

Shelton Fleming discussion Paper Issue 8

THE POWER OF

STORY

08

TELLING

Shelton Fleming

RE-IMAGINING CONNECTED EXPERIENCES



SHAMPOO AND MATCHES MAKE A GOOD TALE

From fairy tales to urban myths, whatever our age, we all love a good story. If it's B2B examples that you're after, then we have two favourites. Both concern lowly heroes who go to the big boss with big ideas. Big ideas that will kickstart the bottom line. The first tells the boss who makes match boxes, he can cut costs in a single strike. How? By putting the strike strip on just one side of the box, not two. The second of our heroes tells the shampoo maker he can double profits in a week. How? By adding a simple sentence to the label. "Rinse and Repeat". Whether these events really happened is irrelevant. The lesson is in a clever idea, simply expressed.

In today's frenetic B2B environment, whether online, virtual or live, storytelling continues to play a critical role in winning and keeping clients. This throws up some key questions. Why has storytelling remained important as a framework and a way to engage? How does storytelling work in an audience engagement and brand building context? What types of storytelling are there and when should you use them? How do archetypes apply and how should they be applied in different cultural contexts? How do millennials and Gen Z value storytelling? What is the view from neuroscience?



Without doubt, storytelling has been highly valued for millennia. It's an innately human way to engage people with challenging topics. To help them understand complex issues. And to help them make sense of a bewildering, often frightening world. The world which many B2B brands face and have to marshal, especially in this disruptive, digital era.

CONTINUING THE GREAT STORY TELLING TRADITION

Every civilisation has oral traditions of storytelling stretching back millennia. Storytelling was used to explain natural phenomena, to pass on stories of creation and to deify pantheons of gods and myths. Oral stories were passed from one generation to the next and storytellers were regarded as healers, leaders, spiritual guides, teachers, keepers of cultural secrets and, of course, entertainers. All helped by the fact that oral storytelling came in various forms, including songs, poetry, chants and dance. Socrates recognised the value of storytelling, as did Aesop, Jesus, Muhammad, Confucius and even Donald Trump.

Storytelling is a means for sharing and interpreting experiences. Humans construct their lives and shape their world in terms of memories grounded in narrative. Stories are universal in that they can bridge cultural, linguistic and age-related divides. Storytelling can be used as a method to teach ethics, values and cultural norms and differences. Learning is most effective when it takes place in social environments that provide authentic social cues about how knowledge is to be applied.

But why has storytelling remained so important? What are the trends that are driving the need for storytelling in B2B marketing and audience engagement? Let's take a look.

WHY HAS STORY-TELLING REMAINED SO IMPORTANT?

By their very definition stories are also a journey. A good story takes you on a journey, ultimately of self-discovery. The threat of the dark and dangerous forest is a recurring metaphor. Little Red Riding Hood goes into the forest, uncertain of what she'll find. Engaged and pulled along by mystery and curiosity, but also a whirlwind of emotions and fears, we can't resist taking each tantalising step with her. The story pulls us in. Little Red Riding Hood is saved from the Big Bad Wolf by the brave, good woodcutter and lives happily ever after. The tale makes the clearest contrast between the safe world of the village and the dangers of the forest, as well as the dangers of not obeying your mother or, implicitly, other figures of authority. All relatable at a young age and a useful life lesson, showing how storytelling is about enriching our understanding of the world.

1. RELATABILITY

We live in a complex, volatile, disruptive world. There's certainly a massive amount of uncertainty in the commercial world. A regular tsunami of new ideas, new business models and new business propositions, to understand or make sense of. Change can be scary. And storytelling provides a way of understanding, in a non-threatening, often gradual way, what a new business trend is all about. Stories allow us to understand change, safely, in a structured way. You get to understand a new concept or change through the eyes of another character. And you're enabled to empathise with their experience. Put simply, storytelling makes big ideas relatable.

MILLENNIALS AS MAKERS AND CREATORS

For millennials, storytelling represents an ideal form of communication. This 'first digital generation' thrives on social media, which involves one-on-one conversations that beg for engagement, versus the one-to-many in mass marketing. Independent, restless, unpredictable millennials represent a huge opportunity for creativity and innovative ideas. The key to maximising their potential is to engage them. And this is what storytelling does.

As social media becomes more mainstream for advertising, more companies are using storytelling to engage prospective customers in blogs, vlogs, newsletters, content branding and other digital communication vehicles.

