How to Tell Your Story

A Simple Framework for Startups

BY OM MALIK

true Ventures

Your values are your story.

Be true to yourself.

We get questions like this from startup founders all the time...

How should I tell my company's story?

And what will entice reporters to write about us?

Instead, what founders should be asking is...

What is my story?

Why is my startup's story important?

And how does it fit into the greater context of the world?

A common mistake startup founders make when pursuing PR and storytelling:

An event-driven approach to media relations

This leads to:

- Scrambling to get attention at the last minute of a news event
- Treating PR as an afterthought
- Defining storytelling success by short-term wins
- Focusing on “quick hits” instead of a continuous narrative

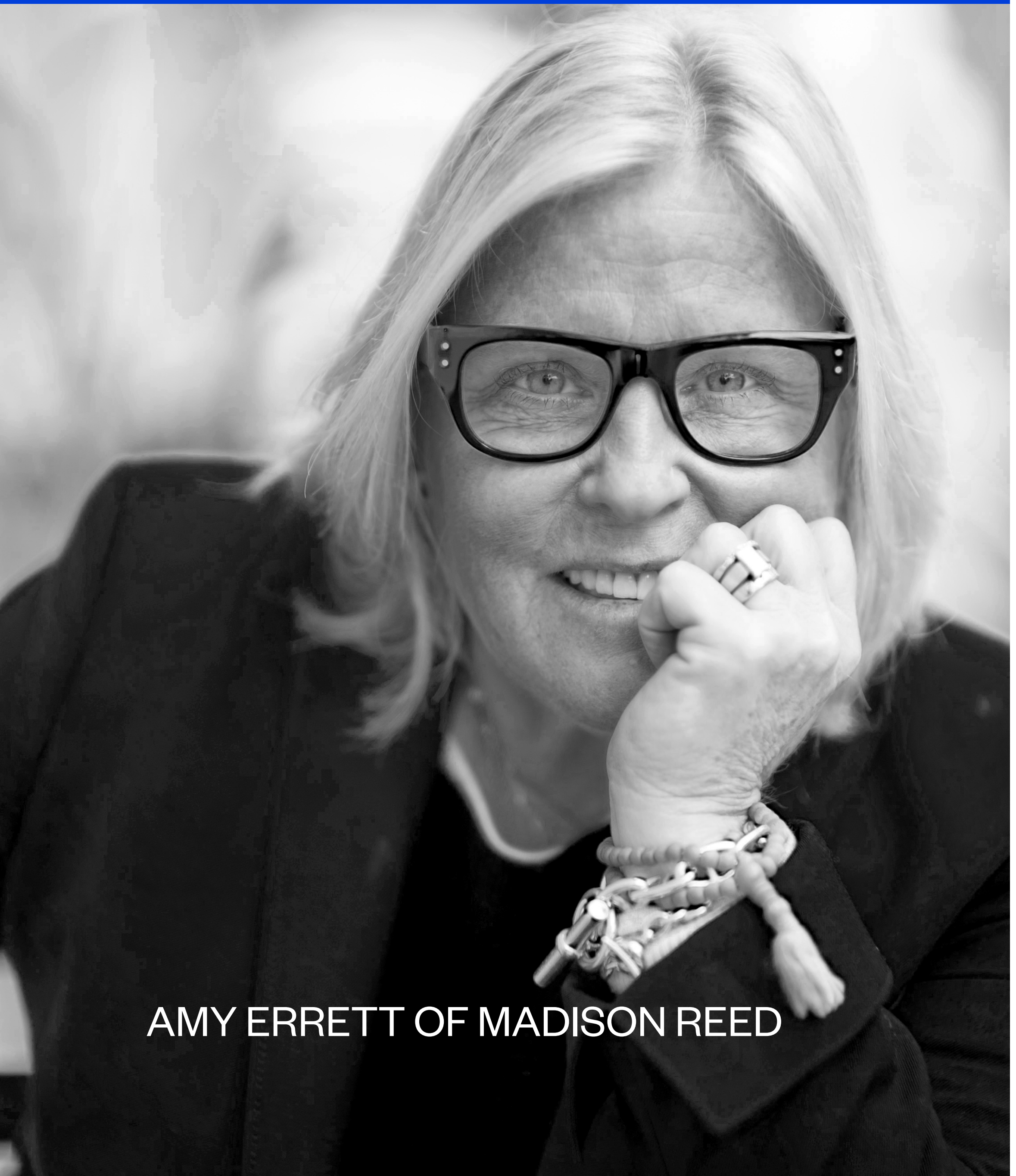
Instead, startup founders should be thinking about...

