

Branding with FIRE



Why You No Longer Own Your Brand
And Why That's a GOOD Thing

A Brand Marketing Manifesto by Carter Harkins

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A Brand Marketing Manifesto
From the CEO of Harkins Creative

Written by Carter Harkins
February, 2010



Prelude

Over the years, I have had many opportunities to help identify and tell the compelling stories of Brands. In the early stages of working with a new client, there has always been the need to cast a vision for what work needs to be done, and why it *should* be done.

We've never approached marketing and branding in a traditional way, and more and more, I think that our way of doing it is more sustainable, and certainly more aligned with the social-participatory-interconnected-digital age that has emerged and left so many companies scrambling to keep up, or even just survive.

What follows is an attempt at casting a vision- setting the tone, if you will- for the existing, new and soon-to-be clients we serve. While I hope it will also find its way into the larger market, I realize this isn't really up to me (if you read on, you'll soon find out that I practice what I preach, or sincerely try to, anyway).

Since I love to tell stories and often get the chance to speak publicly to businesses and entrepreneurs, much of the way I communicate with clients takes on a story-like tone. It just makes sense to use the



Storyteller's tools at my disposal to get a point across, whether it's a cheesy rhyme to help them remember a key point, a parable that tugs at the marketer's heart-strings, or even a real-life cautionary tale.

At some point in helping new clients understand what we do at Harkins Creative, this allegorical story took root, and since it's pretty extended, with lots of valuable nooks and crannies to explore, I got kind of excited to write it all down.

This is by no means to be taken as an encyclopedic examination of the subject of new-era brand marketing. There are some great books, blogs and online discussions that tackle these subjects for the new digital Brand, and much of the sentiment expressed elsewhere you'll no doubt recognize here.

In many ways, the take we have on things is not new at all; it's ancient, really. And the reason this works is that the one constant throughout every age of marketing is this: The Market is still- and always will be- made up of human beings.

And the essential human experience is not all that radically different from its past versions. We still long for respect, a place to belong, to be



known and appreciated. Insofar as a Brand's story incorporates these elements, they remain on solid ground.

Having said that, it's *everything else* that's radically different, and that's where brand marketers have much to keep up with.

So if you read this Branding Manifesto, and find some truth in it; if it is helpful in any way, I'd be honored if you'd pass it along and share us and our philosophy with others that need it.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Harkins', with a long, sweeping underline.

Carter Harkins

CEO and Chief Storyteller

Harkins Creative

www.harkinscreative.com

Carter's cell phone is 615-482-1372. He'd really like to hear *your* story some time.



*To Kelly,
the best part of my Story.*

*And to Reagan,
its continuation.*



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A Short, Allegorical History of Man and Fire

Not so long ago, in a much simpler time, Man discovered Fire. And almost overnight, life became far less simple.

Less simple, because Fire would prove to be tough to manage consistently. It had a life of its own, and had to be respected, or it could quickly do things that were not part of Man's plan (a fact that Woman liked to bring up frequently).

But Fire also brought with it a good deal of comfort and security heretofore unknown by Man. It brought warmth. A hot meal. Light.

In fact, it could be said that Fire was Man's first On-Demand Service Provider.

Not long after its discovery (maybe even minutes), Man decided that it would be very good to try and own Fire.

"Fire GOOD." Or so the reasoning went.



Fire was Power. Having the exclusive rights to it could change a life and give a decided advantage to the individual who possessed it.

But how do you own something as elemental and intangible as Fire? Its secrets are easily attainable through observation. Its fuel is as common and available as, well, oxygen; and if you try to hold it too close or too tightly, you end up getting burned, or worse.

Much, much worse.

Man hardly cornered the market on starting fires, either. Mother Nature had been igniting things with lightning since before there was a man around to observe it.

And so it was, that the most powerful and liberating discovery to be made by Man for eons to come was also the least securable, least ownable, and most downright natural process ever discovered.

So a bargain of sorts was struck between Man and Fire. Man would not try to own the Ancient Flame. And in exchange, Fire would lend itself to a nearly infinite number of practical applications. What a deal.



Fire Changes Things

It was at this point in the timeline that Man began to apply himself to the Knowledge of Fire and its many resplendent benefits.

Benefits such as:

Cooked food. What a concept! Cooking preserved the food for longer, and helped to eliminate some of the nastier side-effects of the raw meat diet that was all the rage at the time.

Cave dwelling. Not a very secure undertaking when you can't see what you are doing, or see who or what might be in there with you while doing it.

Wolf-and-Bear Repellent. Ask any prehistoric cousin to these wild animals (assuming they still existed, could talk, and would tell you even if they could) if the idea of Fire is just a little spooky.

And, of course, **Branding.**

Wait, what?



Yes. Branding.

Perhaps the most history-changing activity enabled by Man's relationship with Fire.

At some point after the discovery of the Timeless Flicker (again, likely moments after) man discovered that Fire can bite back. And such a bite usually left a mark; a reminder to Man of the Deal made not to get too close or grabby.

But while personally receiving such a brand was an experience best avoided, that did not mean that Man couldn't apply this fact to better ends...

Specifically, the rear end of a herd animal.

But that thought hadn't occurred to Man just yet.

