

THE BOOK OF  
**VISUAL**  
**STORYTELLING**

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# Foreword

Dear reader:

This is the inaugural edition of *The Book of Visual Storytelling*. Its creation is a response to a clear trend across media platforms that reflects the behavior of consumers: Visual content is being valued more than ever before.

This trend has manifested in several ways. One surprising turn of events was that **Instagram** topped **Facebook** in U.S. brands' social actions (the sum of likes, comments, shares and retweets) in 2015, according to **Shareable** data provided exclusively to PR News. This would have been inconceivable a few years ago, but Instagram's immediately visual and super mobile-friendly layout helped it surpass its parent social media behemoth (Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012). Accordingly, we have devoted several articles to getting the most out of your Instagram experience.

Facebook and **Twitter** are adapting to the demand for more visual content by introducing innovations of their own. In 2015 Twitter started allowing larger images and introduced slick native video tools that allow users to shoot and edit short clips in the app, while Facebook unveiled motion-enabled profile pictures, live streaming capability for verified pages and an update to its native video that allows users to embed videos into web pages, seemingly stealing some of **YouTube**'s thunder.

Compared to the social media giants, **Pinterest** seems to be on the wane, while **Snapchat** (although popular among younger demographics) is still being figured out by many brands, who may be stymied by the lack of measurement tools and impermanence of content intrinsic to the trendy platform. Still, these and other platforms deserve a look: invest where others are hesitant to invest and your share of voice will be larger.

While the pressure to make your brand more visual is mounting each day, the good news is that creating and sharing visual content is, from a technical standpoint, cheaper and easier than ever. You carry a production studio in your pocket; you just need to know how to use it.

In these pages, experts from brands, agencies, nonprofits and academia teach you how to do just that. I want to thank these contributors for the wealth of advice and ideas they have provided to you, the reader, and your ongoing quest to make your company outstanding through visual storytelling.

Sincerely,

Ian Wright  
Managing Editor, Guidebooks, PR News



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# Our Brains Are Wired to Think in Stories

## The Science of Visual Storytelling

By Jessica Klepac

**S**torytelling and content marketing let communications professionals talk about brands on their own terms. We use stories to create memorable experiences and to build relationships with people. But storytelling is more than a trend or a buzzword: It's a proven, centuries-old strategy and a powerful communications tool that is well documented and studied. In fact, science has shown that human beings have a neurological and physiological reaction to stories. They have power to forge meaningful connections to drive behavior change.<sup>[i]</sup>

### Stories and the Brain

Studies using functional MRI technology show that when we read a list of facts, the language processing part of our brains is activated. But when those facts are woven into a story, other parts of our brains light up, as if we were living the experience ourselves.<sup>[ii]</sup> When we hear a story, a process called neural coupling occurs that puts us on the same mental wavelength as the storyteller and connects us on an emotional level.<sup>[iii]</sup>

### Connect Faster

We've all heard the expression that a picture is worth a thousand words. We'd much rather see a story play out in vivid colors and beautiful shapes than just read text on a page. What's more, we process information much faster when it's visual: It takes 150 milliseconds for the mind to process a symbol,

and just another 100 milliseconds to attach meaning to it. Further, when we both hear and see a story, our brain actually creates an embedded memory.<sup>[iv]</sup> Talk about meaningful engagement!

### A Good Story Helps Brands Build Connections

Brands are embracing visual storytelling to reach audiences and influence behavior. When you know whom you're talking to and how your story resonates with the audience, you can build an experience that gets to the heart of your message.

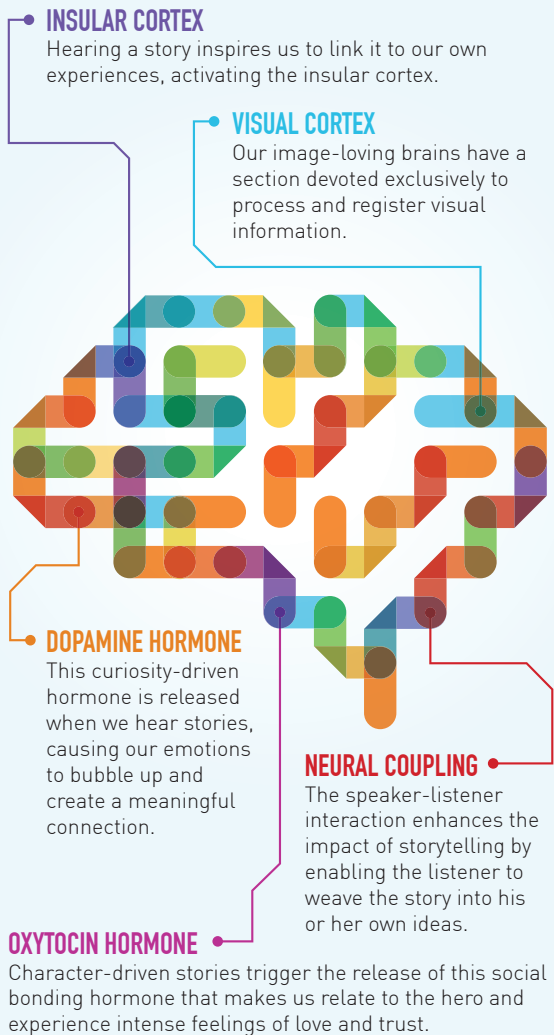
**Coca-Cola** has long recognized the emotional connection that stories create, and its