The truth is, Millennials don't trust traditional advertising. Most rely on feedback from friends for purchase decisions instead and find stories much more credible for learning about products. They have a genuine and compelling desire to be makers and creators and are more likely to be hooked when they see an opportunity to be co-creators. Storytelling apps provide the perfect opportunity for brands to co-create with the application and the audience in an authentic manner.





2. AUTHENTICITY

Ironically, storytelling also works in a business environment, exactly because nobody believes in authority anymore. Authority figures and institutions are no longer trusted. They are inherently distrusted. People see through marketing. They seek authenticity, openness, engagement and collaboration. They expect real stories, from real people and real situations. Think of our reality TV world. Storytelling has a more authentic voice. It's trusted more, especially if it shares real stories from peers.

Real stories can engage audiences in a more authentic way. Recently, an example of this caught our attention at the Farnborough International Airshow. The SAAB Aerospace hospitality suite bristled with demos and presentations, showing off the latest, lethal tech for fighter jets working in complex combat zones.

But there was more. SAAB, in that classic Scandinavian way, engaged the audience, introducing a pilot to talk tech. Only he didn't. He talked about his summer cottage in the Stockholm archipelago. You got a feeling for him as a person. This added a human dimension to the talk that followed. You could identify with his life and passions.

He then talked about the challenges when you come across a rogue bee hive in the rafters of your cottage. Do you poke it? No. You put on protective gloves and recce the site. You find tools to gently smoke out the bees and dislodge the nest. You warn and protect your family. You make your home safe. It was a simple story that drew a comparison with combat in a complex, heavily urbanised environment that has friends and foe hidden in every nook and cranny. We were carried into the story by the pilot, our hero, whose technology story was made relatable relate by the fact he'd spoken about his passions, his home and his family. Terrorist stronghold or rogue bees' nest, there are dangers to confront in many aspects of his life. In all instances, he must select a strategy. Take smart combat decisions. The lesson? SAAB has the tech to bring that story to a successful, smart conclusion.

3. TRANSPARENCY

Storytelling is also important because, today, brands can't preach. The consumer has control. Technology ensures that if the emperor has no clothes, you have no illusions about his 'vulnerability'.

Good stories provide a hook or narrative to engage, relate, connect, empathise, and even co-create. Armed with a good story today, brands don't necessarily need to write the ending, or even the story. It can provide the platform for storytelling, which the audience then writes in blogs, posts and vlogs. Starbucks, for example, talks about brand journalism; enabling consumers to share their stories about good works in the community.

Another example that, literally, brings storytelling home, comes from international retailer Tesco. Although their storytelling is B2C, their storytelling resonates in a simple and intelligent way to explain the phenomena of end user focus.

Tesco's 'Food Love Stories' shares everyday recipes with consumers, adding a simple layer of good, honest, personal anecdote. This makes the content relatable, authentic and transparent, which are key advantages of storytelling.



4. PERSONAL CONNECTION

In the digital age, storytelling helps us to forge real, personal connections that are increasingly rare. Brands need to be more human than ever and good storytelling provides that evasive, authentic touch and voice. Stories create empathy, if underpinned with emotions that enable personal connection.

