

# Stories: The Way We Inspire Ourselves and Each Other

by Eun-Kyong Baek

*Managers need to take advantage of narrative thinking—the engaging art of storytelling—as an important source of creative ideas. Elaborating on this thesis, Baek Eun-Kyong demonstrates how sharing stories can be the catalyst for innovation, revealing new design pathways and triggering specific strategies related to such areas as branding, product development, and advertising.*



Eun-Kyong Baek, Lecturer, Design Management and Innovation, De Montfort University, UK

Whatever we are doing or thinking about, there is always a silent running commentary going on in our minds. Most of us interpret everything that is said to us as an enrichment, an encouragement, a waste of time, or a threat. We judge everything and ourselves nearly all the time, and sometimes what's in these silent "subtitles" is more useful than what comes out of our mouths. It's more intimate and revealing. Sharing our inner narrative and our personal stories improves the quality of our relationships. In the world of designers, their colleagues, and their clients, the more authentically and intimately we

communicate, the more effective the results. This deeper communication takes the form of stories.

These stories (consider, for instance, the success story of Apple computers) become legends, and they endure far longer than any report of numbers or statistics. Personal reputations, and even the construction we create of our own self-worth, can take the form of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

What drives designers? How do they manage themselves? How are they motivated? How does an organization get the best from them? I believe it's through stories, just as it has been for

thousands of years. In this article, I hope to show how effectively stories can motivate and inspire designers. I describe some of the roles of stories and demonstrate how they worked in three design projects for Mothercare, a successful UK-based company selling parenting and baby products. These "case studies" typify the kinds of stories and personal anecdotes that can be created, shared, and used by design teams to benefit the quality of work.

### **Stories—the way we understand ourselves and the world around us**

Cognitive scientist Jerome Bruner posits that human beings have two modes of thinking. One is paradigmatic—a mode that is logical, scientific, rational, formal, rigorous, and concerned with abstracting generalities, or universals. The other is narrative—a mode that is imaginative, addresses human concerns, organizes events uniquely in space and time, acknowledges the multiply determined nature of human action, and emphasizes meaning.

There is clear value in paradigmatic thinking in many ways, but when it comes to managing, inspiring, and enabling people, it has its limitations. Compared to facts, stories often convey meaning better. They make more sense out of chaotic experience, and they establish a connection between teller and listeners. Stories make us more open-minded and less resistant to experimentation and change. It's through stories that we make sense of the world around us.

#### ***Stories for business managers***

In a business context, stories can "explain, inspire, educate, train, convince, schmooze, mentor, and obviously, entertain," writes Bill Birchard. He explains that such stories "are perhaps most widely thought of as a means of sustaining company cultures." Writes Birchard, "Hero stories abound in corporations, for example, stressing integrity in the face of an ethical dilemma; extraordinary service that delights and surprises the customer; and empathy and kindness extended to employees by their leaders."<sup>1</sup>

#### ***Stories for design managers***

Designers often motivate themselves with stories by giving personal meaning to a design project. I often find that designers invent their own narratives or refer to existing narratives related to

their work or to their clients during design projects. Sometimes, a story inspires both designers and clients. At other times, it can be a management tool for communication, overcoming obstacles to understanding.

Design briefs, because they start things off and set the tone, are really important. A brief in the form of a narrative can act as an essential inspiration for both designers and clients. Most briefs are a list of the client's wants and a description of some intended results. Unfortunately, clients seldom ask for what they really want—a solution they never could have imagined for themselves. (That's the whole point of investing in creativity!) If design briefs were stories of imagined successes told through the eyes of future customers and through the eyes of the company, as well, they would be far more inspiring and effective than a mundane list of needs. Storytelling not only acts as a catalyst for innovation and creativity; it's also a far more effective means of inspiring a design team than a coldly rational list of needs.

#### **The Mothercare story**

Founded in the 1960s, Mothercare has grown internationally and expanded its product range from babywear and baby care products to children's toys, clothes, and maternity wear. Four years ago, Mothercare was struggling with weak performance and losing customer loyalty. To regain customers' confidence and to create an up-to-date organizational culture, a new management team decided to invest in a range of areas consistent with their three-year turnaround program. This resulted in three major design projects:

1. Redefining Mothercare's brand profile, recreating its brand position, and creating a new advertising campaign
2. Changing its brand identity with a new logotype, typography, and color palettes; producing design guidelines to set standards throughout the brand's expression
3. Designing a new store format and creating design guidelines for rolling the new design out across all 250 stores

1. Birchard, B. "Once upon a time." *Strategy+business*, Summer 2002, p. 99.

From here on in, all the stories to which I refer occurred during a variety of design meetings. Some of them were attended by employees of a single design company; others included two or more. Sometimes, the client was present, but not always. However, in each case, the point is to illustrate how important stories create inspiration.

***Designers engage through stories that build a shared understanding.***

At one particular meeting, several designers were struggling to agree on a proposal for Mothercare's brand position; they spent a lot of time trying to find the right words to explain or to sum up what the brand was all about. One of them used the story of Mary Poppins—P.L. Travers's famous nanny, who uses magic, as well as dry humor, to get things done—as a metaphor to explain the concept. Other members agreed with the idea and added their own interpretations. This stirred up a group discussion and was eventually used as a basis for a preliminary design concept.

