

# Storytelling, the Bible, and Marketing: An Ancient Framework for Modern Practice

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**ABSTRACT:** Storytelling is deeply rooted in Western culture, from parables in the Bible and ancient classical Greek drama to marketing research and practice. This paper analyzes the presence of story structure via Freytag's Pyramid, applied to biblical accounts and modern marketing examples, presenting Freytag's framework as a best practice for effective marketing. Additional noted patterns of stories in the Bible are presented as possible premises for creating effective marketing stories.

**KEYWORDS:** storytelling, marketing, business, biblical integration

“When a speaker says, ‘Let me tell you a story,’ your attention focuses. But when a speaker talks in the abstract, communicating facts or programs without a story, your attention wanders.”

David Aaker in *Creating Signature Stories* (p. 48)

## INTRODUCTION

There is something very true to what David Aaker has said in the quote above. Facts are boring; stories are engaging, memorable, and effective. In the book, *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*, Kenadal Haven (2007) examined more than 100,000 pages of story research across 15 fields. He also collected anecdotal evidence from thousands of businesses and educators. Every piece of evidence supported the assertion that stories are universally loved. Haven summarizes those results, asserting:

It is clear that stories and storytelling effectively communicate facts, concepts, beliefs, values, and other tactic knowledge. Part of this success stems from story's unique ability to motivate readers and listeners to pay greater attention while they read and listen and to involve story receivers with the characters and struggles of a story. Stories create a common perspective and context that makes content information personal and relevant. (pp. 112-113)

When it comes to marketing, what are the ads you remember most? Are they often stories? Perhaps you remember a great commercial from the last Super Bowl

that felt more like a movie than an ad. For those who attended Sunday School, how many Bible stories do you recall compared to Bible facts you were taught to memorize? If our personal experience and research tells us that storytelling is effective, why do business people continue to create marketing focused on facts and figures? Empathetic characters, inspirational goals, challenging obstacles, and a sequence of events rising to a climax and falling to a resolution make best-selling novels, blockbuster movies and hit TV shows. Why not marketing?

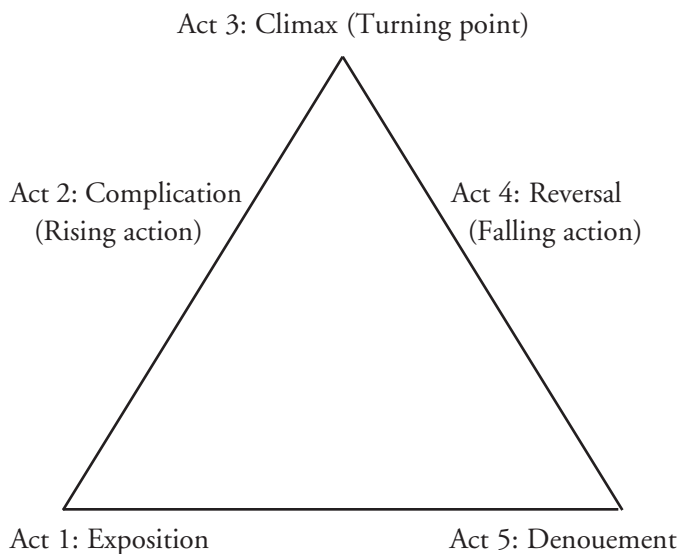
The topic of story, faith, and business has been discussed in the past. Michael Cafferky (2004) described story as “the capsule in which a company's compelling promises are carried to consumers” and argued for the integration of faith, life, and learning of business principles through narrative. Later, as editor of the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, Cafferky (2017) called for papers integrating contemporary theories with biblical narratives addressing business disciplines such as marketing. The purpose of this article is to continue these themes by proposing a storytelling framework found deeply rooted in our culture and evident in the Bible as a best practice for effective marketing.

## ANCIENT STORYTELLING FRAMEWORK

Classical drama is rooted in the theatrical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome. Beginning in ancient Greece, Aristotle wrote *Poetics* 350 years before Christ.

Aristotle considered plot to be the most important element of drama. He described plot as having a beginning, middle, and end with events that must relate (Aristotle, 2013). During the European Renaissance, dramatists such as William Shakespeare created five-act plays as a standard for dramatic storytelling where the plot developed over five story units. Then, in the eighteenth century, German author and playwright Gustav Freytag published *Technique of the Drama*, establishing Freytag's theory of the five-act dramatic structure. Modeled after the Renaissance dramatists, this framework advanced Aristotle's dramatic theory to a five-act structure symbolized as "Freytag's Pyramid" (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Freytag's Pyramid**



According to Freytag, a drama is divided into five linear units called acts, and these acts combine to form the dramatic arc: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. Freytag's framework provides a linear structure for plot, based on a related sequence of events to build a fully developed story.