- Defining their message
- Creating a long-term plan that amplifies that message continually
- Understanding the trends unfolding in their market and shaping the demand for their products
- Providing meaningful context as to why their mission matters
- Establishing themselves as subject matter experts
- Building long-term relationships with reporters

Founders

must shift their thinking from tactics and short-term content wins to long-term strategy and impactful narratives that develop continually over time.

Meaningful Storytelling Example



"Six Ingredients to Watch Out for If You Have Sensitive Skin"

-Self Magazine

Why is it meaningful?

The story supports Madison Reed's long-term, aspirational narrative and mission ***"To make luxurious, at-home hair color with ingredients you can feel good about."***

Now, let's look at how to set the stage for meaningful storytelling.

Before you pursue PR and relationships with the media, ask yourself the following questions...

Who is my audience?

A common answer to this question is "everyone."

Yet it's impossible for a PR agency or team to be successful when targeting all audiences.

Instead, identify your key audience (and be very specific).

Also, know that your audience could change as your product evolves over time.

1

Do members of my leadership team “get” why our story matters and know how to tell it well?

2

All leaders should be well versed in telling your story internally and externally.

Because if you can’t tell your story well to your team, you can’t tell it well to the rest of the world.

Am I ready for PR now?

Some indicators that you're not ready for PR include the following:

- Your startup is struggling to define its mission or message.
- You may change your startup name in the near future.
- Your product is not yet ready for the public (bugs, extremely limited offerings).
- Your company is still in "stealth mode."
- You do not want to drive traffic to your website.
- You or other senior leaders are not comfortable talking with the media and require further media training.

It's better to wait

until you're ready than to tout your company prematurely, as the latter can lead to lost opportunities.

What's the ideal end goal?

4

Consider your desired results before pursuing PR.

- Are you looking to grow brand awareness so you can appeal to potential hires?
- Is your goal to drive qualified leads or gather demo requests?
- Do you want to establish yourself as a subject matter expert within your industry?

When you communicate clear goals

to your PR agency, PR practitioner, or in-house storyteller, you set them up for success.

When you decide you are ready to invest in PR and brand storytelling, here are a few things to keep in mind...

Short-term wins vs. a long-term narrative

By default and sometimes in a rushed manner, startup founders think of storytelling in terms of short-term, sensational content wins.

This could take shape as a brief mention in TechCrunch that doesn’t explain the greater context of why your startup matters or a how-to blog post that goes viral, but doesn’t actually help you reach tangible goals.

While these short-term wins may drive traffic and create brand awareness, they may not support your long-term narrative.

How to think about your long-term narrative

- Consider the human needs your product satisfies.
- Explain why what you're creating matters.
- Focus on what will resonate with key audience segments.
- Clearly articulate your company's mission.
- Repeat key messages to the media and in the content you produce.

Understanding the effects of long-tail PR

- Stories that continue to capture attention long after they publish contribute to “long-tail PR.”
- While attention can spike on the date of publication, value continues to grow over time as a piece of online media is found and referred to again and again.

In the trade journal *Daily Dog*, True portfolio founder and former editor of *Wired* Chris Anderson shared his perspective on long-tail PR in terms of extending one's message across niche communities:

> **It's not about reaching everybody through *The New York Times* now. Instead, it's about seven million blogs and learning to communicate with those fragmented audiences or communities. Traditional PR is oriented around mass media. The new era is about niche media. That is PR 2.0. It's also "Long Tail PR."**

A storytelling timeline for startups

Here's an example of how PR-documented milestones and contextual narratives intertwine over time.

Think of your startup's storytelling strategy in two parts:

1. PR- and content-driven documentation of company milestones.
2. Stories that point to your long-term narrative, entice meaningful dialogue and emotion, and establish you as a subject matter expert in your industry.

These two parts are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are interwoven and contribute to big-picture storytelling.

For instance...

Announcing a seed financing round may be the perfect time to partake in a feature interview where you describe why you started your company, the passion behind the project, and an explanation of the need your product satisfies.

This will help you hit two birds with one stone: funding announcement + founder profile.

What does “building your long-term narrative” look like in action?

Let’s explore it through an example…

Meet Fractyl

A medical technology company working to cure type 2 diabetes through a minimally invasive procedure.

The Scoop

- Type 2 diabetes is a massive problem that affects tens of millions of Americans.
- We all know someone who is suffering from this illness, but rarely do they reveal how much it impairs their everyday lives.
- Fractyl has a strong human interest story, medical technology story, and story of innovation that people affected by metabolic diseases will be eager to read.

Once you know the nuts and bolts of your narrative, you must then practice telling it to various audiences.

- To understand the language of various types of news outlets, read those publications and get familiar with the types of content they feature.
- Great PR practitioners will prep you on what interests individual reporters, what they've written in the past, and how your story can best appeal to them.

