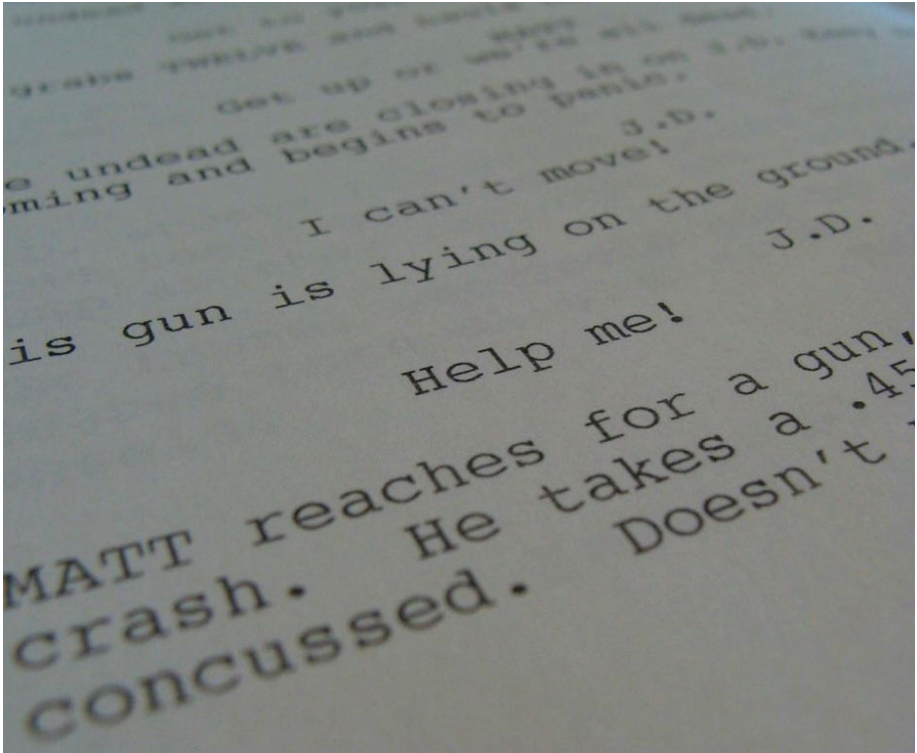


# HOW BRANDS PLAY ROLES IN OUR LIFE STORIES



By Jim White PhD, Founding Partner of RealityCheck Inc.



**RealityCheck**  
A Global Insights Boutique

I was born in Kentucky, grew up there, and live there now. Bourbon is a big part of the state's culture and I am proud of that. My mother, who turns 90 this year, still drinks her bourbon highball every night before bed.

There are an increasing number of specialty bourbons out there these days, many made in Kentucky, but Maker's Mark®, one of the original premium bourbons, has special meaning for me.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I worked on Maker's Mark when I was in the ad agency business. But the brand began to play a role in my life story before that. When I was between my junior and senior years of college, I was a journalism intern at the Knoxville News Sentinel in Tennessee. Surrounded by a bunch of Jack Daniel's® drinking Tennessee newspaper people, I wanted to make two things clear: that I was a Kentuckian, and that I was no longer a college kid.



Maker's Mark helped me to show that both were true. It signaled to those around me that I preferred whiskey from my home state. It gave me a platform to talk about the superiority of Kentucky whiskey. And the fact that it is considered a premium bourbon signaled that I was no longer a beer-drinking college boy. Instead, I had some maturity, sophistication and knowledge.

Now the idea that brands have symbolic benefits is nothing new. That's the whole concept of "badge brands." We use brands to communicate something about ourselves to others in the world.

But what I now realize is that the more important role of Maker's Mark in my life both then, and now, is to serve a much deeper psychological need. That summer in Knoxville, I was using the brand to tell myself a story.

Actually, I was using it to help me find myself. As I was transitioning from college kid to working professional, I was in the process of writing and rewriting my life story. And Maker's Mark was a character in that story.

# Narrative Identity

What I was doing that summer in Knoxville and continue to do today, is create what psychologists call **Narrative Identity**.

What I'd like to suggest in this presentation is that brands play important roles in this process. To understand the true power of brands, those of us in the insights business have got to understand the personal stories in which brands are embedded.

## Narrative Identity

"We are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories. This is not the stuff of delusion or self-deception. We are not telling ourselves lies. Rather, through our personal myths, each of us discovers what is true and what is meaningful in life. In order to live well, with unity and purpose, we compose a heroic narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves."

- Dan P. McAdams

When we conduct marketing research, we spend most of the time asking people in one way or another to tell us about our brands. We track their buying habits, we explore the emotional benefits our brands create for them, and we explore brand perceptions, meanings and motivations.

Rarely, if ever, do we step back and try to understand the larger life stories our consumers are trying to write for themselves.

But I can promise you, when we do take a step back to understand the Narrative Identity our consumers try to write on a daily basis, a whole new world of opportunity opens up—an opportunity for our brands to play a role in those stories.

# We are Myth Makers

Psychologists tell us that we are all creators of our own myths—myths that try to give meaning to who we are in the world.