In this framework, exposition sets the stage by introducing character and setting, followed by a series of events that build the story to a climax where the plot takes a turning point for better (comedy) or worse (tragedy). Falling action is the series of events that moves the plot toward a resolution (Freytag, 1863). Freytag's study and analysis were modeled after five-act plays but have also been applied to novels, demonstrating that dramatic structure is also a literary element. Freytag's Pyramid is seen as a powerful story tool for the most successful fiction (Stern, 2000) and has become an underlying element

of classic Hollywood narratives (Trbic, 2010). Freytag's framework has also been employed as a structure for persuasive speech in the form of sermons (Willobee, 2009).

Marketing researchers first began applying Freytag's Pyramid to TV ads. Stern's (1994) research on drama in TV ads used Freytag's classical drama model. Stern described Freytag's Pyramid as an inverted V plot, following Aristotelian principles of linear chronology and causality that provide the foundation for the action of a story. Quesenberry and Coolsen (2014) measured story presence and development in Super Bowl TV ads via a five-act form modeled after Freytag's Pyramid and found that ads with fully developed stories (all five-acts) had higher scores in Super Bowl ad rating poles indicating increased likability. Most recently, Freytag's five-act model has been applied to viral advertising videos on YouTube. Quesenberry and Coolsen (2019) found that brand viral ad videos with fully developed five-act stories had increased shares and views, improving the effectiveness of viral marketing campaigns. The authors conclude that Freytag's Pyramid could serve as a model to create a story around brand facts and figures through relatable characters and a sequential series of events that evoke emotions leading to consumer response.

Yet, even before Aristotle and the classical dramas of Greece and Rome, the stories of the Bible helped form the basis of Judean and Christian religions. The Bible communicates facts and figures, concepts and beliefs, but in a way that involves readers, motivates them to pay attention, and creates a common perspective that is personal and relevant. And a large part of the Bible is story based. From Genesis to Revelation, Old Testament to New Testament, the Bible contains hundreds of stories. Additionally, much of Jesus's teaching came in the form of stories called parables. Do the ancient stories in the Bible follow Freytag's story framework?

Previous scholars have approached the Bible as a potential model for modern marketing practice in a similar way. Rippé and Campbell (2017) presented a compelling case for integrating marketing's seven-step sales process into a process for witnessing and presented examples in the Bible where modern sales techniques were utilized. Karns (2002) found elements of the marketing mix (product, price, place, and promotion) evident in the expansion of the early church. Hagenbuch (2015) examined biblical cases for insight into when marketers should use shock advertising.

## BIBLICAL STORIES AND FREYTAG’S STORY FRAMEWORK

Several Bible stories demonstrate the five-act form, including the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis 2:4-3:24, the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32, and the story of Abram in Egypt in Genesis 12:10-20. The coding guide from Quesenberry and Coolson’s (2014, p. 454) Super Bowl ad research was utilized in defining the five-acts to analyze the content.

### **Adam and Eve:** Genesis 2:4-3:24.

The analysis of the story of the first man and woman demonstrates the form of five-act dramatic structure as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1: Adam and Eve Applied to Freytag’s Story Framework**

Story Act	Elements of Story Act Development
<u>Act 1—Exposition:</u> Characters, setting and basic conflict are established leading to tension. An inciting moment signals rising action of complications.	In Genesis 2:4-17, time and place are established. It is after creation of earth, water, and sky. The Garden of Eden is planted and described. The protagonist (Adam) is created and he is ordered by God to take care of the garden. Then, in Genesis 2:17, the origin of the impending conflict is introduced by announcing the presence of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and how eating from it will cause Adam to die. This is the inciting moment that sets the story in motion, leading to Act 2.
<u>Act 2—Complication:</u> Tension mounts as the main character’s efforts to reach a goal meets more conflicts and obstacles. Frustration builds as opposing forces intensify.	The conflict of the forbidden fruit is complicated by the introduction of related secondary conflicts. Obstacles are put in the protagonist’s way. In Genesis 2:18-3:5, Adam’s life in the Garden becomes more complicated as God creates all the wild animals and birds and he is asked to name them. Then God creates woman (Eve) out of man (Adam) as his wife and a third character appears as the serpent, introducing adversaries and antagonists. Tension mounts as the serpent questions God’s command and lies to Eve about eating the fruit.
<u>Act 3—Climax:</u> Conflict reaches a high turning point that could lead to victory or defeat for the main character resulting in good or bad consequences.	In Genesis 3:6-7, Eve eats the forbidden fruit and Adam does the same. The eyes of both are opened and they realize that they are naked. This is a tragedy because circumstances have gone well up to this point but now take a turn for the worse. The consequences of the climax play out in Act 4.
<u>Act 4—Reversal:</u> Events play out in falling actions from the reversal in the climax. Momentum slows as the characters head toward a final resolution.	In Genesis 3:8-20, events are reversed as things start going badly. The woman and man try to hide from God. When God confronts Adam, he blames Eve and when Eve is confronted she blames the serpent. The result of the climax is the falling action - God’s punishment for them all. The serpent is cursed to crawl on its belly, the woman is given pain in childbirth and the man is cursed to hard work. The story moves to a final resolution in Act 5.
<u>Act 5—Denouement:</u> Conflict is resolved and tension is released creating normalcy. Comedy ends with the main character better off and tragedy being worse off.	In Genesis 3:21-24, God sacrifices animals to make clothes out of their skins, covering Adam and Eve’s nakedness and shame. Their relationship with God is restored, but they are banished from the Garden of Eden. The tension of the conflict is released but the normalcy of life is now hard work outside the Garden.