In order to understand how he got there, though, let's jump back in the story to the first benefit Fire made possible.



The inception of Cooking as a benefit of Fire led to several culinary changes during this post-discovery period.

For starters, it meant that meat could be preserved and eaten at will, and not simply when a fresh kill had been made. In most history books, this is referred to as the concept phase of the modern-day Convenience Food Industry, but more important to the story at hand, it sparked a sudden desire to domesticate a few head of cattle, and keep them nearby for a quick and convenient meal option.

Suffice it to say, this trend caught on like the all-night Drive-Thru.

It wasn't long before every Tom, Dick and Hairy had roped up some goats and heifers, and taught them not to run away. It was a much happier, albeit noisier community.

But ownership has its problems.

Specifically, how to tell the difference between one man's four-legged property, and another's...

No worries, Fire had the answer for that as well.



It turns out that an artistically applied red-hot poker to the backside of a man's, er... assets... could go a long way toward settling property disputes, even back then.

And thus Branding was born.

If it hadn't been for the fact that barbecue was so irresistibly delicious, Man might never have conceived of the necessity of owning an animal.

Then again, that was probably inevitable.

Ownership.

What Fire denied Man regarding itself, it had no moral qualms in facilitating when it came to Man's ownership of practically everything else.

To the ancient Man, Branding was Ownership.

The irrefutable, irrevocable mark of possession.

But it was the Fire that bestowed that power, lest Man forget.



Fire made it possible, and no one owned the Fire.

Fire also bestowed other benefits, as we mentioned earlier, such as making possible the inhabiting of the dark underground.

You see, as man entered the Cave Estate Market for the first time, and brought with him the Great Light, the better with which to see and explore his new homestead options safely, Woman immediately noticed the bare quality of the walls, and lamented this fact.

Her lamentation was not lost on the Man, who, upon seeing the immediate potential of a large, multi-room underground dwelling in securing his safety and status in the neighborhood, embarked upon the world's first personal Art Gallery project.

Aided by the tentative relationship with Fire (made even more tentative by being together in closer-than-usual quarters), Man set upon the task of remodeling his new estate by adding a little color to the walls, in the form of drawings and pictographs; rudimentary Brands, which, unbeknownst to him at the time, would later become priceless works, admired and studied by generations of anthropologists and ad agency



executives. Had he known this, he might have invested in an art class or two before tackling the project.

Just like the tacky knick-knacks and artless snapshots we hang about our own homes, these cave paintings had meaning to the inhabitants within.

They told stories.

Important stories.

Stories of Life and Death. Tales of Victory and Defeat. Rites of Passage. Heroes and Villains.

As the Fire Light danced and cast lively shadows upon the stone canvasses, the stories practically jumped to life, immersing the viewer in the tale playing out before her.

They made impressions.

They were memorable.

They defined the Dwellers.



Even after the new cave smell had worn off, the paintings still served as touchstones, tangible and visible reminders of a Story worth the telling.

At a glance, they could rekindle the Emotions, bringing to mind all the potent memories, the immediacy of the very moment when the story was first revealed by the flicker of a Flame.

Such was Fire's ability.

Such was Man's response.

As Man grew in lingual ability, and developed a more sophisticated and portable form of communicating, he still preferred to tell his Stories while enrobed in the Fire's warm Light.

By now, though, the Light was a familiar Embrace.

Man had grown accustomed to its movement, knew its Energy, respected its Strength.

The Fire had become a magnet, drawing a community together for common purposes:



Warmth. Protection. Comfort. Usually Food.

And Stories.

Always Stories.

In fact, so sacred was Fire to the Storyteller's art that, for many societies, certain Stories were forbidden to be told in its absence.

Many native American Indian Nations had wandering Storytellers, lovingly known as Twisted Hairs. The Twisted Hair was entrusted by the Elders to carry the important Stories of the Tribe from one village to the next, keeping alive the history of a People.

When a Twisted Hair was spotted entering a village, children and adults alike would rush to gather around him, hoping to be chosen to be among the listeners that night, as the traveling Teller of The Stories addressed his assembly.

Before he practiced his sacred Craft, he would always make a prayer fire, offering tobacco to the Great Storyteller, and passing a pipe among the gathered.



He knew.

Fire was a force. An element both physical and metaphysical.

The Fire was essential. It was the Prelude and the Benediction. No Stories would be told outside of the circle of its Light.

Fire unlocked the Story. Without fire, there was no Story.

And no one owned the Fire.

The Core Truth of Fire

So, you are asking by now, why all of this flowery and over-the-top prose about Fire, when this was supposed to be a book about modern-day Corporate Branding?

Good question.

You may not like our answer.



Especially if you have recently spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on a Branding Strategy that is based on a different premise.

In fact, after reading this chapter, you may put this book down, walk away and discount everything you've just read.

We might have a better shot at getting your business if we *didn't* tell you all of this.

But we couldn't provide a real benefit that way.

You see, knowing what we know has changed things for us.

Caused us to rethink our industry, and its primary activities.

Dramatically shifted our world-view.

For most Corporate Brands, the typical response to the increasing speed with which the world is changing is to hold on tighter.

Clinging to control.



To Ownership.

The Technology of Interconnectedness has enabled a Culture of Participation which has spread like the Fire of Old we just described: enabling historic change, benefitting all, yet owned by no one.