*Images engage the brain—FAST! Take a look at these road signs. We've all been on that mountain or country road and seen the image of a jumping deer. Our brains immediately go on high alert that wildlife might unknowingly leap in front of our car. It's an immediate reaction. I bet it took you a whole second longer to read the text on the other sign, by which time you might have already had an encounter with Bambi.*

## WHY OUR BRAINS LOVE STORYTELLING

We are drawn to stories, as they are among the most fundamental ways to communicate. Science shows us why stories are literally fuel for the brain.



1. <http://lifehacker.com/5965703/the-science-of-storytelling-why-telling-a-story-is-the-most-powerful-way-to-activate-our-brains>  
2. <https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling>  
3. <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/why-abraham-lincoln-loved-infographics>  
4. <http://www.pnas.org/content/107/32/14425.long>

SPECTRUM

ads and videos depict people from around the world enjoying life's special moments, all while sharing a Coke. These images ignite feelings of love, nostalgia and a sense of happiness, biologically driven by a surge of the

hormone dopamine. This chemical reaction in the brain creates an emotive memory. So every time we scan over the fountain drink options or think of Coca-Cola products in general, those lovey-dovey feelings resurface, influencing our purchasing decisions.<sup>[v]</sup>

Plenty of professional athletes sport **Nike** athletic shoes and clothing, but Nike uses the stories of ordinary women trying to run their first marathon to connect with women who might not see themselves as regular workout material. Nike's "Better For It" campaign features video of women in the gym, at yoga class and in a race, overcoming struggles, if only in their thoughts. The stories of perseverance, sprinkled with self-deprecating humor, ring true for many women. This kind of character-driven story triggers the production of the neurochemical oxytocin, enhancing our ability to empathize and connect with the character.<sup>[vi]</sup> Oxytocin makes us more sensitive to others, which can motivate us to act; to get up and go for a run ourselves.<sup>[vii]</sup> We think of decision-making as a pragmatic brain function, but emotions actually exert a powerful influence. Emotional arousal organizes and coordinates the brain activity that shapes our decisions.<sup>[viii]</sup>

### Putting Storytelling Science to Work in Design

As a designer for a strategic communications firm, my audience always is top of mind. People recall 80% of what they see and do, but only 10% of what they read. To make it more complicated, these viewers, on average, will read only about 28% of what they see.<sup>[ix]</sup> So not only must our communications be more visual, they must be engaging and interactive as well.

At the same time, we don't want to over-stimulate the viewer. People are bombarded with five times more messages than they were 20 years ago. On a typical day, we consume 34



gigabytes, or 100,500 words, outside of work.<sup>[x]</sup> That's a lot of information to sift through and process. So designing something that simply looks good is not enough. Our design must provide just enough of a spark to pull a viewer in, so he or she wants to experience the message. A simple design that tells the story helps the viewer interact with the information and process it quickly.

### Ingredients for a Powerful Visual Story

A great design starts with a solid storyline and a meeting of the minds between the designer and content experts. When all of the pieces come together, the design blooms and the visual story is born. As you build your design, ask yourself these questions:

1. Does it have an attention-grabbing headline?
2. Are you using appealing images and pops of color?
3. What emotional reaction are you seeking?
4. How it does encourage the audience to act?

When the health of a community is at stake, a visual story can educate the audience and prompt it to care about the situation, without alarming it.