These myths focus on three different images of the self:

- Past Self – the person we imagine we used to be
- Present Self – the person we imagine we are today
- Future Self – the person we want to become in the future

We may create myths about being *The Devoted Spouse*, *The Athlete*, *The Entrepreneur*, *The Artist*, or *The Expert*. We may imagine a past in which we were *The Popular Kid* or *The Serious Student*. And we may



hope for a future in which we become *The Perfect Parent*, *The Steadfast Survivor* or *The Triumphant Professional*. There are countless personal myths that all of us have in our heads every day.

But our mythmaking isn't always cut-and-dried. Nor is it easy. We struggle to create coherent stories from the raw materials of our experiences, our memories and an endless stream of cultural resources.

There may be parts of our current self—beliefs and behaviors—that don't fit the story line we're trying to create. We may have an image of our future self that has been elusive for years. And there may be parts of our past selves that don't necessarily fit the narrative we want to create.



As we create our Narrative Identities, we try to resolve these inconsistencies and contradictions. This process continues every day of our lives. We aren't creating falsehoods. Rather, we are constantly choosing to emphasize some bits of our experience and deemphasize others in order to create narratives that make sense to us and give our lives meaning.

# So what does this have to do with brands?

Brands help us create Narrative Identity. We use them to smooth over the inconsistencies and contradictions in our stories. We write them into our personal narratives to help us become the characters we want to become in the stories of our lives.

The most meaningful brands are those that play some role in their consumers' Narrative Identity.

*"We use brands to tell ourselves stories about who we are."*  
- Will Noxy

This is what Maker's Mark did for me back then. Think about the brands that matter most to you.

What role do they play in your story?

How do you use them to help you create a coherent Narrative Identity?



# The Roles Brands Play

I think it's useful to think of brands playing at least three different kinds of roles in one's Narrative Identity. Just like any movie, our stories consist of **characters**, **props** and **settings**. And we incorporate brands into our stories in one of these three ways.

Brands can be characters, playing the role of supporting actor in our narratives. They can be props that we use to move our personal plotlines along. And lastly, they can be settings, stages or backdrops against which we act out the stories that shape our identities.



In marketing, we often talk about brand personality. And in marketing research, we often ask consumers to “personify” brands; that is, describe them as if they are people. Most of the time, consumers find it very easy to personify the brands they like. Why is this? It's because those brands are characters in their life stories.



They think of them as playing roles in their lives. So when we ask people to personify a brand, they immediately get it. It's intuitive to them because some brands are character actors in their personal myths.

## Brands Characters

Now, I'm a decent skier but the older I get, the more cautious I become. Truth be told, I never really was that adventurous in the first place.

### CLIF BAR & COMPANY



Over the years, I've gotten into the habit of sticking a Clif Bar® into my jacket pocket when I ski. Now, I'm not a back country skier by any stretch. There's little chance that I'm going to ski anywhere far from a mid-mountain restaurant. And I can't remember the last time I actually ever ate the Clif bar in my pocket.

So why do I ski with that Clif bar tucked away in my jacket? I believe that the brand, in many ways, represents my backcountry skiing partner. He is rugged, adventurous, skilled and serious about being in the mountains. I'd love to ski with someone like that. And with Clif Bar, I can, in a small and very non-threatening way.

So think to yourself, does your brand play the role of an aspirational or inspirational character in the life story of your consumer? Could it play such a role?



## Brands as Props

Brands also can be props in our stories. They can be the portable tools we use to move our personal plotlines along. What's important to understand about brands as props is that the good ones are transformative in some way. They allow us to play different roles and access a different part of ourselves—become a different character, if you will.

In the movies, the kinds of props I'm talking about are critical. Think Harry Potter's wand, Catness's Bow, Luke's lightsaber. But for us everyday folks, brands are often our transformative tools.

### My Gibson Les Paul Goldtop is my light saber.

I think all of us in one way or another have a personal myth that we are at least somewhat cool. This is particularly true as we age.



This Les Paul is actually my laptop background. Why did I choose it? After all, usually I'm the only one who sees that screen. Am I trying to convince myself of something as I write my personal story each day? Probably. I have other guitars too. Why did I choose the iconic Les Paul as my screen saver? Maybe it's because some of the biggest, coolest rock guitarists of all time used this same transformative tool.

So again, ask yourself. Is your brand a transformative prop for your consumer? Does it empower them? Do they use it to help move their personal plotline along? Can it become such a tool?

## Settings

Brands also play the role of settings, scenes or contexts in our stories. And not just the obvious kinds of brands like retail stores, hotels and restaurants. Many different kinds of brands can serve as a backdrop or stage that makes it easier for us to play out certain roles.

I have some status on Delta Airlines which means I get to board early and I get upgraded now and then. I'm sure a number of you are like me in that.



Now, while I may not like to admit it, I like the feeling of boarding early and sitting in first class. Not just because it's convenient and more comfortable, but because it reaffirms something important about my identity; that I'm meaningful in my world, that I have status, and that I'm successful and important.