To be at the helm of a Brand of any size at this moment in History, and NOT understand the sea change occurring in the Global Marketplace could be likened to any number of metaphors involving the Titanic and an iceberg.

Or Man and Fire.

That's right. Maybe you've guessed it by now.

You

no longer

own

your Brand.



Confused?

It's expected, don't worry. But you should probably sit down for the rest of this.

Here's where your head is really going to swim.

You don't own your Brand any more.

Not in this new world.

It doesn't matter if your Company or Product Name is followed by a registered trademark symbol or not.

Not any more.

No one owns the Fire.

"So," you ask, "the Fire in the story is our Brand?"

No.



Is the Brand played by Man in the story?

Not even close.

But if we don't own our Brand, and no one owns the Fire...

Exactly.

Still not getting it? The truth about Fire in our story is this:

Whatever Fire enables, fire owns.

And no one owns fire.

The benefits of Fire are immediately revoked the moment the Flame goes out.

Warmth.

Light.

Safety.



All of it, gone, the instant Fire is extinguished.

So in fact, how can it be said that any of the benefits that Fire brings are possessed by us, when we do not possess the source of the benefits?

Does this sound too metaphysical to be in a Corporate Branding Manifesto such as this?

Let's put it this way, then.

The Brand you have so lovingly and painstakingly crafted, the one you have claimed ownership of for years, perhaps even decades; the Brand which has been such a presence in the Marketplace...

You don't own it.

Not if the Fire that provides your Brand's very existence dies out.

Who would that Fire be, do you think?

It's worth the risk of sounding patronizing at this moment...



Does the existence of your Brand as a going concern depend on the continued favor and cooperation of your marketplace?

Of course it does.

The Fire is your Market.

You don't matter unless you have customers.

Not just any customers...

The *right* customers.

In the right quantities.

At the right times.

Subtract an interested Market from the equation in which your Brand figures heavily, and suddenly you'll discover what you really owned in the first place.

Nothing.



Well, you'll still own the right to use your Brand name.

Big deal.

Without the Fire in your Market, what is that name worth?

And remember, you do not own the Fire.

So it follows that you do not own your Brand.

There was a time in the early history of Corporations when it really felt like ownership in the truest sense; Companies could come up with practically any Product or Service, give it a Brand name, brainstorm a catchy slogan, and go about the process of force-feeding their captive marketplaces with messaging that seems downright hokey in retrospect.

Unquestioningly, the Market would lap it up, thank them for it, and beg for more. It was as unsophisticated an exercise as early Man's courtship and marriage rituals.

Big ugly stick + brute force = new wife in the cave.



Sure there would be the occasional unhappy customer.

But who would ever hear them, even if they voiced their complaint?

The radio and television networks were practically owned and operated by the big sponsors.

The newspapers were the same, but with smaller coverage areas and often infrequent publication dates.

And writing to the boys in charge at Corporate?

Good luck with that.

There was no incentive to look at a customer complaint as anything but controlled collateral damage in the larger scheme of things.

The one-way official Brand messaging was just too effective.

People believed it, because it was on TV or the radio.



We certainly don't mean to paint a picture of a despicably irresponsible corporate culture. Most companies ostensibly tried to deliver on their promise of value.

But if they sometimes fell short...

Oh well. Probably not much would come of it.

After all, how many people were really going to hear about it, and then choose to believe it?

Market ownership felt not only possible, but practically ensured for the top Brands.

But that was a different world.

Today, the Technology of Interconnectedness has permeated to the very core of the modern Market.

And the Culture of Participation it has enabled is not just a social experiment with a limited engagement.



No, today, a Brand owns nothing.

Not its market.

Not its reputation.

Not even itself.

Today, before a plane has even taxied safely to an arrival gate, passengers have located and retrieved stored communications devices, powered them on, and checked in with their world.

Email.

Cell phones.

Texting.

Chat.

Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, and about 100 million blogs and forums.



All of them talking.

Saying things.

Telling Stories.

Starting their own Fires.

Do you still want to contend that you own your Brand?

No, *they* do.

The Fire.

Millions of connected people, spanning culture, race and gender,
huddling together around topics of mutual interest.

Products they like.

Brands they trust.

Brands that make them mad.



Things they want.

Or things just purchased from you and reviewed.

This seemingly innocuous group can turn vicious mob in less time than it takes to power up a laptop.

And Brands still stuck in the old Ownership paradigm, rigid and walled off...

They are the new playthings of the bored, unimpressed and disenfranchised.

You've seen it happen.

The Fire consumes.

Fire alone has the power to Brand.

You don't. Not really.

It's the opposite problem of a dying Fire, and it may be worse.



A Fire burning out of control does not exercise reason or restraint.

It blindly seizes what it needs to fuel its angry blaze.

It shows no pity, no regard for our hard work or careful planning.

It just consumes.

But Fire's intent is not malicious. It doesn't set out to destroy for the pure delight of watching things burn to the ground.

Rather, Fire's unbridled fury is a response.

A message.

And if you are lucky, you can learn what the Fire is trying to tell you before it's too late.

Man has a bargain with Fire, remember?

Do not try to own it, and it will be available to you for good purposes.