### **The Prodigal Son:** Luke 15:11-32

The parable of the Prodigal Son also follows Freytag’s Pyramid for five-act story form. The five-acts are explained through the elements of the parable as seen in Table 2.

**Table 2: The Prodigal Son Applied to Freytag’s Story Framework**

Story Act	Elements of Story Act Development
<u>Act 1—Exposition:</u> Characters, setting and basic conflict are established leading to tension. An inciting moment signals rising action of complications.	Characters are introduced as a man and his two sons on their father’s land. The origin of the impending conflict is established when the younger son asks his father to give him his share of the estate early. This creates dramatic tension as the father divides his property, giving the younger son the money usually bestowed upon the father’s death, signifying the inciting movement that sets the remainder of the story into action.
<u>Act 2—Complication:</u> Tension mounts as the main character’s efforts to reach a goal meets more conflicts and obstacles. Frustration builds as opposing forces intensify.	Interests clash, and events accelerate as the younger son gathers all he has and leaves for a distant country. The story moves in a definite direction. Tension mounts and actions rise as the younger son squanders his wealth on wild living. The basic internal conflict with his father is complicated by a famine. The son runs out of money and is forced to take a job feeding pigs. He is starving, not even able to afford what the pigs are eating.
<u>Act 3—Climax:</u> Conflict reaches a high turning point that could lead to victory or defeat for the main character resulting in good or bad consequences.	Conflict reaches a high point where the protagonist stands at a crossroads. The turning point happens when the younger son decides to return to his father and beg to be a hired servant. Depending on his father’s response this could be a change for the better (a comedy) or a change for the worse (a tragedy).
<u>Act 4—Reversal:</u> Events play out in falling actions from the reversal in the climax. Momentum slows as the characters head toward a final resolution.	The result of the turning point plays out as momentum turns downward. The son travels home with both hopes and fear, not knowing how his father will react. The father sees the son returning and, instead of shaming him, the father runs to his son, throws his arms around him, and kisses him. The son confesses his sin and the father welcomes him back, calling for a celebration, making this a comedy.
<u>Act 5—Denouement:</u> Conflict is resolved and tension is released creating normalcy. Comedy ends with the main character better off and tragedy being worse off.	Act 5 happens as the conflict is resolved, creating a new normalcy for the characters and a sense of release of tension and anxiety. The younger son and father restore their relationship, but it is revealed that the older son’s heart was not in the right place either. All is resolved at the end as the father confirms that everything he has is always available for both his sons. Reconciliation happens for younger and older sons.

**Abram in Egypt:** Genesis 12:10-20

One of the shortest of stories in the Bible is also structured on Freytag’s five-act dramatic form. In Genesis, a story of ten verses or just 250 words contains all five of these storytelling units as explained in Table 3.

**Table 3: Abram in Egypt Applied to Freytag’s Story Framework**

Story Act	Elements of Story Act Development
<u>Act 1—Exposition:</u> Characters, setting and basic conflict are established leading to tension. An inciting moment signals rising action of complications.	Act 1 occurs when the time, setting and past events are established about the famine and travel to Egypt. Characters are introduced including Abram and his wife, Sarai. Conflict develops into tension between opposing forces. Abram is afraid that Pharaoh and the Egyptians would kill him for his beautiful wife. This act ends with an inciting moment of Sarai and Abram lying to the Egyptians about their relationship, setting the story in motion towards the rising action of complications.
<u>Act 2—Complication:</u> Tension mounts as the main character’s efforts to reach a goal meets more conflicts and obstacles. Frustration builds as opposing forces intensify.	The story becomes more complex. Interests clash and plans are made as action rises and tension mounts. Abram’s effort to reach his goal of being safe is first realized and he benefits from Pharaoh’s gifts and wealth. But this is complicated when God starts punishing Pharaoh and his household for taking Abram’s wife. Frustration builds as circumstances intensify.
<u>Act 3—Climax:</u> Conflict reaches a high turning point that could lead to victory or defeat for the main character resulting in good or bad consequences.	The conflict reaches a high point. Pharaoh confronts Abram for lying about his wife. This is a turning point for Abram that could lead to a change for the worse. The result of the turning point is that Pharaoh angrily sends Abram away with his wife.

(Table 3 continued)

Story Act	Elements of Story Act Development
<u>Act 4—Reversal</u> : Events play out in falling actions from the reversal in the climax. Momentum slows as the characters head toward a final resolution.	Act 4 shows the consequences of the climactic turning point. The falling action happens with Pharaoh's decision as the characters head toward a final resolution. In this story, Abram is able to get his wife back.
<u>Act 5—Denouement</u> : Conflict is resolved and tension is released creating normalcy. Comedy ends with the main character better off and tragedy being worse off.	Act 5, (denouement), happens as the conflict is resolved, creating a new normalcy for the characters and a sense of release of tension and anxiety. Abram experiences a positive outcome (comedy) as Pharaoh orders his men to send Abram away with his wife and all of his possessions.

