



Brand Storytelling in the EU: Is it a Thing?

An Investigation
Winter 2025
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Who's Telling Stories Where?

In the United States, here and there we come across brand practitioners who take a story-based approach to brand-development similar to our own. (Some, in fact, are friends of ours.) More broadly, an appreciation for storytelling in the domain of marketing appears to have grown considerably over the past decade, at least in the US and Canada.

One day we got to wondering whether we also had counterparts among brand marketing firms and creative agencies in the EU. That was the question we set out to answer.

The Search for “Historia Marki” and More

Our exploration of brand storytelling throughout Europe began with an internet search, starting with a search for the closest equivalent to “storytelling” in various languages. In German, for example, “brand story” is “Markengeschichte.” In French, “histoire de marque”. In Italian, “storia del marchio”. In Polish, “historia marki”. And in Spanish, “historia de la marca”. In many languages, the word for “story”, in the sense of *tale*, is the same as “history”, in the sense of *chronicle*. This overlap in meaning creates many false positives within search results.

Two types of search. We supplemented our keyword approach with a query of which brand strategy consultancies appeared to use or offer storytelling as a part of their approach to brand-building.

These two approaches tended to complement each other in a way we didn’t consider at first: The second type of search tended to lead to large, diversified agencies, often global in nature, that had references to storytelling (or, more broadly, brand strategy) on their web sites. The first type of search was more useful for leading us to smaller firms. Not surprisingly, when the bigger players stake out key terms they tend to drown out messages from the smaller ones.

The Spread of Brand Storytelling

Our investigation turned up at least one important and heartening result: The case for storytelling in the brand development process is gaining traction throughout Europe. We’ve come a long way since Applied Storytelling first articulated our storytelling approach some 25 years ago, and since Seth Godin first drew large-scale attention to the role of stories in marketing with his bestselling book, *All Marketers Tell Stories* in 2005.

A wide variety of EU-based agencies and consulting firms are making a strong case for storytelling. Some have observed that awareness and attention to brand stories has been part of a growing trend over the last decade at least. Few, though, reference brand storytelling in their top-line messaging or home page. Most often, discussions of this subject are to be found deeper down, in the “Insights” or “Blog” sections of their websites.

Storytelling: The State of the Conversation

Different types of marketing business cite brand storytelling or offer storytelling-related content, to a varying extent. These include big agencies, boutique agencies, marketing content creators, and providers of peripheral services.

The Big Agencies. Searches for brand storytelling invariably turned up some of the industry’s biggest players. A close look at their respective websites, however, suggests that they don’t always or even mostly think of brand storytelling as a working methodology. Generalizing a bit, here’s how they *do* tend to reference storytelling:

Brand purpose and strategy. One widely recognized agency, Landor, discusses the importance of a brand’s purpose and how it must resonate with its audience. While not linked to brand storytelling per se, articulating a brand’s purpose, along with its vision and mission, is an important foundational step in developing a brand story.

Brand experience. Bigger agencies might also emphasize the importance of creating a cohesive brand experience across all touchpoints. They may go so far as to suggest that every interaction contributes to the overarching narrative that a brand presents to the world. We agree, though we see the story—or the backstory—as playing a role as the source of the cohesiveness, not only its outcome.

Case studies and client work. Through their case studies, bigger agencies sometimes showcase how they have helped brands to create and communicate compelling narratives. They may position the specific ways they have worked with clients to refine their messaging, identity and brand positioning as forms of storytelling in practice, even if they haven’t set out explicitly to craft stories as such.

Publications and thought leadership. Bigger agencies occasionally publish feature articles, white papers and reports that discuss the role of establishing emotional connections in brand building and, sometimes by extension, the role of storytelling as a tool for doing so.

Industry recognition. Interviews and industry talks by agency leaders and brand practitioners sometimes delve into the importance of narrative in branding. These discussions often happen outside their main website, in industry publications, conferences, or webinars.



STORIES ARE **LITTLE LIGHTS** IN THE DARK.

STORYTELLING

Storytelling has become a buzz word in marketing — our unique approach is to combine the traditional craft of storytelling in the entertainment world and use the same techniques for brand & corporate communication.

Little Lights Studio, an Austrian film studio, summarizes their storytelling approach.

Media Content Creators. Many search results pertained to media content producers, those creating images and videos for companies to use in their on the websites as well as in ad campaigns and other promotions. Here as in the US, references to brand storytelling are frequent. However, also as in the US, the storytelling they are referring to are literally one-off media products. The most strategic of them certainly take a brand's specific vision, mission, value propositions and vibe into account, but they don't necessarily approach their specific product as an instance of a larger, ongoing narrative framework, which is our own primary concern.

Consider this excerpt from the website of the most excellent **Toast Studio** in France (<https://www.toaststudio.com/>) : “Your brand has stories to tell, and that is why it needs to make a meaningful connection with its audiences. Informing, entertaining or inspiring them is what builds trust and deeper relationships. Our storytellers help your brand find, craft and create your brand's stories.”