It's a delicate balance, a nuanced relationship.

Attempt to control too much, and you'll likely smother the Flame.

Try to stoke and manipulate Fire without regard to the ancient Bargain, and the ensuing inferno will not stop until it has consumed everything.

Both responses are Fire's way of reminding us that the relationship has been disturbed, the balance upset.

Fire will not be owned.

The Market will no longer tolerate manipulation, spin and control.

The Market now has a voice.

And the Market's response can be devastating.



A New Brand Age

By this point in modern history, Man thought he understood just about all there was to know about the properties of Fire.

He had traded in his cave and club, got a shave and a haircut, and moved to a place called Madison Avenue.

And in his new role as Marketer, he was already fairly adept at applying his understanding of the nature of Fire.

With little effort, he could summon the cooperation of Fire practically anywhere and anytime he so chose.

“If you build it, they will come.”

And for the most part, Fire was complicit in the Marketer’s Strategy.

Man had grown overly confident, and began to believe that even if he could never own the Flame, he *could* possess the entire knowledge of it.

And that was more or less the same thing, right?



Leave it to Fire to teach us a few more essential lessons.

Whatever predictability and scientific repeatability ascribed to Fire, what knowledge and leverage we felt comfortable in assuming we possessed over it, all of it was undone the day the first 4800 baud modem connected two remote computers.

Fire had sparked the gap.

It had just been given a very fast, very uncontrollable new modality.

The Internet.

The vast, ever-growing, always changing Interconnectedness.

And in this new dimension Fire felt right at home.

In fact, in that first digital instant, Fire had become more powerful, more indomitable and less predictable than ever before.

What was first conceived as a technology to move and share data between machines on a global level has more accurately come to be



described as the means for connecting individuals- *humans*- in new, self-organizing ways.

You've heard all this before.

But what you may not have stopped to consider is just how this emerging social circuitry is revealing a new fundamental nature of Fire, and Man's old bargain hangs precariously in the balance.

In ages past, Fire always had a Ground Zero; the place at which fire would acquiesce to Man's purposes.

The locality of Fire was reassuring to Man, especially as he wrestled to understand what was in the fine print of the deal he had made. This reassurance often led him to mistakenly conclude that he had more control over Fire than was prudent to believe.

But whatever Fire's response to Man's inevitable pushing of the envelope, at least there was a center point of reference for Fire's activity.

If the Fire died out, it could easily be observed at the place in which it fizzled.



If it raged and grew, the wake of devastation could be measured from its epicenter.

Man could monitor and apply Fire's abilities, but it required close proximity.

But no more.

Fire no longer obeys the limits of such physicality.

There is no Ground Zero.

Fire no longer grows or recedes concentrically.

It just pops up.

Here.

And there.

Then over here again.

With no predictability.



In fact, the same Fire can burn out of control in one place, and be near extinction in another.

At the same time.

Jumping around like that, it would seem that Fire spit in the eye of physics and went and changed the bargain.

Or did it, really?

Our ownership of Fire is no less than it ever was.

And careful observation of this new social medium can reveal some amazing undiscovered and useful attributes of Fire's personality.

Fire, it turns out, doesn't just start and grow from one place.

Fire can be transmitted.

And that is perhaps the most valuable observation of the nature of Fire that Man has ever made.



A Tale of Humanity

By now, the abstract notion of Fire as a synonym for the Marketplace has outgrown itself. At this point in the story it becomes necessary to take down the allegorical veil and become more literal in our Story's focus.

Because to think of your marketplace as a mythical or physical force, or a natural element beyond concrete comprehension is to miss the point of what we've really been saying.

Your Market is made up of Human Beings.

It probably sounds like the most self-apparent statement ever made, right?

But let's sit with it a moment...

Your Brand exists because a few Human Beings decided they liked what you were selling, and patronized your Brand.

Human Beings, just like you.



With desires.

Wants.

Needs.

And a clear picture of what they do NOT desire, want or need.

These humans, just like you, are quite resistant to the idea of being owned or manipulated by anyone or anything else.

The old ideas inherent in the Corporate Mentality have been exposed.

Control.

Ownership.

Spin.

These all neglect the fundamental truth of the Human composition of any Market.



It's People.

With their own agendas.

Going about their own lives, when suddenly-

BUMP

...Right into your Brand's Message.

It was inevitable, really. Such a small world, it was bound to happen at some point.

In fact, you were planning for just this moment, hoping to be introduced.

And just like any planned chance encounter, you've got a very short window in which to make a favorable impression, before the moment is lost, and the magic is gone.

So you take a deep breath, and...



Hit them over the head with your contrived Story and drag them back to your cave.

Yeah.

Short term, it's a compelling conversion strategy, but it won't win you any points after the headache wears off.

How many sales forces do you know that play this aggressive game?

Sales teams, incentivized by numbers-driven management, instructed to go out and sign up anything with a pulse, to meet a quota or inflate the market share claims.

Oh, the inhumanity.

It may have worked in a different era, with a crowd possessing the naive sensibilities of junior-high girls, who, thrilled just to have the attention of real-live boys focused in their general direction, misconstrued certain early statements and claims as heartfelt promises, and proceeded to misplace innocence for the sake of closing a hasty transaction.



But that's not today's marketplace.