In this small sample of stories from the Bible, it seems that Freytag's framework for storytelling applies. The stories of Adam and Eve, the Prodigal Son, and Abram in Egypt vary in length and place in the Bible, from Old Testament to New Testament, but follow Freytag's Pyramid linear story structure establishing an Aristotelian plot. The Bible contains some of the most memorable and motivational stories ever told and those stories appear to follow this ancient framework.

### MODERN MARKETING APPROACHES

The ancient practice of storytelling is often lost on business people in modern times. As a modern marketer or business person, you may be so focused on product facts and figures that you forget the human story behind the product or business. Yet, without the story you may be limiting your marketing effectiveness. Bill Bernbach, *Advertising Age's* most influential person in advertising and the creative leader behind the campaign that helped turn the VW Beetle into the world's best-selling car ("William Bernbach," 1999; "Beetle overtakes Model T," 2009) talked about the importance of presenting messages in the right form. "You can say the right thing about a product and nobody will listen. You've got to say it in such a way that people will feel it in their gut. Because if they don't feel it, nothing will happen" ("William Bernbach Quotes," 2019).

For a business person, facts seem important, but facts are not heard unless you draw interest through attention. And facts are uninteresting to your customers unless they can feel them. Perhaps Bernbach's right thing to say about a product becomes the right message to an audience when it is delivered through a relevant story. As David Aaker (2018) said, "When a speaker says, 'Let me tell you a story,' your attention focuses."

The marketers at Budweiser have known the power of story in advertising for decades with their popular Budweiser Clydesdales Super Bowl Ads, which finished in the top five of *USA Today's* Ad Meter consumer rating poll eight times in ten years. Each Clydesdale ad is a well-crafted story that pulls you in and takes you on a rollercoaster ride of feelings as you wait to see the final outcome. With marketers betting millions of dollars on a single 30 second TV spot, an 80 percent success rate is quite amazing (Quesenberry, 2017).

Yet, even Budweiser's marketers often forget the power of story. In 2014, Budweiser had both the best and worst Super Bowl ads that year. It won *USA Today's* Ad Meter with the highly likable Clydesdale story "Puppy Love," earning a rating of 8.29 out of 10. It also created the number three most popular commercial with "Hero's Welcome." The attention focusing and gut feeling ad told the story of a soldier returning home from war, attracting a rating of 7.21. However, that same year, Budweiser also created the Bud Light commercial "Cool Twist," which finished dead last in the 57th spot of the poll with only a 3.89 rating. "Cool Twist" presented facts through 30 seconds of a spinning bottle with a voice over talking about the new features of the product's packaging. There were no relatable characters, conflict, rising or falling action. With no Aristotelian plot and no Freytag story development, the ad had very low audience interest (Siegel, 2015). Somehow, in the same Super Bowl, these marketers forgot the truth about the power of story.

In recent years many have attempted to remind business leaders and marketers about the power of story. Storytelling has been called "The new strategic imperative of business" by *Forbes* (Howard, 2016), "An irresistibly powerful strategic business tool" by *Harvard Business Review* (Monarth, 2014), "one of the biggest buzzwords in business" by *Entrepreneur* (Tugend, 2015), and an

“essential element of company success” by *CRM Magazine* (Del Rowe, 2017). These articles in the trade press seem to reflect that storytelling in marketing is something new. Yet, as we have seen in the examples above from Classical Greece, Renaissance Europe, and the Bible, storytelling

itself is not new. Marketers simply need to be reminded of it. Storytelling is not an outdated ancient method or a passing business fad. It is a marketing best practice that can be applied through Freytag’s framework.

### MARKETING AND FREYTAG’S STORY FRAMEWORK

Some stories in the Bible follow the five-act structure. Have successful marketing communications been structured according to Freytag’s story framework? What follows are examples of advertising analyzed for five-act form via Freytag’s Pyramid.

The first example comes from a Super Bowl TV ad. Super Bowl ads are especially important in marketing because they represent one of the last opportunities to reach a mass audience. To reach over 100 million people, a 30-second commercial costs \$5 million (Carroll, 2018). Super Bowl commercials can generate considerable buzz in traditional media, social media, and by word-of-mouth. No other event in the U.S. invites this level of media and public attention focused on the likability of a TV commercial.

#### Lost Dog

In 2015, the first place finisher in *USA Today’s Ad Meter*, where viewers vote for their favorite Super Bowl ads, was Budweiser’s “Lost Dog” (“2015 Ad Meter Results,” 2015). This commercial followed the five-act story form as seen in Table 4.