At another early meeting, a male designer told stories about how completely different his post-baby life was. There was always something to be done, some disaster to avoid, or some breakthrough to enjoy. Nothing was what it had been, and you could never switch it off. All the other parents agreed, saying that life involved



Figure 1. Because the Mothercare name and logotype are well known in the UK, the company wanted to retain them. The designers re-drew the name to make it bolder and stronger, and freed it from the oval that previously contained it.

more work now—you didn't get enough sleep, you had to be more responsive. There wasn't much leisure, and your partner always seemed to think you weren't doing enough to help. One designer mentioned an acquaintance he had always considered shallow and brusque. Now that this acquaintance was a father, he seemed wiser, more generous, more sympathetic.

This conversation created the inspiration for the work that came next. It was all about the reality of raising children, the ups and downs of parenting. After more long exchanges of parenting stories, the team came up with Mothercare's brand proposition and the radio advertisements that won accolades and a coveted prize (see script below).

Mothercare Radio Script	
Radio script	"Fashion"
Voice 1	<p>I reserve the right to strip naked in your garden.</p> <p>I reserve the right to put my clothes on backwards in the morning.</p> <p>And wear my palest dress when I'm painting.</p> <p>I reserve the right to remove as many of my clothes as possible when you've just dressed me.</p> <p>And however long you've taken to get me ready, and however nice I look, I reserve the right to swap my clothes for some wellies, a tutu, and a policeman's helmet.</p> <p>Because I am your toddler.</p> <p>And these are my rights.</p>
Voice 2	<p>If it's time your toddler had a stylish new outfit, check out our latest fashion ranges at Mothercare.</p> <p>Mothercare. For that wonderful, awful, hilarious, serious, exhausting, rewarding process called parenting.</p>
Toddler laughter.	



Figure 2. Dolly symbol: old version (left) and new version. When a retail identity is as well known and liked as Mothercare's, change has to be subtle. In this case, designers brought a familiar identity up to date by clarifying and softening it. The Mothercare "dolly" is one of the best-known retail symbols in the UK. Over the years, it had been changed and weakened. The design team restored it to its former strength by redrawing it and removing the circle that constrained it.



Figure 3. Mothercare's new packaging has clearer, less formal descriptions and friendly illustrations.

***Sharing organizational stories puts designers and their clients on the same side.***

At another meeting, one of the designers spoke of a store assistant he'd met in one of Mothercare's stores. She had worked there for more than 12 years. All those years spent with customers and their babies meant that she'd met and talked to many thousands of mothers. Her experience, her stories, and her advice on Mothercare's products were invaluable to Mothercare's designers, as well as to the customers. He told another story about the exceptionally warm welcome he had had from the receptionist at Mothercare's corporate office, who had told him a great deal about the quality of the company. These stories inspired the design team, encouraging members to feel they had interests in common with their client, and they made it far more likely that their work would be a success.

***Sharing stories can inspire designers to create ideas.***

The designers were discussing photography styles when one of them pointed out that most photographs of pregnant women were rather sterile and most definitely avoided any hint of sexuality. Why should these mothers feel they were giving up their sexiness because they were pregnant. One team member mentioned a photograph he'd seen of a very pregnant woman using an elastic band and two safety pins to expand her jeans. Somehow, this made her look like she was merely adapting her personal style to accommodate pregnancy rather than abandoning it to the conventional one of voluminous and dreary maternity clothes. In fact, this realization led to the design of a sub-brand of fashionable and sexy maternity clothes called Moda.

***Stories dissolve conflict and ease the atmosphere.***

At the end of a difficult meeting with the client, in the Mothercare boardroom, one of the designers noticed that the CEO's chair was unusually large—larger than the rest. In fact, it was so large that it made the chairman look slim, commented the designer. The CEO chuckled and explained that the previous chairman, a particularly large man, had designed the boardroom furniture, and hence that chair, himself.

Despite that, at the end of the first board meeting he ran using the new furniture, the chairman got up from the table only to find that the chair went with him—it still wasn't big enough. Everyone laughed at the story, and the tension of the meeting dissipated. This helped to build an informal relationship between the new CEO and the design group—and, depending on how you looked at it, made the subtle point that he expected things to be designed correctly.

When team members meet, they exchange ideas and express their opinions on the work in progress. Disagreement and conflicts among designers or among designers and clients are unavoidable and usually lead to improvements. We call it creative tension. I have particularly noticed that at both the beginning and the end of a design meeting, team members often find themselves telling witty, funny, or even silly stories, often not even related to the design issues under discussion. This exchange helps to create a friendly atmosphere among designers and their clients and helps smooth out potential conflicts.

### Conclusions \_

Narrative is the primary form through which our experience is made meaningful and with which we share knowledge and insights with others. Thinking narratively has clear advantages in the everyday world. After all, we use narratives in our dreaming, thinking, understanding, conversing, writing, entertaining, and illustrating. We use narratives to create our own identities, structure our experiences, and impose order on disruption and chaos. In the design world, these activities are also important, and they play an essential part in developing creative ideas.