By the time you've spotted them in the room, they've already learned from countless possible sources just what sort of suitor you'd make, should you target them.

And they are not impressed with smooth talk, vanity, or empty promises.

Your market is not a conquest.

They aren't a quarterly sales volume goal.

Your market is Human Beings.

People.

Persons desiring respect, understanding, and authenticity.

They are not marks.

Or targets.



Or segments.

They have names.

They live lives.

They need things. Maybe even things that you offer.

But these people owe you nothing. And they will not be owned.

Hard sell tactics.

Manipulative and complicated conversion strategies.

Fine print.

All of these have been historically counted in the arsenal of Brands of every size.

And today, they are met with fervent resistance and concerted public push-back.



The Market is asserting its Human-ness.

People- including you, if you're honest- expect to be treated in a manner that assumes that they are intelligent, capable, and independent.

We collectively sense Corp-Speak from miles away, and mock it every chance we get.

“But wait! There’s more!”

“Act now, operators are standing by!”

“Don’t miss out on this exclusive deal.”

“Batteries not included.”

Whatever.

Yesterday’s standard sales pitch is today’s punchline.

Is your Brand a punchline?



How do you know?

Are you listening? Are you in on the joke?

Branding is Storytelling

Every statement a Brand makes about itself, and every thing it does, tells a Story.

But it may not be the Story you *think* you are telling.

All Marketers have a tendency to think of Story as the one-dimensional, unidirectional statements they so lovingly craft and spew upon the world.

And as observed earlier, there was a time when that Story was pretty important.

But Story- at least as we are using the word here- is so much more than Corp-Speak.

In fact, that portion of a Brand's Story is becoming increasingly minor.



Today, your Market can peer beyond the veil, even if you attempt to stop them.

The penetrating stares coming from your customers are not inconsequential any longer. Many of the impressions you are making every day are finding a place in the larger, ongoing Story of your Market.

It's not what you *say* about yourself that matters.

It's what you *do*.

In public or private.

With customers, prospects, employees and competitors.

The scrutiny can be intense.

But it all adds up to become the entire Story of your Brand.

Every time your Brand says or does something not in keeping with the core values of authenticity or transparency, it participates in proving the



third law of physics, which can be described in the context of the Marketplace as follows:

Every corporate action designed to manipulate, spin or control produces an equal and opposite reaction in the Human Beings it seeks to influence in that manner.

It's called Push Back.

It's Brand Repellent.

The unintentional Stories a company tells about itself are, without question, the most important Stories being told.

Human Beings are not the same innocent, naïve creatures we once were.

The official Brand message rarely tells us anything we want to know.

We don't get swept off our feet any more.

We've been burned a few times too many.



So when a Brand tells us what it wants us to believe, the first reaction of the market is, “We’ll see.”

And then the market goes about a trusted process of vetting the Corporate Messaging Handed Down From On High.

Is it real?

Can it be trusted?

What else should I know?

This process evolved as a defense mechanism, long before Brands- at least as we have come to think of them today- entered the marketplace.

As Man roamed around, looking for things to eat, he would often encounter natural objects which *looked* edible, *smelled* edible, but in fact were quite poisonous.

The only way to know for sure was a high-stakes game of trial and error.

Gastronomic Russian Roulette.



OR... He could leverage some Social Intelligence.

Certainly someone knew more about what he had found, and could help him identify it.

So he would gather some up, and head back to his village, where hopefully, someone else knew something more first-hand.

If others had eaten it, enjoyed it and survived to tell about it, then it was okay to eat.

Preservation Logic.

As a species, Man has been doing this same thing for eons.

And within the Culture of Participation, there are endless options for discovering the truth about a Brand.

In fact, it's not uncommon for several perceived truths about your Brand to be discovered *long before* a person comes into contact with the Official Message.



Let's suppose for a moment that this first impression occurs through unofficial channels, perhaps a blog or review site.

And let's also agree that it was an overwhelmingly positive impression.

Later, as the impression nets a few new customers, you will have a number of new chances to blow it.

Any more, you are only as good as your last Story.

It used to be that a customer who had a really bad experience would just sort of leave.

Evaporate.

They wouldn't say much to the Brand. They knew the impersonal Corporate Façade would not listen anyway.

So they just left.



But these days, a single Human Being has a set of tools at her disposal that makes it possible to have a voice.

A voice that can *shout down* the Brand's Message Machine.

And this Human Being is not afraid of using this newfound voice.

But since there is still the expectation that a Brand isn't interested in hearing her voice, this recently soured Human Being doesn't speak to the Brand.

She speaks to the rest of the Market.

A Market who is very interested in listening, and talking back.

And leaving the Brand to continue trying to sell its Official Story.

Only now, that version of the Story is less and less important.

Less relevant. Less Resonant.

Less likely to actually catch any new unsuspecting Human Beings.



Marginalized.

Now, the prevailing Story, the one most likely to influence, the one most perceived as being authentic has become the collective Story your Market is telling about you.

See?

You *really don't* own your Brand.

What to Do?

Well, chances are even the most poorly told Official Story has a shred of truth in it.

Most companies are not evil. In fact most really try to add value to people's lives. But no company has the luxury of operating in a vacuum anymore.