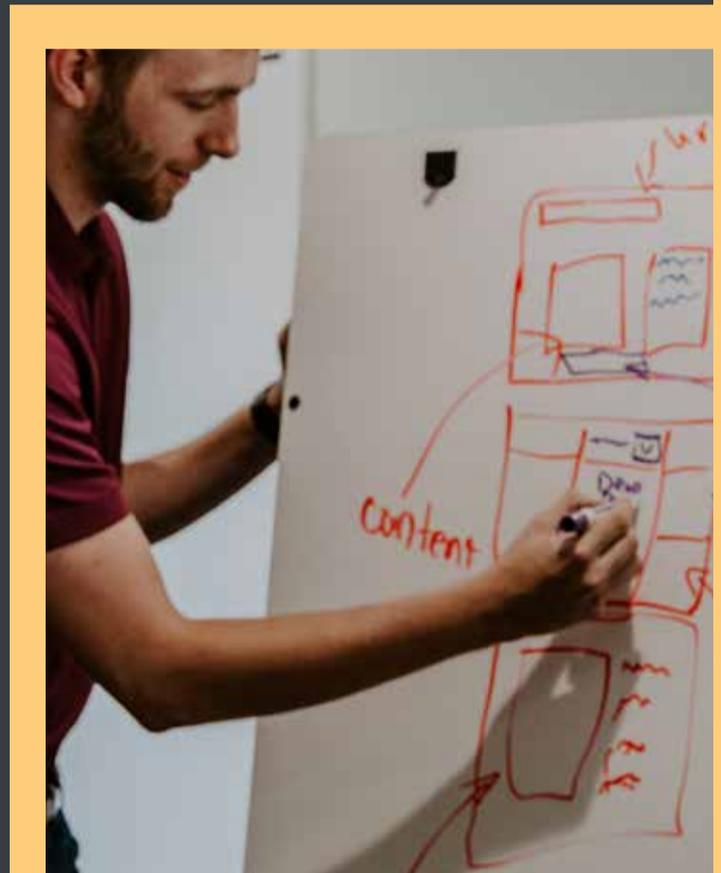
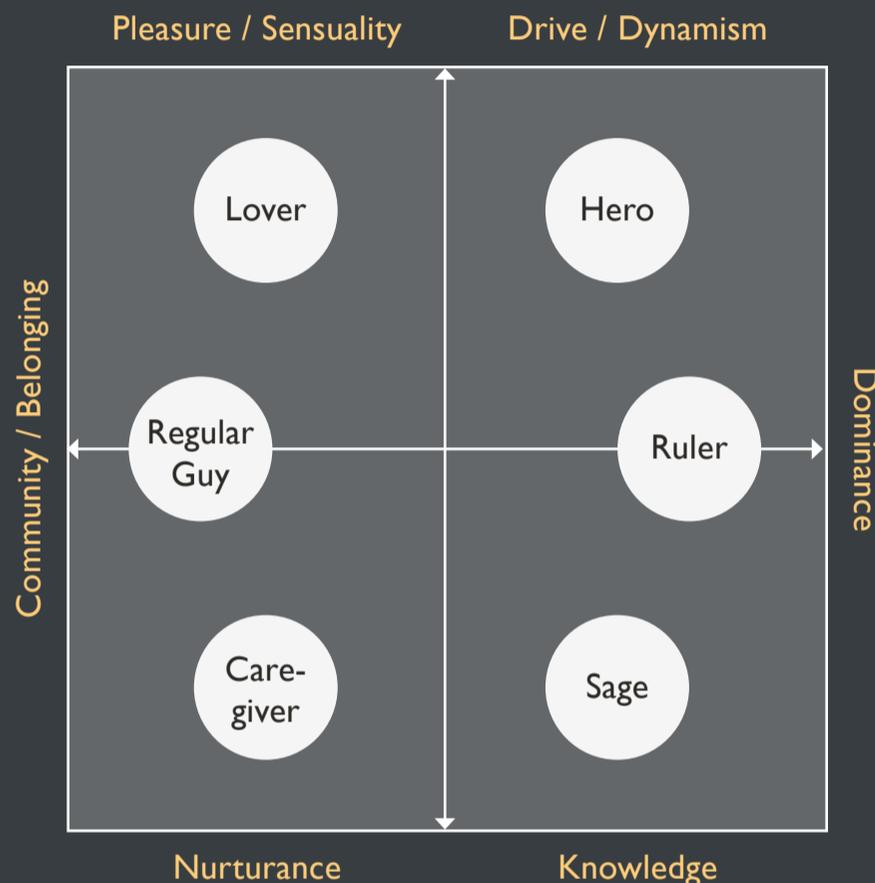
Brands are about longer term relationships and, very often in B2B today, the company's very raison d'être is dependent on thriving in an ecosystem where success demands ongoing conversation and collaboration. Brands are increasingly committed to building brand communities and then co-creating conversations within them. It's those conversations that storytelling can trigger and stimulate.

It's also true that what we see in B2C soon shows up in B2B, as demonstrated by Spotify. Although a consumer product, Spotify uses video, one of the best tools for selling brand stories. It uses video to show lifestyle vignettes of how their product – AKA your personal music library - can be created and customized to the tempo of your life. It is modern and fast, riding high on visual stimulation, rather than words. It should be an aspiration for most B2B sites, which in past web generations have often been just too verbal. Video is becoming ubiquitous on the web, has great advantages for SEO and tracking usage, as well as being a great storytelling medium. And as with most trends, what we see in B2C shows up in B2B not long after.

ARE YOU AN ARCHETYPAL ANCHOR?

Archetypes are tried and tested, trusty anchors for different kinds of narrative. Archetypes are story anchors like hero, sage, lover and, yes, even regular guy. Take a look at our chart.