**Table 4: Lost Dog Applied to Freytag’s Story Framework**

Story Act	Elements of Story Act Development
<u>Act 1—Exposition:</u> Characters, setting and basic conflict are established leading to tension. An inciting moment signals rising action of complications.	Characters are introduced including a farmer with Clydesdale horses and a puppy in the horse barn. Conflict develops into tension as the puppy runs out of the barn away from the farmer. This act ends with an inciting moment of the puppy rounding a corner and looking at an open horse trailer.
<u>Act 2—Complication:</u> Tension mounts as the main character’s efforts to reach a goal meets more conflicts and obstacles. Frustration builds as opposing forces intensify.	In Act 2 the story becomes more complex. Interests clash, action rises and tension mounts. The puppy jumps into the back of the trailer and the door closes suddenly. The farmer picks up the puppy’s empty leash outside the barn door. Frustration builds and circumstances intensify as the truck drives the horse trailer into town. The puppy jumps out and gets caught in the rain. The farmer arrives in town posting lost puppy signs.
<u>Act 3—Climax:</u> Conflict reaches a high turning point that could lead to victory or defeat for the main character resulting in good or bad consequences.	The conflict reaches a high point. The puppy makes it back to the farm at night only to be threatened by a growling wolf. This is the turning point that could lead to a change for the worse. The result of the turning point is the Clydesdale horses breaking out of their stalls and running up the hill to save their puppy friend.
<u>Act 4—Reversal:</u> Events play out in falling actions from the reversal in the climax. Momentum slows as the characters head toward a final resolution.	Act 4 shows the consequence of the climatic turning point. The falling action happens when the farmer walks into his kitchen at sunrise with his coffee. Out the window he sees the puppy running down the farm lane towards him with the Clydesdales shortly behind.
<u>Act 5—Denouement:</u> Conflict is resolved and tension is released creating normalcy. Comedy ends with the main character better off and tragedy being worse off.	Act 5, (denouement) happens as the conflict is resolved, creating normalcy for the characters and a sense of release of tension and anxiety. The farmer welcomes the puppy home as he dries him off in the kitchen sink, clean from the mud. The puppy licks him in the face. Then the farmer sits down on a bale of hay in the barn with the puppy and a Clydesdale as he enjoys a Budweiser. The commercial ends with “#Best-Buds” and the brand logo.

Sources:

2015 Ad Meter Results. (2015). *USA Today Ad Meter*. Retrieved from <http://admeter.usatoday.com/results/2015>

Quesenberry, K. A., Coolson, M. K. (2014) What Makes A Super Bowl Ad Super for Word-of-Mouth Buzz?: Five-Act Dramatic Form Impacts Super Bowl Ad Ratings. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 22(4), 437-454.

## Like A Girl

The next example is a viral advertising video. Digital marketing has become an important part of marketing strategy. An Interactive Advertisers Bureau survey of marketers and advertising agencies indicates a 53 percent increase in digital and mobile video spending since 2016, with two-thirds shifting these funds from traditional TV budgets (“2018 IAB Video Ad Spend Study,” 2018).

Viral marketing has developed into an integral part of marketing communication strategies, and viral marketing relies heavily on social media views and shares. To be effective, reach is obtained by attracting an audience to the marketing content and then having those consumers share videos with other consumers.

The Always’ #LikeAGirl viral advertising video was watched more than 90 million times, became the number two viral video globally, and drove unprecedented earned-media coverage (“Case study: Always #LikeAGirl,” 2015). The analysis in Table 5 indicates that this successful viral marketing video follows Freytag’s five-act form.

**Table 5: Like A Girl Applied to Freytag’s Story Framework**

Story Act	Elements of Story Act Development
<u>Act 1—Exposition:</u> Characters, setting and basic conflict are established leading to tension. An inciting moment signals rising action of complications.	Characters are introduced as a director (off camera) and actors (on camera) are trying out for an audition. Conflict develops into tension as the director asks them to run like a girl and to throw like a girl and their reactions start to make the viewer feel uncomfortable. This act ends with an inciting moment when the viewer realizes the negativity of the actors’ interpretations of the phrase.
<u>Act 2—Complication:</u> Tension mounts as the main character’s efforts to reach a goal meets more conflicts and obstacles. Frustration builds as opposing forces intensify.	The story becomes more complex. Interests clash as action rises. Tension mounts as a question is posed on the screen “When did doing something ‘like a girl’ become an insult?” The protagonists’ goals to earn a spot in the commercial are complicated when they realize what they have been doing.
<u>Act 3—Climax:</u> Conflict reaches a high turning point that could lead to victory or defeat for the main character resulting in good or bad consequences.	The conflict reaches a high point. The director confronts one boy directly by asking, “So do you think you just insulted your sister?” The turning point of the climax is a realization of how wrong this popular saying has been.
<u>Act 4—Reversal:</u> Events play out in falling actions from the reversal in the climax. Momentum slows as the characters head toward a final resolution.	The result of the conflict plays out as the same question is asked of young girls. The falling action happens as each young girl acts like a girl with strength and positive images. A fact is posted on the screen, “a girl’s confidence plummets during puberty...”
<u>Act 5—Denouement:</u> Conflict is resolved and tension is released creating normalcy. Comedy ends with the main character better off and tragedy being worse off.	The phrase in Act 4 continues with “... but it doesn’t have to.” The question is posed one last time to a young girl, “What does it mean to you when I say run like a girl?” She responds, “It means run as fast as you can.” Girls end better off in this story as a call to action is posted on the screen, “Let’s make #LIKEAGIRL mean amazing things.” Hopes are raised as the viewer is invited to “Rewrite the rules” and “Share what you do #LIKEAGIRL.”