Today's Brand faces a Market so connected and participatory that to ignore this reality is to treat the Market – Human Beings all – with utter contempt.



The Market has spoken.

There is a new way it wants to conduct its business interactions.

A new Bargain governs the relationship.

No more Corp-Speak. No more manipulation, spin and control.

If a Brand is incapable of telling a transparent, authentic Story that involves its Market in a relevant way,

The Market will tell. It will send a message.

But the Brand who tells a Story that resonates with the Market will be rewarded with an invitation.

Participation.

Involvement.

Profit.



To be clear, this doesn't mean that you draw people to your fire, and invite them into your world for your purposes.

You don't own the fire.

It means that the Human Beings who recognize truth in your Story will issue a conditional invitation for you to gather around *their* fire, and listen in as they tell *their* version of the Story for you.

An authentic, resonant Story gains a Brand entrance into the larger, more important ongoing Story of the Market.

And that's a magical place to be.



The Magic of Inclusion

If Branding is Storytelling, then a good Branding Strategy is concerned with telling the *right* story at the right moment to the right people.

These three components- the message, the timing and the audience- are essential to making the Strategy work. If you are off on one element, nothing will happen.

Let's start with Story.

The *right* Story.

What does that look like, really?

Your Brand's Story is not a one-way, force-feed, push-marketing sort of thing. It's not a shout-it-from-the-mountaintops, get-in-people's-faces tactic.

You offer it up.

You suggest it.



You serve up a carefully prepared Story, and then place it on the communal table, step back, and see if anybody grabs the spoon to take a heapin' helpin'.

You run it up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes it.

Because telling a Story is not the end of things.

It's the Beginning.

You can't end your Story with a period.

It has to be a question mark.

That one small matter is the difference between the *right* Story and the wrong one. The right Story involves the audience who hears it, and a question mark is the fastest way to involve an audience.

If your Market isn't involved, it indicates one of two things:

Either your Market has heard you loud and clear, but they do not see a place for them in the plot;



Or they think you must be telling your Story to someone else.

Either way, the message your Market is sending is this...

It's time to change your Story.

A good storyteller asks questions, gets feedback, and adjusts his story on the fly to accommodate his audience. He speaks to the needs and desires of the people gathered around the fire.

He takes the temperature of the responses he is getting, and then adds more of the things that are evoking response.

The *right* Story takes into account all of these nuances in order to do one very important thing:

Connect.

Engage.

Captivate.



The right story makes you feel like you are there, in character, seeing, hearing, touching and even smelling the things being described by the Storyteller.

It's bigger than life, but it mirrors our hopes and dreams, our aspirations, and emotions. It paints things the way that we really want to see them.

The right story involves the audience; they can see themselves in it.

They identify.

But this Story is not going to have the right impact if it is told at the wrong time. Timing is the real art of the Storyteller.

Knowing exactly when to pause, how to let that pause build, and then sensing exactly the right instant to unleash the Story's full potential.

A great Storyteller will gauge the appropriateness of the moment for a particular Story, and will only proceed to tell it if he senses that the audience will be receptive.

Waiting, until the audience is most susceptible to influence.



Timing is the difference between a smash box office hit and a straight-to-video production.

Timing may not even be something that can be taught. It's an intuitive, elusive knack. But it's still not everything.

Because without knowing *who* the right audience is for your story, all the timing in the world is meaningless.

There is always the tendency to try and understand who the right audience is by segmenting and scientifically slicing and dicing a marketplace to bits.

Red headed Sagittarians, ages 27 ½ to 28 ¾ with a disposable income of \$12,362.23 living in 2nd floor rented apartments in the eastern half of New Jersey.

All 28 of them.

This activity has its place, to be sure, but it is not without its pitfalls.



It can cause a Storyteller to think of his audience in the abstract.

To de-Humanize. To understand a market purely as numbers.

Unless the exercise of gathering market intelligence comes full circle, and the Brand is actively engaged in dialogue with real people, the artificiality of segmentation divorces the Brand from its customers, and the Story will show it.

Stories are for People, not Demographics, or High-Value Targets.

The right people, approached at the right time, with the right Story will be engaged and involved.

And that's Profit-Fuel.



Fire Demands Sacrifice

By now, it should be clear that your Market, made up of people with names and Stories of their own, collectively possesses the power to decide the fate of a Brand.

They are your Fire.

So why would you *want* more a more involved market? Why would you intentionally invite the uncontrollable element of participation?

How exactly is that valuable to a Brand? Doesn't familiarity breed contempt?

Many of you are thinking that it would be better if you told a Story that just had the goal of happily separating your market from its money.

No messy relationships.

No group of people asserting its influence over the direction you are headed.



That's the sort of thing that's likely to interfere with quarterly sales goals.

Yes, it is.

Isn't that great?

Involving your Market- in fact, *seeking out* their participation- is a huge sacrifice. It will feel like you are facilitating a volatile town hall meeting, not a smooth-running, well-oiled machine of commerce.

Participation threatens the illusion of control.

But we've been there already, and discovered that control is just another way of getting burned.

Participation, despite the scary unpredictability of it, is the most mutual of postures a Brand can take with its Market.

Participation requires respect.

Sacrifice.



Transparency.

All the things that the Market now expects of every Brand it patronizes.