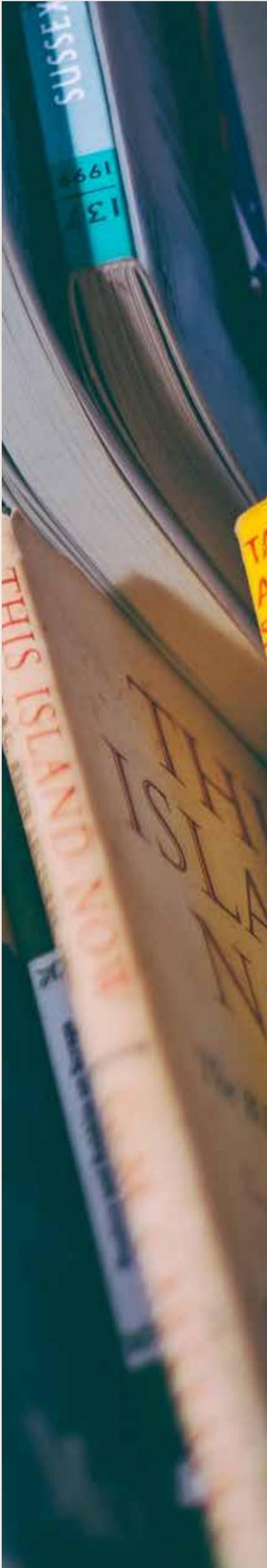
Adopting these different protagonists can help to develop the right type of narrative. But it's also critical to overlay cultural insights. The regular guy in India might be your hard working, middle class professional, struggling with a corrupt system, but prevailing with an intelligent guile. In Saudi Arabia, the regular guy would be defined by chilling-out and talking with his peer group, safe in a stress-free 'guy space'. And in Australia the regular guy narrative might be about being with your mates, shunning elitism, confirming honest, hard-working roots, and prevailing with a 'new frontier' mind-set.



As we have demonstrated, storytelling is a simple, time honoured, intuitively human way to connect and bond. Above all, good stories are memorable. Stories make it easier to understand, accept and navigate alien worlds, which in business terms can be worlds of complex, disruptive trends and challenges.

There is little doubt that content is king. Content is what drives and maintains engagement. And the emotive power of a good story can be a powerful way to leverage a content strategy.

TIPS FOR CREATING ENGAGEMENTS WITH STORYTELLING



Above all, good stories should take you on a journey of self-discovery. This thought brings us neatly to offering some suggestions for creating successful story driven engagements:

GENERATE SOME MYSTERY. Don't give away the entire story in one go. Encourage the audience to engage, explore and learn more, across different media; especially digital.

BE UNIQUE. Be brave.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE. Great storytelling is about self-discovery and personal enrichment, so know your audience, and especially, know their inner-demons, hopes, fears, aspirations and challenges. Use those insights to nourish or anchor the narrative.

USE CLASSIC STORYTELLING ELEMENTS. Convincing characters, an engaging protagonist, a riveting plot, an empowering conclusion or moment of self-discovery are key.

DON'T SELL. Customers see through marketing. They are cynical, but good storytelling can deliver the authenticity needed to overcome this inherent cynicism. Let the story do the sell in a more subtle way. It should be the story for the story's sake, not the brand's sake.

PUT PEOPLE FIRST. Create stories about people, by people. Real life stories enable an audience to empathise and connect emotionally, allowing brands to come across as more human, fallible and honest.

ENCOURAGE CO-CREATION. Provide the platform and the themes, but not necessarily the script or story. Let the customer tell the story. Collaborate with your audience. For example, at a live event, use event apps to enable audiences or visitors to influence how a topic or story is explored.

TAP INTO EMOTIONS. Don't be scared to make people cry. But ideally, make them laugh. Entertain them. Then they'll remember your message for a long time afterwards.

WHAT TYPES OF STORYTELLING ARE THERE, AND WHEN SHOULD YOU USE THEM?

There are many types of storytelling. But equally, there will be a multitude of situations in the life of your business, where a particular type of storytelling will serve you well. Here we look at some familiar business scenarios and how storytelling can make a real impact.



LAUNCHING A NEW CONCEPT

If it's a new concept or company, provenance is often a good way to engage, emotionally. The back story. Your roots. Your history told through the eyes of your staff or your founder or your customers.

Zendesk, the makers of customer support software, created one of the funniest and most ingenious marketing campaigns to build their company profile. Their 'anti-storytelling' has the effect of making their brand extremely likable - and even trustworthy - as they cast a very human impression. Something any small business owner would appreciate from a SaaS provider.