Case study: Always #LikeAGirl, (2015, October 12). *Campaign*. Retrieved from <http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/1366870/case-study-always-likeagirl#0Xqg8M2WYzb37OFI.99>

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## TOMS

A final example is more of a business story than a single advertisement. TOMS Shoes is a company that knows the power of story. Founder Blake Mycoskie created a One for One business model that has not only led to a successful business but has also helped millions of people in need around the world. In Mycoskie’s (2011) book *Start Something That Matters*, he acknowledges the power of story referencing storytelling author Kendal Haven saying:

According to renowned storyteller and author Kendall Haven (author of *Super Simple Storytelling*), “Human minds rely on stories and story architecture as the primary road map for understanding our lives—as well as the countless experiences and narratives we encounter along the way.” Smart, future-oriented companies use this ancient impulse in new ways, by telling stories that people can watch on YouTube and share on Facebook. (p. 25)

The analysis in Table 6 indicates that TOMS business story, voluntarily shared by millions, follows Freytag’s five-act form.

**Table 6: TOMS Shoes Applied to Freytag’s Story Framework**

Story Act	Elements of Story Act Development
<u>Act 1—Exposition:</u> Characters, setting and basic conflict are established leading to tension. An inciting moment signals rising action of complications.	While traveling in Argentina in 2006, business person Blake Mycoskie saw firsthand the hardships faced by children growing up without shoes. This establishes character and setting. It also sets up a conflict and tension about whether he will do anything and what he can do to help.
<u>Act 2—Complication:</u> Tension mounts as the main character’s efforts to reach a goal meets more conflicts and obstacles. Frustration builds as opposing forces intensify.	Blake discovers this is a huge problem in developing countries where a lack of shoes discourages children from attending school and puts them at greater risk of contracting various infections and diseases. Complications arise as we learn that this is a big problem to tackle with many potential obstacles.
<u>Act 3—Climax:</u> Conflict reaches a high turning point that could lead to victory or defeat for the main character resulting in good or bad consequences.	Upon returning to the United States Mycoskie comes up with the solution. The “one for one” business model. For every pair of shoes someone buys, a child in need gets a new pair. TOMS or tomorrow’s shoes is born. The turning point happens with a simple and brilliant solution.
<u>Act 4—Reversal:</u> Events play out in falling actions from the reversal in the climax. Momentum slows as the characters head toward a final resolution.	Wearing TOMS became a story to tell. Mycoskie’s original goal was to help 250 children, as Chief Shoe Giver he has helped over 86 million and expanded to eyewear for restoring sight, coffee for clean water and bags for safe births. The story plays out with success and expansion of the idea, company, and those who are being helped.
<u>Act 5—Denouement:</u> Conflict is resolved and tension is released creating normalcy. Comedy ends with the main character better off and tragedy being worse off.	A shoe company becomes a One for One business model inspiring hundreds of new social entrepreneurs launching their own for-profit businesses with philanthropic components.

Naeini, A., Dutt, A., Angus, J., Mardrossian, S., Bonfanti, S. (2015, June 7) “A Shoe for a Shoe, And a Smile” *Business Today* Retrieved from <https://www.businesstoday.in/magazine/lbs-case-study/toms-shoes-shoes-for-free-cause-marketing-strategy-case-study/story/219444.html>  
 Morell, K. (2011, October 5) “Trendsetter: TOMS Founder Blake Mycoskie On Starting A Movement” *AmericanExpress.com* Retrieved from <https://www.americanexpress.com/en-us/business/trends-and-insights/articles/trendsetter-toms-founder-blake-mycoskie-on-starting-a-movement/>

Quesenberry, K. A., Coolson, M. K. (2014) What Makes A Super Bowl Ad Super for Word-of-Mouth Buzz?: Five-Act Dramatic Form Impacts Super Bowl Ad Ratings. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 22(4), 437-454.

The advertisements of Lost Dog and Like A Girl, and the business model of TOMS, appear to follow Freytag’s five-act story framework. They each vary in length, brand, and communication form but follow a similar pattern. The five-act form could provide a powerful template to marketers for effective storytelling of their products and services as well as for business itself.

Storytelling author and consultant Kendal Haven (2014) says that effective stories engage and hold an audience’s attention, which is essential for influence (p. 59). Story structure or architecture is a delivery vehicle for a marketing message that enables it to be received and

remembered. Social Media author and consultant Jay Baer argues that the best way to grow any business is for your customers to grow it for you via talk triggers. Talk triggers give customers a story to tell. Additionally, business professors, authors, and consultants David Aaker and Jennifer Aaker (2016) explain that signature stories are a critical asset that clarify and enhance a brand, customer relationships, and business strategy.