Methamphetamine is a highly addictive, illicit drug. An estimated 1.1 million Americans annually abuse it. The meth problem plagues communities around the country, and is fueled in part by “meth cooks” who extract

the drug from nasal decongestant products containing pseudoephedrine. **Acura Pharmaceuticals** makes Nexafed®, an abuse-deterrent pseudoephedrine designed to impede the conversion of the drug to methamphetamine.

Through its *Join the Fight Against Meth* campaign, Acura is working to educate people about the dangers of meth production. The company is driving community pharmacists to protect the neighborhoods they serve and urging consumers to join that fight. It's been a particular concern in rural areas across the country. Bringing the facts to life through visual storytelling has helped deliver the message.

Acura has created a series of infograms that feature compelling facts about meth use, with a new infogram posted to the **Facebook** page every #MethMonday. Using simple illustrations and pops of color, each infogram gets

**Join the Fight Against Meth**  
September 28

METH BRAIN: Over time, meth destroys dopamine receptors, making it impossible to feel pleasure, a condition known as anhedonia.  
#MethMonday

#MethMonday

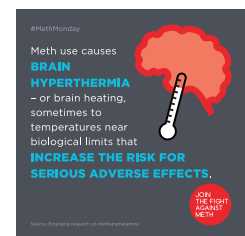
**METH BRAIN:**  
Over time, meth destroys dopamine receptors, making it **IMPOSSIBLE TO FEEL PLEASURE**, a condition known as **ANHEDONIA**.

Source: PBS Frontline

Like Comment Share

80 people like this. Top Comments ▾

1,088 shares



to the heart of the message and adds another chapter to the story. The campaign has jump-started the conversation about meth abuse, and engagement continues to grow. Brad Rivet, Acura's vice president of marketing, says, "There are more people talking about the meth issue online than ever. Incorporating images into our social media posts has created more attention-grabbing content, more shares and a more emotional reaction from our audiences."

Facebook's statistics confirm the value of social media posts that feature visuals. It says photo posts represent 93% of its most engaging or shareable content. Photo posts get 53% more "likes," 104% more comments and 84% more click-throughs than text-based posts.<sup>[xi]</sup>

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**We think of decision-making as a pragmatic brain function, but emotions actually exert a powerful influence.**

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### Emotional Stories Compel Action

A powerful story with striking images not only attracts likes and shares; it has the ability to change human hearts. The tens of millions of people following the **Humans of New York** blog on Facebook and **Instagram** clamor for Brandon Stanton's stories and photos of everyday New Yorkers and people around the world. He started the blog five years ago, and has published a bestselling book featuring his portraits and interviews.

Stanton's storytelling style sparks people's interest in his subjects and makes

them care enough to open their pocket-books. His crowd-funded charitable campaigns have raised money to help people in his stories recover from Hurricane Sandy, adopt an Ethiopian orphan and set up summer programs and scholarships for New York children.

Human beings by their very nature are hard-wired to think in stories. Visual storytelling is incredibly powerful in not only engaging people but also in influencing behavior. **PRN**

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### Citations

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[iv]<http://neomam.com/interactive/13reasons/>

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[viii]Stets, J; Turner J.H. (Eds.) *Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions*. 2006, XIV

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# On Instagram, Transform from Casual User to Visual Storyteller

By Lisa Arledge Powell

In today's 24/7, always-on world, the storytelling approach to corporate communications is quickly replacing the traditional public relations and marketing approach. In the PR industry, a story used to mean writing a press release and sending it out to the news media. Today, a brand's stories are called content, which is no longer restricted to a certain word count or format. **Instagram**, which enables brands to tell its story using visuals, can be a communicator's dream. With more than 80 million photos uploaded to Instagram daily, how can you make your story stand out on an all-visual platform?

## The Best Instagram Storytellers

Some brands are Instagram superstars. These are companies who share a photo that is so compelling it prompts users to continue clicking until they find themselves weeks deep into the brand's posted photos. Why does this happen? The company understands its target audience. And once it understands the message the audience wants, it finds a way to communicate it using dramatic visuals. Here are some brands that are using this strategy to lead the way as the best Instagram storytellers.

### 1. Nike

Just do it...on Instagram like **Nike!** The



*Some Instagram posts, like this one, don't need an extensive caption. Viewers already understand the story.*



brand is known for iconic commercials, epic slogans and a long list of celebrity endorsements. Another thing it's doing right is storytelling on Instagram. Nike includes compelling images that inspire its target audience, with a focus on stories about endurance, relevant world events and, of course, the athletic lifestyle.