The Brands that have invited participation have discovered a powerful new dynamic at work.

It turns out that the Market, made up of real people, has really always wanted to express itself.

To share thoughts. Opinions.

Ideas.

Criticism.

And praise.

And if a Brand makes it known that its desire for real participation can be trusted, then it will begin to discover insights into its practices and customer relationships that it would never have found otherwise.



The Brand will begin to hear the Stories that its customers are telling.

Wouldn't you like to know what they really think?

How would that inform your near-term and long-term strategies?

It's market intel on steroids, and your market is more than willing to freely provide it, on demand.

All for the price of a Story.

The *right* Story.

The one that involves them.

Your Story is an invitation to participate, and if the Market believes you are sincere in your desire to join them, in time they'll issue an invitation of their own.

This is the party you've been hoping to be invited to.

It's A-list only.



Don't even think of crashing this party without a proper invitation. Do that, and you'll never gain entry.

The Brands who get invited to this party will enjoy instant celebrity status. But that status has nothing to do with who *you* say you are.

It has everything to do with who *they* say you are.

Letting go of ownership and control can be a beautiful thing.

Step back, and let the Fire burn.



Getting the Invitation

A place around the Fire is a coveted position for any Brand. To be trusted by your market, to have your Story embraced and in return receive valuable participation is the hallmark of success for any new-era Marketer.

It's clear that this kind of marketing is relationship-based. It does not come easy, and it requires the sacrifice of ownership and control.

You have laid a foundation for participation by telling the right Story, and then listening to your audience to see how that Story is being received.

And you have taken the feedback- all of it, good bad and ugly- and used it to help guide you into a more authentic version of the Story; one that resonates even more intensely with your Market.

In fact, the people most likely to be considered your best customers are the ones most likely to take you up on the invitation to participate.



These customers have a sense of your Brand that others in your Market do not have yet.

They are the gatekeepers. They are trusted by the Market to help them understand things. These are the people who will eventually issue your invitation to the party.

These key people in your market also understand your competition, and can help you understand them better, too.

And since it benefits them to communicate with you about what other Brands are up to, you will find that they will do so eagerly. After all, the more transparent the marketplace becomes, the more the consumer wins.

Do not underestimate the strength of these powerful relationships. You could almost think of these engaged patrons of your Brand as co-creators of your products and services.

A vast number of people who, for nothing more than recognition and appreciation, are willing to help you sharpen and hone your Story.

And then help you to tell it. In places you'll never gain free access.



And the more involved you let them become, the more they'll view their role as loyal champions of your brand.

When they hear voices of unfounded criticism in the Marketplace (and they will hear them long before you do), they will rise up, these self-appointed guardians of your Brand, and defend you with a voice of authenticity far greater than any paid voice you could hire.

These are the perks of inviting participation.

This is the logical end to which this road leads.

But not every Story will be told flawlessly.



Correcting the Story

Every Brand will falter at some key point in telling its Story. At any point that a Brand is actively trying to sell a Story that is just plain spin...

The Market will intervene.

The Market is a compelling Storyteller.

And you don't own their version of the Story.

A transparent Brand worries less about the numbers of people that have to know it failed in a specific instance, and concerns itself more with making sure everyone in its Market hears the Story of how the Brand is making specific changes to ensure it measures up more consistently.

It's not about damage control.

It's about the opportunity to communicate transparently about the desire to be better.



To do more good than harm.

People want to know if there is an Improvement Strategy.

That's the *right* Story.

It's the Story you get to tell after you've really listened to your Market, and heard *everything* that they have to say. It's a more legitimate Story, refined by the people who want to trust that you are growing and working to serve them better.

It's an opportunity.

Not a liability.

Unless you are still trying to own your Brand.



Outsourced Sales and R&D

The fastest way to know what you should be doing as a Brand is to ask your Market.

They'll tell you.

They've been waiting for that chance.

You'll get answers to questions such as: What should you be building next? How should it work? Where are you missing the point?

Get ready.

If you are telling the right Story – one that ends with a question mark – you are going to get some keen market insight in return.

Your Market wants to be helpful. They are quite willing to share what your competition is up to. And what you could do to improve by comparison.

They may even bring you the next Big Thing.



The idea that will propel your Brand beyond all previous limits of success.

And they probably won't ask you for much in return, other than the chance to buy it from you when it's ready.

After all, they would *want* to buy it from you, not someone else, because they have invested themselves in your Story.

You have included them.

But what if your Market tells you something you didn't expect? What if they ask you- or *dare* you- to go in new directions?

How would you know if they have thought this through?

It's not your core competency. It's not a model you've ever explored.

Why would they say such things?

Many Brands are comfortable creating a product, and offering it to the Market that wants to buy it.



They may not ever listen to what their market is saying about the other things it wants.

Just so long as they keep saying they want the old tried and true offerings.

The Brand may even spend millions of dollars researching and developing a new derivation of Old Faithful.

They spend millions more creating a launch marketing strategy.

The big day arrives.

And they unveil it to the Market with much pomp and circumstance.

And the Market yawns.

And the Brand is confused.

And more than a little scared.



Suddenly, Old Faithful no longer has the old draw.

It's still a great product, but the Market seems disinterested.

Why?