Storytelling and the use of different kinds of narrative are part of the way communication takes place in the world of design. Somehow, though, stories are characterized as softer and less serious than the down-to-earth details of criteria and performance. There are no stories in the minutes of meetings or in design briefs. But finite and purely rational performance specifications are often less relevant than the emotional aspects of things. People buy and use what they want rather than what measures up against an arbitrary list of rational criteria. Desire drives more decisions than pure practi-

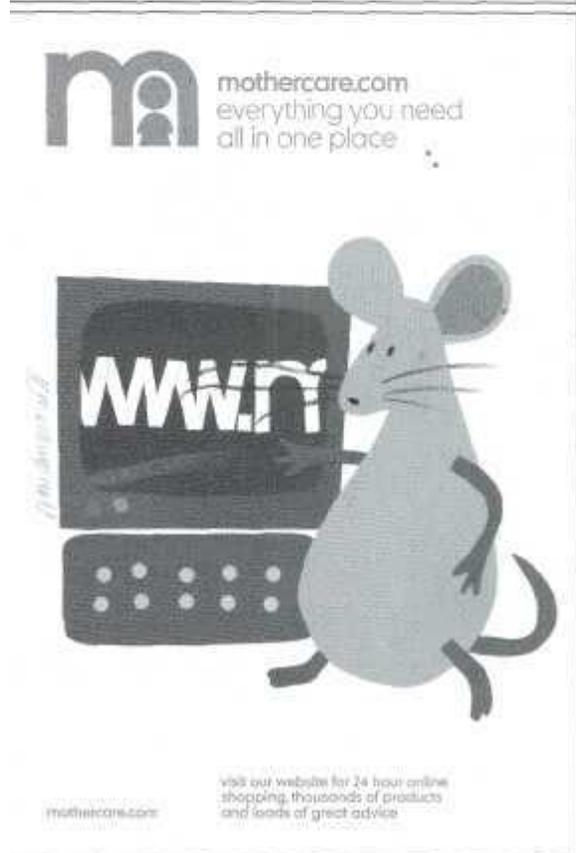


Figure 4. New poster designs.

ality. And desire can only be discussed in stories about feelings. To manage design and enable inspiration and creativity to happen, we need to be far more conscious about storytelling and how to use it more effectively. In the case of Mothercare, the use of stories has helped to bring coherence to advertising, brand identity, store design, packaging, and to the catalogue. Indeed, it has helped to ensure that the company itself tells a story.

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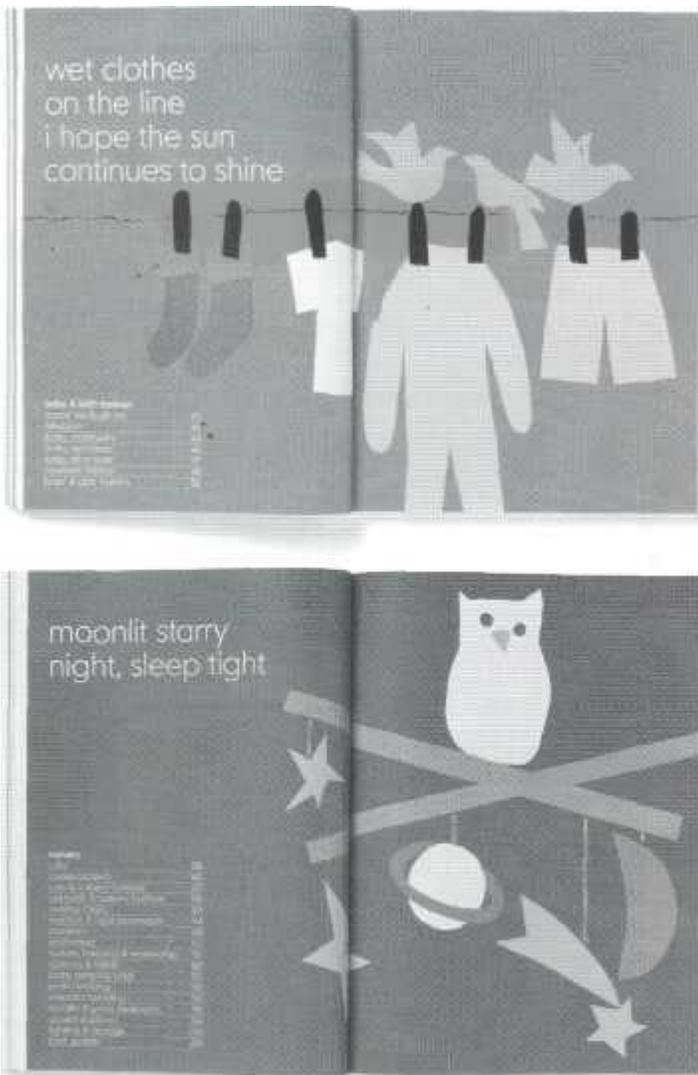


Figure 5. New catalogue design.