Instead of a classic corporate video about Zendesk, they created an entertaining video. This is a fictional indie rock band, frustrated that a customer support provider 'stole' their band name, yet admitting their need for Zendesk's services to keep their careers going. To conclude this masterful tale beautifully, the band writes a cheesy jingle about the importance of customer service. There is a whole range of Zendesk stories to inspire you.

SWITCHING SUPPLIERS

If you want to give prospective customers the belief and confidence to switch to a new supplier, provider or partnership, use a hero to champion your story. Have your hero take on great challenges, conquering both the challenge and coming out the other side a better human being. More enlightened. More self-aware. More confident.

HP's video *The Wolf* tackles printer security, a topic that might seem dry and uninteresting. However, this short film is incredibly engaging, creating a menacing character to represent the threats that lurk beyond proper printer security. It's an entertaining story that shows how vital HP's printer security software can be. You might not have the budget to feature Hollywood stars in your videos, but you can still learn a lot from HP's unique approach to B2B storytelling.



CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

If you're seeking to overcome misconceptions about a brand, market or product, use stories about the underdog. See the world through their hopes and fears to help your audience re-evaluate their world view.

Mouth is a living, breathing anthology for some of the most passionate food and beverage makers in America. The company exists to tell the brand stories behind the indie creators of everything from artisanal chocolates and hand-made pastas to small-batch tequila and gourmet honey. And to sell the food and beverage products as gift packages and subscriptions on their mouth-watering e-commerce site.

Learning about apples, grown on a small orchard in upstate New York by people who view making cider as one of the last vestiges of true American folk culture, is utterly compelling marketing. By enabling the small business owners who make these products to share their passion, Mouth brand stories add a whole new level of meaning and value to the items they sell.

ACHIEVING CUSTOMER LOVE

Or if the goal is customer love and creating an emotional affinity with the brand, a love story embracing empathy and connection might be a good call.

A great example is BuzzFeed, which has captured the attention of millions through stories that play on the themes that demand an emotional response from particular groups. Take a typical BuzzFeed headline, like “25 Things You’ll Understand If You Grew Up With Asian Parents.” Millions of people read this story because a certain group—Asian kids and their friends—could relate to it so deeply, they had to check it out.

BuzzFeed does the same thing with other groups, including college alumni. The site is filled with posts such as “21 Things That Could Only Happen at Stanford.” The editorial team repeats this formula for almost every college in the country. And that’s because they know that students who went to Stanford will share that video on Facebook, and the post will go viral among current students and alumni.

The secret is they don’t try to speak to everyone in every story. They target the emotions of specific identity groups and bet that those groups will share these stories prolifically. This also explains why character-driven stories are so powerful and why our favourite characters tend to resemble people we love.

THE SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN POWER OF STORYTELLING

Neuroscientists have shown that the brain was built to wander on average over a thousand times a day. They also found that storytelling stops this wandering and engages the listener. They call this “neuro-coupling”.

Bruce Perry, an expert on brain development, says that “neural systems fatigue quickly, actually within 4-8 minutes, and become less responsive,” but can be stimulated and sustained by storytelling.

Artificial Intelligence specialists have been studying how our brain actually works, especially how we file and store all the information that the brain absorbs every day. They discovered that the brain does not process information in ‘files’, like a computer programme. Instead, your brain remembers critical elements. For example, when you look at a PowerPoint presentation, your brain might remember the first and last slides, as well as anything that has an emotional impact. The rest is discarded as “trash” and never retrieved. Therefore, the brain most effectively files and retrieves information when there is a context, as in the form of a story.

Reinforcing this discovery, author and marketing professor Jennifer Aaker from Stanford notes that people remember stories as much as 22 times more than they do facts alone.



STORYTELLING HELPS YOU THRIVE, HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Storytelling is a perfect match for live events. They offer the perfect environment in which to weave the magic of an engaging, empowering narrative. But there are challenges. The key challenge is that you will probably have limited time in which to tell a story. The solution is, not to tell the whole story during the event. Seed the story and let the visitor pick up the story later, via a mobile app or website.



Maybe your engineering company wants to show off its consulting skills and business savvy, in relation to smart transport infrastructure. You might show a short video of someone looking stressed, running across a station platform with the statement, 'Will Harry Mug Sally?' and then a QR code to download a video, telling the rest of the story, which the visitor watches later. And that story explores the cool, smart infrastructure technology that is being built into cities, enabling, navigating, detecting and protecting people as they connect with people that matter.