Let’s practice telling Fractyl’s narrative to various audiences:

STORY TYPE	NARRATIVE	OUTLETS*
Human Interest	Fractyl could change the lives of the millions of Americans affected by type 2 diabetes. This includes Jane Doe, a single mom who struggled with diabetes and the scary prospect of insulin therapy. Since undergoing Fractyl’s procedure, she now has new hope.	The New York Times Health Care Editor at The Washington Post
Medical Technology	This is how the procedure works: we rejuvenate the portion of the small intestine that is altered by modern diets, which helps to reverse insulin resistance.	Medical Journals Popular Science
Innovation	We’ve been thinking about type 2 diabetes all wrong. To date, western medicine has focused on issues with the pancreas when treating type 2 diabetes. We think this disease is actually rooted in the gut, and here’s why...	TED Talk Fast Company Inc. Magazine
General	Fractyl is a medical technology company on track to reverse insulin resistance and resulting metabolic diseases including type 2 diabetes. Here’s why the co-founders are uniquely positioned to succeed and what this innovation could mean for health care.	Wired Techcrunch The Verge Wall Street Journal

* Many of the publications listed above are considered top tier and are difficult to land. If you are very early stage, start with a healthy mix of niche publications and online media first, i.e., set realistic goals for each stage of your business.

Storytelling reminders

Don’t use a proxy to describe your company.

“The UBER of X”

- You only have a few seconds to make an impression. Using a proxy is a shortcut and attaches the baggage of the other company to your brand.
- Entrepreneurs should be great at describing their product with their own words, in few words. What’s your 10-second pitch?

Don’t wait until you need something to reach out.

The Godfather approach to relationship building

- Start building relationships with niche reporters and influential bloggers early on.
- Connect with fellow industry experts to talk shop.
- Meet with contacts regularly to discuss industry-relevant events.
- Don’t wait until you have hard news to contact a reporter.

Invest time in relationships

and you will see the fruits of your labor. Reporters are more likely to ask for your opinion once trust is built.

Buzzword aside...

Here’s how to think about thought leadership

Thought leadership is:

- Hyper-focused commentary on timely trends within your industry
- An article predicting the future of your industry
- Selective interactions on social media where joining dialogue helps to establish you as an industry leader

Thought leadership is not:

- Medium posts about topics that don't have anything to do with your industry
- A blog post covering your latest product announcement
- What's already been said and done

Controlling your message and establishing trust

Both PR and brand-owned content help you tell your story, but with different levels of control. Find your balance of both for a comprehensive storytelling strategy.

PR

Low level of control over message

High level of authority and audience trust

- You can drive the conversation in an interview with a journalist, but they ultimately hold the key to how your story will be represented.
- A great PR person will secure these opportunities and help guide the message as best as they can by working closely with the reporter before and after the interview.
- However, there is zero visibility into the final story prior to publishing.

Brand-owned content

High level of control over message

Lower level of authority and audience trust (at first)

- This includes your company’s press releases, blog posts, LinkedIn posts, Medium posts, and other public-facing communications.
- Since you’re producing the content, you can control your message fully.
- But authority and trust must be built over time.

Key takeaways

- Storytelling is a long-term strategy.
- PR is a tactic for delivering upon that strategy.

DON'T	DO
Don't reach out to reporters only when you need their help.	Do look to your PR practitioner for opportunities that will allow you to build those relationships over time.
Don't tell your story the same way to every audience.	Do consider your audience every time you pitch an idea or produce brand-owned content.
Don't take an interview with a reporter if you're not yet familiar with their publication.	Do familiarize yourself with the publications that align with your industry and related industries.
Don't expect your PR team and in-house storytellers to automatically understand the long-term goals of your company.	Do brief your team on the goals you are trying to achieve through PR and storytelling to set them up for success.

Additional Resources

“How to Write a Good Blog Post” by Om Malik

“My Top 25 Daily Tech Reporters” by Om Malik

Wired’s Chris Anderson: “Start Practicing “Long-Tail PR””

About Om Malik

Journalist Om Malik founded technology blog Gigaom in 2001. With seed funding from True Ventures, he turned the one-man blog into a media company and research firm. Not long thereafter, Om became a venture partner at True Ventures. In 2014, he graduated to partner at True where he continues to invest in promising networking and internet infrastructure technologies.

Om regularly writes for The New Yorker and provides commentary on tech trends to broadcast channels including Bloomberg West, NPR, and BBC television and radio. Om started writing about tech in the early 1990s at Quick Nikkei News before joining the founding team at Forbes.com. After a short stint at H&Q Asia Pacific as an investment manager, he then returned to the media world as a senior writer for *Red Herring* and later at Business 2.0. He published his first book, *Broadbandits: Inside the $750 Billion Telecom Heist*, in 2003.

Storytelling is sharing your values.

Be true to your values

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