Because the Brand didn't listen.

They didn't ask.

The Brand did as The Brand thought best, and then wanted approval for what it had done.

It doesn't work that way anymore.

The Market isn't impressed.

They know what they want. And they will patronize the Brand that will *listen* to them, and *then* give them what they want.

Even if it looks *exactly* like what the first Brand came up with all on its own!



Don't let this point slip past you. You have to *matter* to your Market.

How do you engage them to care about you?

Involve them.

At every level.

From the very beginning.

You don't tell people what to buy, you ask them what they need.

You don't assume they want something. You find out if they would be interested.

Brands that do not invite participation may find themselves sidelined in the market that only a year ago they dominated and owned.

Or *thought* that they owned.

The Fire still teaches the same old lessons. Refresher courses are offered almost daily, free of charge.



So do you know what your market wants to do next? Where are they headed? How do you make sure they want to head there with you?

Ask them.

You *have* asked them, right?

You'll find that when you do, you'll be rewarded with answers.

Participation.

Engagement.

Inclusion.

It's what the New Brand is built upon.

It's what the Market wants and expects.

What do you get from this?



Free R&D.

Increased understanding.

Improved and closer relationships with customers, more of whom are willing to buy.

After all, they told you what they wanted.

And you,

In your infinite wisdom and foresight,

Provided it.



An Invitation to Brand with Fire

By now, our hope is that through our Story you have come to see the benefits of Brand Un-Ownership.

By letting go, you can do more, react to opportunities faster, and respond in a more transparent way.

When you aren't being defensive.

Guarding the image.

Managing perception.

Manipulating and Spinning the Story.

Trying to make critics disappear.

Pumping hype when there is no buzz.

It's exhausting and time consuming and resource-intensive.



It's stressful and draining.

It's wasteful and inefficient.

It's far better to just let go.

Turn loose of the reigns.

Invite your Market to take the wheel.

Yes, it's a scary move.

And of course, you'll want to continue to tell your Story with transparency and authenticity.

And, of course *listen*.

Always listen.

Especially as people become accustomed to your new stance.

The new Brand.



The open posture.

Will they trust it? Can they make the shift with you? Will they accept the invitation to participate, as expressed in your new Story?

We think they will.

We think they will jump at the chance.

To connect.

To share insight.

Experiences.

This new relationship will seem foreign and tentative at first.

It always does in the beginning.

Lessons have to be learned.



The relational dynamics of trust, openness and respect must be observed and practiced.

No question, this *will* be worth it.

But if you don't mean it, don't start down this path.

If you do not really want your customers to drive the direction of your Brand, don't invite them.

Because once they begin to participate, they will ultimately craft a New Story for your Brand.

They will be a *part* of that Story now.

Storytellers of the Brand.

With a new, vested interest in your success.

Their success.

You will *matter* to them.



You *are* them now.

And they are you.

You have empowered them to feel that they are a part of something much larger than themselves.

They trust you.

They know that if they need to say something, you'll listen.

They have a voice.

A Market made up of many, distinct Voices.

And they are using it to tell your Story to people who have not heard it yet, or maybe stopped listening to the Old Brand Story.

These are the true Voices of Authenticity.

The Partners of the Brand.



The People who make the choice to align themselves with you.

Not because they don't have options.

They do. They always will.

But they have found a home. A place where they are accepted.

Respected, chosen and included.

Partners and Co-Creators of the evolving Story.

Getting just what they need.

Engaged and participating.

And inviting *you* to participate in the larger Story of the Market.

Saving you a spot around the Fire.

Yes, The Fire.



The Ancient Flame that started it all, ages ago.

Back when the Bargain was struck.

A set of immutable rules, fashioned to help advance and protect a rapidly evolving species.

You have never owned The Fire.

You will never again own your Brand.

But *that*

Is a VERY

Good

Thing.



About the Author

Carter Harkins has been a creative Storyteller all his life. He would write songs as a child, and later did it professionally in Nashville, Tennessee, where he still resides. He has written screenplays, books, and been an engaging public speaker for over 20 years.

He is a pioneer in emerging social web technologies, having co-created a multimedia conversation engine, and later led the company as both its Marketing Director and CEO.

Carter is passionate about helping new digital Brands navigate the sea change which has occurred as a result of the social web culture. His expertise in this area is a reflection of his company's larger comprehension of successful Brand Strategy in the digital age.

Carter now serves as CEO and Chief Storyteller of Harkins Creative, a digital brand agency and division of HarkinsHill LLC. Both companies are based in Nashville, Tennessee, where he lives with his wife Kelly and son Reagan.



About Harkins Creative

Once upon a time, in a land just brimming with creativity, two guys got together to tell stories. They were good at it, using web, audio, video, and countless other creative ideas, and before long companies began asking them to tell their stories.

And a company was born.

A full service marketing and digital brand agency, Harkins Creative is anything but a traditional ad agency. Founded on the philosophy of transparency and authenticity, they serve their global clients by finding and telling their compelling Brand Story- the *right* story to the right audience, at exactly the right moment- helping to build stronger, relationship-driven markets.

Harkins Creative is a division of HarkinsHill, LLC, a Nashville, Tennessee based company founded by partners Taylor Hill and Carter Harkins (the two guys mentioned above).