The modern marketing impact of this ancient practice was most recently confirmed in research published in the *Journal of Interactive Marketing*. A content analysis of 155 viral advertising videos found that average shares and



views were higher for videos with full story development, as measured on a five-act drama scale based on Freytag's Pyramid (Quesenberry and Coolsen, 2019).

### ADDITIONAL FRAMEWORKS IN BIBLICAL STORIES

Beyond Freytag's framework as five-act form (Freytag's Pyramid), there are possible additional patterns of Bible stories that could be followed in crafting marketing messages. These include creating stories that challenge myths, show don't tell, make the story relatable, keep the story brief, and provide a hook.

#### Challenge Myths

In discussing parables, Scott (1989) writes, "The threat of the parable is that it subverts the myths that sustain our world" (p. 424). Jesus's parables did just that and sometimes shattered the conventional myths of his day (Rindge, 2014). Jesus was known for contradicting assumptions and traditions. The fact that his parables presented views counter to the norm led to people talking about them and spreading his message. Jesus and his message were almost impossible to ignore.

For example, John 7:53-8:11 relates the story of The Woman Caught in Adultery. At the climax of the story, everyone is about to stone the woman to death. This was the norm and accepted punishment for this crime in contemporary culture. Yet Jesus stops the crowd and challenges their thinking by saying, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). The conventional way of thinking is challenged and the reader is left with a different view on sin, condemnation, and forgiveness.

To change people's beliefs and provoke further discussion and retelling of their brand stories, marketers could craft stories in ways that challenge conventional thinking. Marketers could challenge myths or conventional understanding that is getting in the way of the target audience trying and using the product or service. Similar to the Like a Girl example cited above, they could then craft stories that challenge that opinion to break barriers to adoption.

TOMS Shoes challenged consumers and business to reconsider their assumptions about philanthropy and giving to causes. At a time when non-profit giving was separate from for-profit selling, TOMS came out with stories that challenged that convention saying that businesses

could integrate a social mission within a corporate mission and consumers could purchase products as a way of giving.

#### Show Don't Tell

Christian scholars have found that the Bible uses stories to teach the Gospel and convey theological ideas. For example, Baloian (2016) studied the book of Luke and found that in Luke's writing, he used narratives, or stories, to teach theological truths. Baloian indicates that Luke wrote in a way that conveyed truth as something to be watched rather than defined. In discussing faith, Luke often did not directly define it but rather told stories of people in crisis and described how Jesus interpreted their reaction to determine if they had faith. This method forces readers to interpret the stories themselves and requires the reader to think deeper.

For example, Luke 7:1-10, relates the story of The Faith of the Centurion. In this account, faith is not defined but instead the Centurion's actions are described in a situation where one of his servants becomes deathly ill. The Centurion does not ask Jesus to travel to his home. Instead the Centurion says, "But say the word, and my servant will be healed" (Luke 7:7). Jesus is described as responding in amazement and he turns to the crowd to say, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel" (Luke 7:9). Through this story the Bible does not provide a definition of faith or list features of faith. It simply demonstrates faith through a story acted out in a person's life.

In a similar way, marketers could create stories that go beyond defining a product's function or describing its features. Telling a story of how the product is used in a person's life or how it is made by showing the people behind the product, demonstrates its use and high quality. Substituting definitions and features with relatable stories involves the audience in a way that leaves them with a mental picture of the product's use and quality.

Consider stories that the target audience can relate to that show a product's or service's features in action. Telling people a car is safe is very different than telling the story of a family that survived a car crash. The audience members are drawn in by the story and come to their own conclusions. This causes them to think deeper about the importance of car safety features to protect their own families.

#### Make the Story Relatable

In studying the book of Esther, Berlin (2001) argues that writing history in ancient times included fictions,

myths, and legends with motifs, stereotypes, and conventions of the day to make the story relatable to readers. When studying a Bible passage, it is often necessary to research the culture, beliefs, and conventions of the day to gain full understanding of the message. The context is important.

For example, Jesus told several parables to convey what the kingdom of heaven is like. Many of these parables were references to farming, because many people in Jesus's time were farmers. In Matthew 13:24-30, Jesus tells the Parable of the Weeds, delivering the message not to pull the weeds, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them" (Matthew 13:29). The farmers of the day could relate to this story which helped them understand the meaning of the kingdom of heaven. The roots of the weeds would intertwine with the roots of the wheat so that pulling the weeds could mean also pulling a large part of the wheat.

Another example is when Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). Most farmers in Jesus's day used animals for transport and would have understood this passage. Today, many people must look up the meaning of "yoke" to appreciate that a yoke was a wooden beam fixed between a pair of animals that enabled them to share the load.

In telling a story to convey a marketing message, it could be presented from the audience's point of view within a context and situation familiar to that audience. Even in advertisements, where stories are often fictional, those ads could include motifs that are common to the culture, based on an understanding of the target audience that makes the story relatable and realistic. Not every marketing story is a testimonial. The overall story may be fictional, but it should contain elements that are true to the reader or viewer in possible, specific situations.