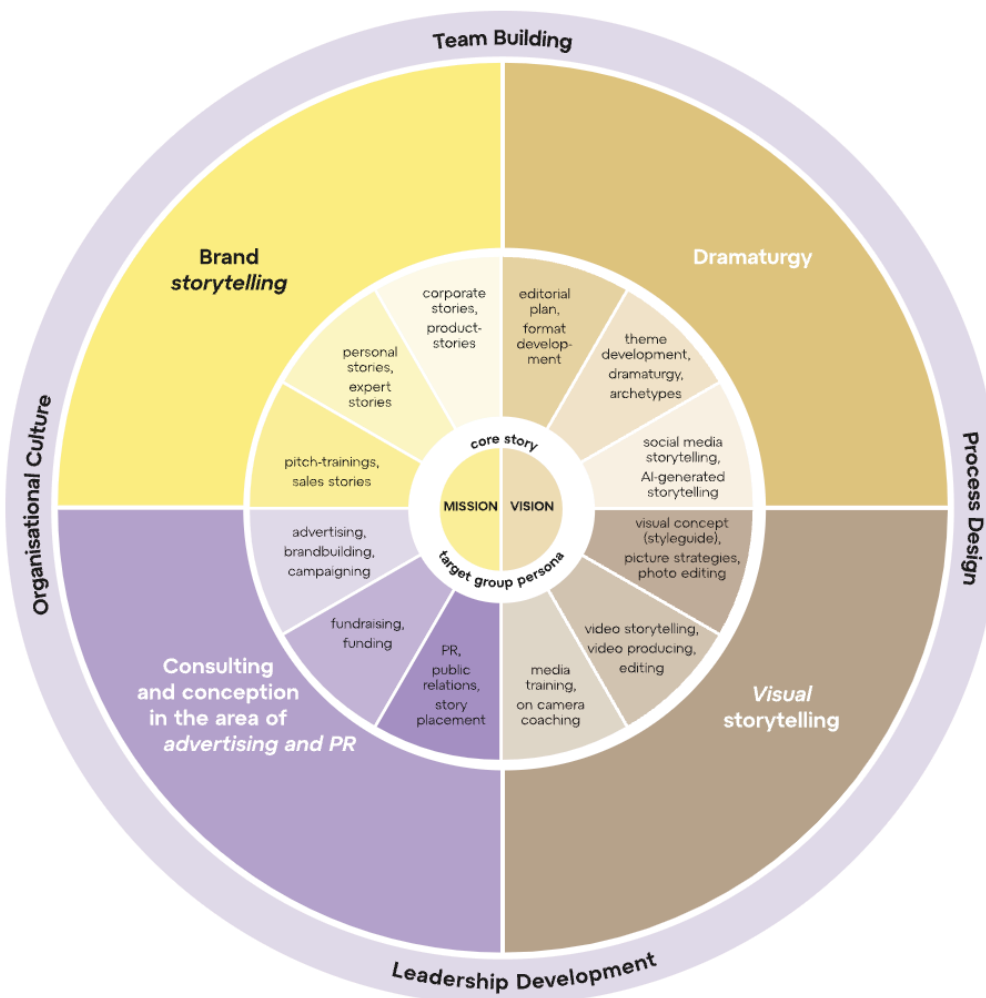
Specialized Boutique Firms. Often, search results relating to brand storytelling in Europe directed us to small- to medium-sized firms with specialized marketing skills such as data asset management, website development, internet positioning, meta space creation, and classic advertising. These results seemed to be most common in France, Italy and Poland (where we are based).

In these instances references to “brand storytelling” or “brand story” tended to be found in the Insights or Blog sections of their websites. The Swiss firm, **We Dot** (<https://wedot.ch/>), caught our attention. While small in itself, it operates within a network of as-need specialists for projects. Their scope, as presented on their site, is broad: branding, website, digital, SEO, marketing, strategy, advertising, design, copywriting, and content marketing. In the “Lexicon” section of their website, they provide an extensive discussion of brand storytelling. Despite this reference, the main pages of their website don't discuss storytelling as a service offering or approach.

The Dutch company **HLO Branding Agency** (www.hlobranding.com) is an exception among smaller firms. While they, too, provide a broad scope of services, even including business strategy and animation, they are also up front about brand storytelling. They call themselves “360° brand storytellers” and make frequent and direct references to the importance of brand storytelling on their site with statements such as: “We don't invent your brand story, as it already exists. We collaborate with you to shape and refine it. Together, we make sure it resonates authentically with your audience and guides your marketing efforts”.

Where Storytelling Lives at the Center

To be blunt, while our investigation turned up plenty in the way of kindred spirits it turned up very little in the way of “peer practitioners”. In the end, we found two agencies that seem to put storytelling into practice in a truly robust way. (Of course, we might have missed some. If you’re reading this and you’re one of them, please get in touch!) One of the firms in question is Berlin-based **Storywerk** (<https://www.storywerk.de/>). Their descriptor: “communication consultants for purpose brands.” Their process focuses on brand platform elements, defining audiences and identity, and development of the what they call the “core story”. Like us, their work also extends to key implementations. Aside from their somewhat narrower focus on purpose brands as opposed to brands and organizations of any kind, at first glance we’ve found our European kin.



Storywerk Navigator: "Our navigator offers you a convenient overview of the most common training and counselling topics and enables you to tailor concepts with practical combinations. So that your teams and management communicate even more authentically, convincingly and confidently with your target groups."

Storywerk’s commitment to storytelling is captured nicely in one of their statements under strategy: “The core story is the heart of your strategic content marketing. It creates clarity, structure and focus and unites the needs of your target groups with the vision and values of your organisation as a central narrative.”

The second firm is **StoryStylers** out of Dublin (www.storystylers.com), who place storytelling at the heart of what they do: “Storytelling is at the intersection of business strategy, well-crafted comms and beautiful design. Sounds simple, but it's very hard to execute.” and when they say: “We work with you to understand: your story, vision and mission; your customers and what resonates with them; your competition and how they're reaching the same audience—and we use all this to craft the right story. Your story.”

They sound like kindred spirits to us.

Stay tuned for reporting on where our conversation goes from here.