MAKE YOUR PEOPLE SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Outbeam nurtures your people to becoming influencers. Then, by virtue of their enhanced status in the social spheres, like LinkedIn, Twitter and Medium, they enhance the profile and appeal of your company too.

Understanding each person's interests, skills and motivations is key. Outbeam works with each individual, on a subscription model, to refine and develop their personal brand. And from that they devise a content programme, in which each person starts to generate content for their LinkedIn feed. Because most people lack the confidence to generate copy for blogs and articles, they provide an online journalist buddy to help scope topics, suggest edits and, if need be, provide finished copy.

Because the content generated is better with a professional steer, the employee gets more likes and shares, and their brand profile in social channels increases. The employee feels good, because their personal brand is enhanced. They have a voice and, therefore, more influence.

This is also a great way to get stories to market and use affinity marketing to drive new business leads and conversations. There's a correlation between company success and the influencer profile of employees. The company benefits from the halo effect of having employees who are actively followed and respected.

As Jay Gronlund says in his biznology blog, "Today, technology has transformed our world into a data-obsessive circus where information is unbelievably accessible, connectivity is constant, and unpredictable events always surprise and engulf us. Call this extreme clutter and volatility. With so much information and multi-tasking surrounding us, it has become a challenge to restore simplicity, clarity and focus in our communications. These excessive conditions provide the main impetus for the re-emergence of storytelling for inspiring, engaging and connecting to others."

At Shelton Fleming, we have the experience and expertise to help you deliver captivating events that resonate with key audiences and build your brand. A critical part of this is helping you to tell your best stories. We can help ensure you define and refine your messages, before finding the perfect storytelling vehicle to enthrall, educate, empower and, of course, entertain your audience.

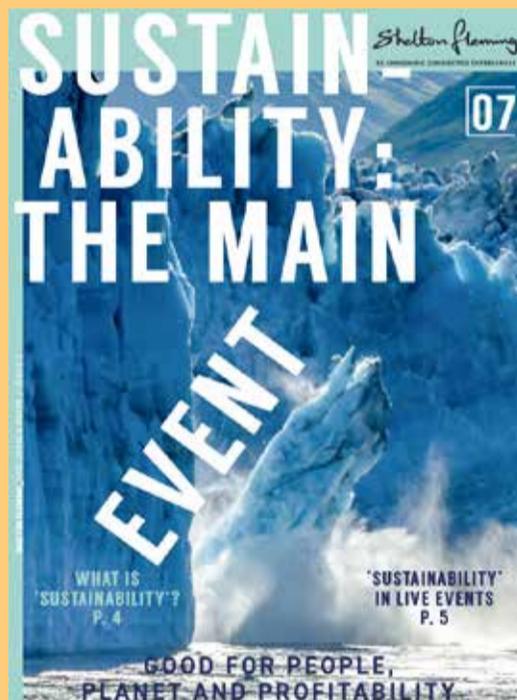


Data has a better idea

SHELTON FLEMING IS A CREATIVE AGENCY THAT CONNECTS B2B BRANDS TO EXPERT AUDIENCES, THROUGH INTELLIGENT LIVE ENGAGEMENTS. WE SPECIALISE IN THE APPLICATION OF TECHNOLOGY AND BOLD ARCHITECTURE FOR EXHIBITION DESIGN AND LIVE EVENTS.

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**#6 Virtual Conferences:
Not what it says on the tin**

7# Sustainability: The Main Event

CHAT WITH THE AUTHORS:



ANDREW REID, DIRECTOR, CORPORATE STRATEGY AND ACCOUNT PLANNING

**Disruptive thinking. Strategic focus.
andrew.reid@sheltonfleming.com**



CHRISTOPHER JOYCE, COPYWRITER

**Critical thinking with emotion.
christopher.joyce@sheltonfleming.com**

Disclaimer: In this paper we introduce ideas that illustrate how you could start your journey towards sustainability in the live events sector. These are generic thoughts that are non-specific to any sector or business. Our views aim to stimulate discussion rather than provide specific recommendations. We'd encourage you to work with us, or an equally qualified partner, to analyse your activities, agree your desired outcomes and decide on a strategy to achieve them. This will enable you to find the solution that's best for your event and business. Every live or virtual event has unique requirements and, as such, the technologies, methods and concepts deployed should be evaluated against your brief. © Shelton Fleming Associates Limited.