Nike uses compelling imagery shot in high-quality formats as the anchor for a good visual story. Caption length and detail are determined depending on the specific image. The company stays relevant and newsworthy as many photos are related to upcoming events, seasonal changes or other news happening in the world.

## 2. Airbnb

The innovative travel brand **Airbnb** has hotel brands terrified and travelers astonished with its new vacation concepts. On its Instagram account, the company draws explorers

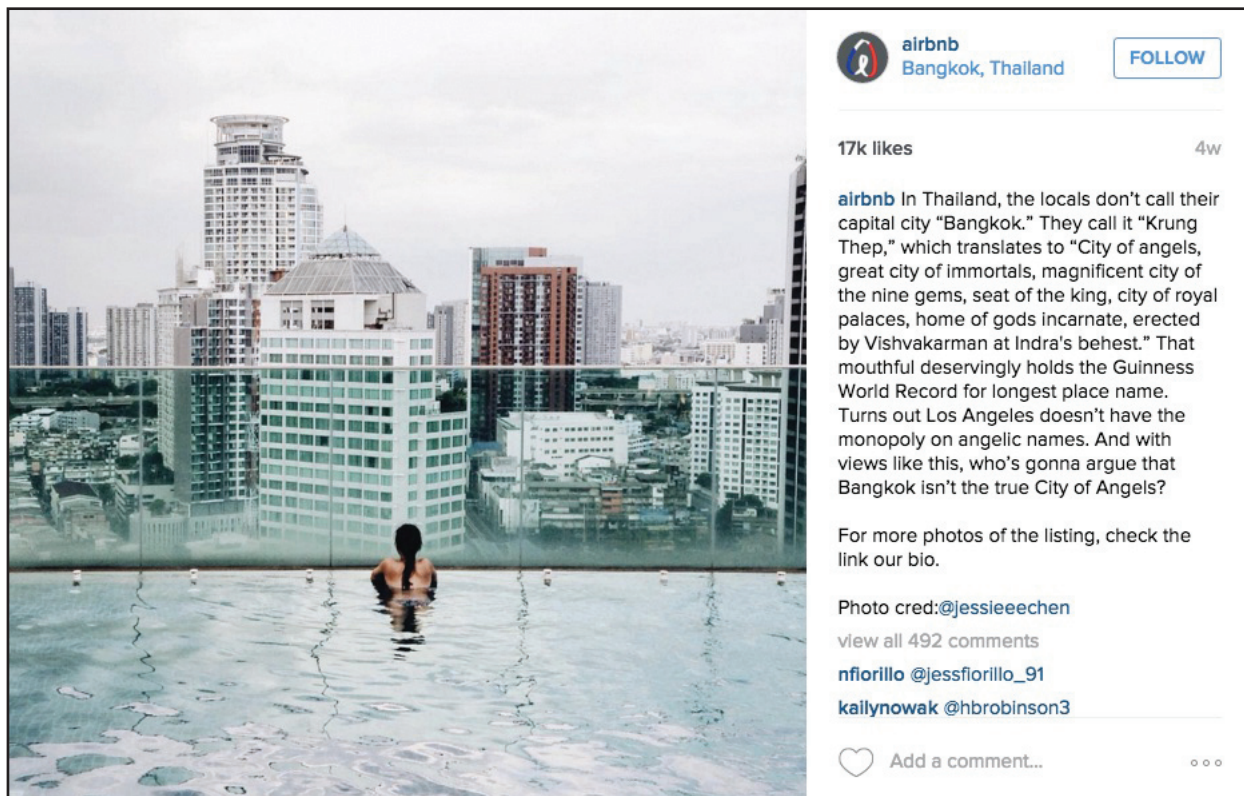
to the brand with stories that any world traveler would love to feast his or her eyes upon.

The stories of Airbnb destinations across the world are told through iconic, bright imagery. The account includes a variety of destinations, which provide wide appeal to stories targeted to all types of travelers.

## 3. General Electric

Despite its lack of a sexy product to photograph, **General Electric** uses Instagram to share classic images for its audience, and this works to the brand's advantage.

G.E. uses memorable photos of landscapes, machinery and the people of G.E. to connect with niche audiences such as #avgeeks, #railfans and more. The company successfully leverages Instagram as a community and understands the images and terms that its fans identify with. It allows followers to be a part of these visual stories that take place within the brand.



*On Airbnb's account, long captions are used to structure the follower's viewing experience, and include a call to action in most posts.*



G.E. combines attractive imagery with niche hashtags to build an audience.



Elite Daily's millennial-focused Instagram motto is "You think it, we say it."