Marketers could attempt to create stories that highlight little moments of what the target audience knows to be true in their own lives. One technique in advertising is called "slice-of-life," where accurate portrayals of a segment of an actual life experience is used as the basis for the marketing story ("Definition of Slice-of-Life," 2017). Establishing a relatable context is important before taking the audience on a journey to the main marketing message. If the setting and characters are unrelatable or not typical to the target audience, they may determine the story is not for them.

### **Shorter is Better**

In studying Deuteronomy, First and Second Kings, and First and Second Chronicles, Campbell (2002) notes that these larger great narratives were made up of smaller story units ranging from ten verses (about 250 words) to forty verses (about 1,200 words). Today many digital marketing experts recommend the ideal length for a blog post or online article is between 250 and 1,200 words. Posts around 275 words tend to get the most comments while posts around 1,500 words tend to get the most shares (Gordon, 2016). The most shared and remembered stories written thousands of years apart have the virtue of brevity.

Examples can be found in Matthew 13 where Jesus tells eight different stories to explain the larger story of the kingdom of heaven. This includes The Parable of the Sower, The Parable of the Weeds, The Parable of the Mustard Seed, The Parable of the Yeast, The Parable of the Hidden Treasure, The Parable of the Pearl, and The Parable of the Net. Each story is short in length ranging from 33 words (The Parable of the Yeast) to 154 words (The Parable of the Weeds) (Matthew 13). Powerful messages can be conveyed in a shorter story format.

Dewey (2004) noted that many of the stories in the Bible seem to have been written in condensed versions to be shared in social situations. Dewey argues that the Gospel of Mark was written as memorable stories that could be easily retold in the oral storytelling tradition of the time. The collections of portable and memorable short stories taken together deliver the larger message of the Gospel.

When crafting marketing stories, time could be taken into consideration by abbreviating larger brand stories into many smaller story units. The smaller story units could attract more engagement while delivering the larger message over time. For example, the larger business story of TOMS Shoes has been told in hundreds of smaller stories about the business model and different products delivered through various brand and consumer media vehicles.

### **Provide A Hook**

The stories in the Bible often provided hooks in memory that could easily be recalled later. Jesus told parables with hooks such as The Good Samaritan, Wolves in Sheep's Clothing, and Houses Built on Rock or Sand. In the parable of The Woman Caught in Adultery, "cast the first stone" is a memorable hook that can be recalled later in similar situations (John 7:53-8:11). In Genesis 3,

the story and message of Adam and Eve is remembered with a hook in the phrase “forbidden fruit.”

Stahl (2010) points out that human memory is story based. It is difficult for us to learn the abstract without illustrations that make information retrievable from our memory. Delivering information in the form of a story creates multiple pathways to recall the story and information when experiencing or considering similar situations. Without the story, our memory has limited ways to label abstract information making it more difficult to recall. Hooks in stories provide ways to recall the whole story.

When creating stories, marketers could look for those moments in a story to serve as a hook, making it more memorable and aiding in recall. Hooks serve as a way to sum up or remember key moments from a larger story. For example, the Always Like A Girl viral video told a story that challenged myths, showed the issue instead of defining it, was relatable through a common phrase, and was told in a short form of 30 seconds. The phrase “like a girl” also provides a hook in the viewer’s memory to recall the story and message later. The hook helps motivate engagement and sharing to make it one of the most viral advertising videos.

The characteristics of stories that challenge myths, show don’t tell, make the story relatable, keep the story brief, and provide a hook are evident in various Bible stories. These same characteristics have been seen in successful examples of marketing stories. They could provide additional insight for marketers to emulate in creating brand stories for effective marketing. The Bible is rich with potential insights into creating memorable messages that could aid brand recall and lead to more effective marketing. Additional research could delve further into these and other areas of this rich topic.

## CONCLUSION

Storytelling existed long before the discipline of marketing and before Freytag formalized a framework for story development. Yet, it is often the frameworks of the past that get tossed aside for more progressive ways of doing business. In recent years, there has been a call in the business trade for a return to storytelling as a powerful business practice. Before this too becomes forgotten, to be replaced by another business fad, we should reconsider it as a long-term marketing best practice.

Yet storytelling could go much deeper than simply helping to create better performing marketing campaigns.

Laurie Busuttil (2017) has called for a practical theology of marketing where marketing is done according to biblical principles. Story could be one of those principles. Stories could also be a way to build a reconciliative approach to marketing as argued by Hagenbuch (2008) where marketing facilitates valuable exchanges. Finally, stories could contribute to what Karns (2008) suggests as a return to God’s original design of transparent and fair exchange. This may be best seen in the TOMS example where story was central to the business’ dual mission to serve the company and the common good. And story was central to the TOMS’ marketing success that relied on customers to voluntarily pass on the story through social media.

In today’s environment, younger generations are focused more on experiences than objects and more interested in giving back to the community than moving up the corporate ladder. These same generations occupy a digital media landscape more reliant on voluntary engagement and sharing of marketing messages, giving Christian educators a unique opportunity. There may not be a better moment in history to integrate biblical principles into marketing practice.

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