grabbing graphics all leading the visitor to the Call To Action button.

Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee's call to action is simple: she asks the audience to create, in their communities, opportunities for girls to achieve excellence.

*"I don't have much to ask of you," she says. "Will you journey with me to help that girl, be it an African girl or an American girl or a Japanese girl, fulfill her wish, fulfill her dream, achieve that dream? Because all of these great innovators and inventors that we've talked to and seen over the last few days also are sitting in tiny corners in different parts of the world, and all they're asking us to do is create that space to unlock the intelligence, unlock the passion, unlock all of the great things they hold within themselves. **Let's journey together. Let's journey together.**"*

TED speakers are adept at creating a sense of urgency by laying out their cases for change: the people in the TED audience are society's great innovators and naturally want to be the first to adopt emerging technology and lead the charge of a philanthropic cause.

### **Exercise: Your call to action**

Think about your target audience: what's irresistible to them as a call to action? More information? A great bargain? Taking a risk that could pay off? The opportunity to join a

community or to help others?

To sum up the TED Pitch Formula, it looks like this:

### **IDEA**

The core message you want your audience to spread.

### **Inspiration**

Your origin story or source of motivation for what you do.

### **Information**

The evidence you have to prove why your idea is awesome.

### **Impediment**

The obstacles you and your audience must overcome to make this idea work.

### **Impact**

The change that can happen as a result of your idea working.

### **Invitation**

The call-to-action for your audience.

In the spirit of a TED talk, here's my invitation to you: if you, like me, are tired of business-as-usual marketing and are inspired by the connections that great storytelling can bring about both in business and in life, let's spread our ideas together (see what I did there?).

Follow Speaking Human, clap away, and share this post on Twitter. The more we can preach the storytelling gospel, the more we can infuse business with the human element.

**Storytelling, marketing and social impact.**  
*If you're into those things, this should be a no-brainer.*