#### 4. Elite Daily

With Instagram focused on visuals, the challenge is to “say it” in pictures. **Elite Daily**, the millennial-aimed publisher, takes a different visual strategy from most companies. It posts graphics and quotes mainly instead of photos to its account. The messaging is laser-focused on 20- and early 30-somethings through references to first-job problems, dating horror stories and happy hour hangovers, with the attitude of “we all do this.”

Brands can take a cue from Elite Daily by understanding and acknowledging the daily challenges audiences face and communicating that via Instagram through graphics or photographs.

#### Strategic Visual Storytelling

The key to any brand’s storytelling is a full understanding of telling stories in a strategic way. When it comes to Instagram, the most valuable communicators are experts at story-finding—the step that comes before visual storytelling begins. Work like a beat reporter; discover stories that align with key products and services and have a visual component.

Once you define the story, start with a storytelling strategy before grabbing the iPhone, iPad or high-definition camera to snap a shot. Look at each visual option as its own story, and understand what you want your audience to know, feel and do. To be successful, create a goal for all content. Never post a photo without a plan.

Once your golden story ideas are developed, create an editorial calendar for your Instagram strategy.

#### Create Compelling Content

Instagram content includes any piece of compelling, visual content. The most important thing an Instagram photo should do is tell a story. A modern communicator should

#### Visual Editorial Calendar

Treat your Instagram feed like other social media channels by developing a visual editorial calendar aimed at your target audience.

##### Questions to Shape Your Visual Editorial Calendar

- Who is my audience?
- What are the best topics?
- How often should I create content?
- When can I hit delete?

think less about shooting a photo and more about telling a story in the most visual way possible. Identify the iconic image that will tell your story, and make capturing that image your goal.

With the average attention span dropping and now at 8.25 seconds<sup>[i]</sup>, how can you make your story just as compelling for consumers with little time for brand content?

If you approach a photo shoot like a storyteller, your Instagram feed can achieve visual victory. Try these techniques:

1. **Love the Shot List.** Treat an Instagram photo like any other piece of planned content. Make a pre-production shot list that includes how and where to capture the image. Note any props needed and prepare for the shoot like a professional photographer. This will ensure that no iconic images are missed!
2. **Be a Location Scout.** Smartphones have great cameras, but their lenses are limited. Don’t let the limitations of your camera influence the final photo. Shooting a photo from the back of a room yields lackluster results. Whether at the actual event or planning before, move around to find your best shooting location, which is typically closer to the action you’re trying to capture. Once you’re in place, explore different angles to find the most compelling shot.



## Brand Journalizer Criteria

### 1. FOCUS ON THE AUDIENCE

Always consider what the audience cares about and how they will benefit.

It's not about the organization's brand, it's about the organization's audience.

### 2. FIND A VOICE

Find a real person and tell the story through their eyes.

### 3. BE CREDIBLE

Seek tie-ins into a national trend or bigger picture.

Integrating third party stats/facts bolsters credibility.

### 4. KEEP IT SIMPLE

No 'technical talk'—find an expert who can speak the consumer's language.

### 5. THINK VISUAL

The most memorable stories deliver engaging visual content.

### 6. UN-BRAND THE CONTENT

Brand Journalism is not brand-centric, but a Brand Journalist's job includes figuring out how to seamlessly weave in a brand presence.

To learn more about proper story vetting and how the Brand Journalizer works, visit [MediaSourceTV.com](http://MediaSourceTV.com)

3. **Be Dynamic.** A shot that is ordinary often means the difference between the target audience scrolling past your photo or engaging with it. Remember to go out of the brand's comfort zone. Experiment with interesting angles or extreme close-ups to make your photo stand out. Instagram's features make it easy for brands to take a great image to another level. Using filters and other editing tools before posting to Instagram can make a traditional photo more interesting.
4. **The More the Merrier.** It's better to take too many images on a shoot than not enough. Even if you think you've captured your ideal image, snap a few more photos. It's frustrating to edit photos and realize you don't have the shots you need. Deleting extra images is much easier than returning to shoot additional photos.

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*Lisa Arledge Powell is president of MediaSource, national chair of the PRSA Health Academy Conference and vice president of communications for the PRSA Central Ohio Executive Board.*

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[i] Harald Weinreich, Hartmut Obendorf, Eelco Herder, and Matthias Mayer: "Not Quite the Average: An Empirical Study of Web Use," in the *ACM Transactions on the Web*, vol. 2, no. 1 (February 2008), article #5.

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