I may try to write the same storyline when I fly Southwest Airlines. That narrative identity is still part of me. But it's a little bit harder to do when I'm on Southwest. That setting doesn't quite fit the story I'm trying to tell myself. I have to do a little mental editing to make my identity as Successful Entrepreneur fit the facts when I board a Southwest flight.

So finally, ask yourself, does your brand provide a stage on which people can act out the roles of their lifetimes? Could it become such a stage?

# Resolving Tension

Now, you may have noticed that all of my examples involve some degree of tension. They involve competing notions of the self, self-doubt or uncertainty. I want to be a responsible adult, but I also want to be daring and adventurous. I'm getting older, but I still want to be cool. Am I really the successful business person I think I am?

What we've found in studying narrative identity is that brands, meaningful brands—whether they are characters, props or settings in the story—are there to resolve these kinds of tensions in peoples' narrative identities.



Apple is a brand that I think allows many of us to write myths of creativity.

I use a Lenovo laptop and I take a lot of crap for it from my colleagues who are all Mac users. I like my Lenovo. It's reliable. It's familiar. I've used Thinkpads for years so it's just easy to upgrade to the new model when I need to.



But it is the Apple products in my life — my iPhone, my iPad, and my Mac desktop at home — which are part of my Creative Strategist myth. Apple is part of a mythology I use to tell myself that “I’m not a boring research geek. I’m a creative guy.”

Apple helps me negotiate this tension. It helps me hold on to that creative guy narrative despite other things in my life that point in other directions.

# Getting the Story

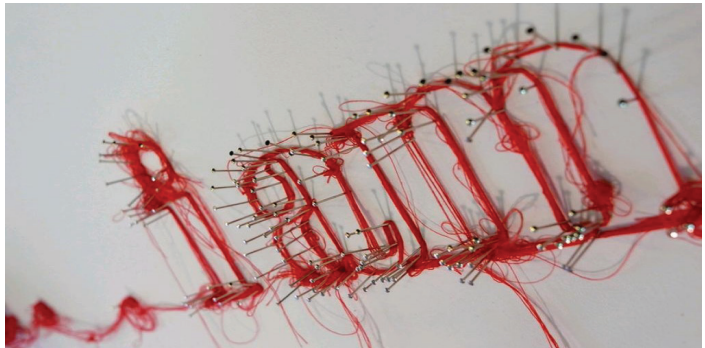
So, what does all this have to do with research? It means that...

If you want to understand your consumer and your brand's role in their lives, start by asking them to tell stories about themselves (not your brand).

Find the myths they are writing. What are the central narratives they are trying to craft?

Find the tensions they need to resolve. Where do they struggle to craft those myths? What are the contradictions and inconsistencies in their desired stories?

Then ask, what role can my brand play in this? How can my brand help resolve their tensions? How can they use my brand as an inspiring supporting character, a transformative prop or a setting that allows them to realize their narrative identity?



# Narrative Identity Approaches

In our experience, a handful of research approaches are useful for understanding narrative identity. They include:

**Psychological Interviews** – Our clinical psychologists conduct interviews with consumers drawing on proven clinical techniques. We explore their past, present and future notions of the self to reveal the tensions that exist in those narratives.

**Story Elicitation** – Have people tell you the story of their life as a book, with each chapter representing a different life stage as they see it. Have them describe a photo from childhood that has special meaning for them. Or, have them draw a map of their childhood neighborhood. These techniques are great ways to elicit images of the past self, which can then help illuminate their current self-concept and the person they aspire to be.

**Narrative Analysis** – Once you've collected some consumer stories, analyze the "story arcs." A story arc is the flow of action and emotion through the narrative. Is this a story about redemption, triumph, struggle, individual achievement, group belonging, or something else? What are the larger, cultural myths and themes that underpin the story?



**Semiotics (Archetypes)** – Semiotics is the study of cultural symbolism and stories are rich sources of data for this. What symbolic meaning is embedded in the stories? What archetypal characters play out in their narratives? Keep in mind that people and brands might be playing those archetypal roles.

These approaches will allow you to explore and understand what, if any role your brand plays in the life stories of consumers. The key to building better, more deeply connected brands starts by illuminating the myths that people tell themselves to construct their sense of self. Only then can we build brands that are truly meaningful to people.



## About the Author

Jim White, PhD, Founding Partner of RealityCheck Inc.

Years ago Jim started his professional career as a newspaper reporter and in many ways he's never stopped thinking like a journalist. He still digs "to find the story." He believes that good research, like good reporting, is about finding "the lead" – that single-most important insight – and conveying it in a simple yet compelling narrative.

That's not to say Jim doesn't apply research rigor to what he does. After all, he holds a doctorate from Northwestern University in Communications Studies and has taught courses in Communications Research Methods, the Psychology of Attitudes and Persuasion, American Popular Culture and Brand Strategy. His knowledge and dedication to doing research the right way shows through in the analytical capabilities of RealityCheck.



RealityCheck Consulting  
A Global Insights Boutique  
[www.RealityCheckInc.com](http://www.RealityCheckInc.com)