Telling the

Design Story

Effective and Engaging Communication

Amy M. Huber

A **Focal Press** Book

ROUTLEDGE

Telling the Design Story
Effective and Engaging Communication

When presenting projects in competitive design environments, how you say something is as important as what you're actually saying. Projects are increasingly complex; designers are working from more sources and can struggle with how to harness this information and craft a meaningful and engaging story from it.

Telling the Design Story: Effective and Engaging Communication teaches designers how to craft cohesive and innovative presentations through storytelling. From the various stages of the creative process to the nuts and bolts of writing and speaking for impact, to creating visuals, Amy Huber provides a comprehensive approach for designers creating presentations for clients. Including chapter-by-chapter exercises, project briefs, and useful guides, this is an essential resource for students and practicing designers alike.

Amy M. Huber is an Assistant Professor at Florida State University, teaching in areas of Advanced Computer Applications, Advanced Visual Communications, and Design Studios. She has presented on the topic of Design Communications at both national and international conferences, and her research has been published in the Journal of Interior Design and the International Journal of Architectural Research. Previously, Huber was a Senior Designer with Gensler in Denver. There, she played an instrumental role in projects that have been recognized on state and national venues, including a 2014 AIA National Merit Award. She has interviewed for projects and presented ideas in settings ranging from elevators to auditoriums.

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Amy M. Huber

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PREFACE

How we say something is nearly as important as **what** we're saying.

We don't just crave stories; we crave the way they make us feel. A single story can have the power to evoke laughter, tears, fear, anger, or a myriad of other emotions. Storytellers can encourage us to act in newfound ways, and believe in newfound things.

Today, our projects are increasingly complex, and as designers, we need to amass more information than ever to provide thoughtful ideas and solutions. Yet, despite our preparation, we may fail to articulate our knowledge and ideas in a way that compels our audiences toward action.

My years of practice and teaching have imparted on me the power of storytelling. Being able to understand your client, garner their attention, and leave them with a message that is clear, purposeful, and inspiring has never been more critical.

This book's aim is to demystify the elements of story, to help readers define their audience's characters, and provide useful frameworks and strategies to craft their own stories using written, verbal, visual, and video messages. Essentially, it's the resource I wish I had going into practice.

Amy

Part 1 Storytelling in Design: A Primer

While designers are undoubtedly familiar with stories, they probably haven't conceptualized the significance and potential of story in design practice. This part will introduce the concept of story, why it matters, and how it can be leveraged throughout the design process.

Ch 1 Human Response to Story

We begin by exploring the topic of storytelling, offering a brief history of the evolution of storytelling and our responses to stories, including their potential to foster social connections, aid our capacity to organize information and help us recall that information, as well as which story elements prompt these responses.

Ch 2 Presenter Meet Audience

The real "stars" of a design story are the audience. To sway these individuals, this chapter will challenge readers to question their presentation goals and then introduce strategies to help them connect with their audience.

Ch 3 Story Design

This chapter introduces the notion of both "stories" and "S"tories. All good presentations are "stories" and this chapter discusses how to generate story ideas involving the readers' point of view, their projects, or project pitches. "S"tories are the tangible representations that make ideas come to life, and the chapter closes by summarizing how to integrate these "Stories" into a design presentation.

Part 2 Modes of Communication

Even the best of stories can fall flat given ineffective communication. The second part of the book helps readers find their voice through written, verbal, visual, and video communication tactics.

Ch 4 Writing for Impact

The written word is a critical but often underappreciated tool in the designer's toolkit. This chapter explores the significance of writing in design and readers will learn how to succinctly and potently distill their messages using the written word.

Ch 5 Speaking for Impact

Some are adept at public speaking, while others avoid it at all costs. This chapter will help readers effectively present information and ideas using oratory tools such as inflection, cadence, non-verbal gestures, and audience activity.

Ch 6 Visual Storytelling

While many designers are savvy at creating visuals, they may struggle with how to fold visual messages into a design story. This chapter will summarize the basic mechanics of visual communication so that visuals support rather than distract from the message at hand.

Ch 7 Storytelling with Information

Designers are frequently asked to define project parameters from a wide array of inputs. This chapter focuses on how to tell the story of design analysis by applying information design strategies.

Ch 8 Storytelling with Ideas

Ideas are a designer's livelihood. This chapter will identify strategies to tell the story of an idea using visual messages including drawings, models, and mixed reality depictions and how these "props" can be woven into a design story.

Ch 9 Storytelling with Video

Videos are being viewed, shared, and generated like never before. However, creating an engaging video is no small undertaking. This chapter explores the appropriate use of video, the typical flow of work involved in video production, and how to conceptualize and create a design story when timing is critical.

To Ethan,
The most passionate storyteller I know.

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Part 1 Storytelling in Design: A Primer

Defining our stories.

OBJECTIVES

- Conceptualize the potential of story within design practice
- Understand how stories influence an audience
- Understand the basic elements of story
- Consider the role of story in your presentation

1

HUMAN RESPONSE TO STORY

This chapter will focus on why we like stories and provide a storytelling primer.

Olivia could sense the growing antipathy with each passing word. "Our firm is so well-equipped to handle the design of your library," she thought to herself. And she had good reason to; the numbers were good; they had compiled a qualified team and created a detailed action plan. They had even received several accolades for a similar project. When discussing these merits, however, she saw the board of trustees looking at their phones; some were even whispering to each other. So, she paused, and said, "Let me give you an example." As she told her story, she could see several of the board members put down their phones, lean in, and start to listen more intently.

Her story had changed the entire mood of the room.

INTRODUCTION

Campfires, water coolers, dinner tables – storytelling occurs in many places and across many cultures. From Aesop's Fables to the Trojan Horse, the most enduring stories are handed down from one generation to the next. In fact, many of today's films are rooted in classic works. Skywalker's triumph over the evil Darth Vader is likened to the hero's journey of ancient Greek mythology. Bridget Jones' endearing quest for love is a modern telling of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice.* Stories can be a potent delivery tool; some even argue that they are the most powerful and enduring art form.[1]

Whether to a client, teacher, or supervisor, a designer's role is often to convince another party that they hold the key to the best possible solution. So, whether we like it or not, design is steeped in the art of salesmanship – and stories can help "seal the deal."

WHY DOES STORY MATTER IN DESIGN?

To paraphrase marketing expert Jonah Sachs, the capacity to spark change and provide inspiring solutions stems from our ability to provide great stories.[2] With more ways to *reach* an audience, it can actually be harder to *move* them. The best storytellers can use their craft to cut through the distractions of everyday life. Their stories act as an **affective primer,** steering the emotions of their audience toward the desired course of action.

As designers of products, spaces, and experiences, we too can use the art of storytelling to shape the emotions of our audience prior to sharing our ideas. If we want to empower our client to take a radical new approach, we can share a story that calls them to action. If we want our clients to be dissuaded from making a bad decision, a story highlighting another company's similar missteps can be a very powerful deterrent.

Stories can serve as a moral guidepost or as a quick and vivid means of sharing information, selling lifestyles, sparking change, or inspiring others.[3] But to harness their power, we need to understand their potential in design communication.

Master storytellers use their craft to convince their audiences of their own world-view.

DESIGN COMMUNICATION TACTICS

Since designers are called to both inform and persuade their audiences, many parallels can be drawn between design communication tactics and contemporary marketing strategies. The best marketing campaigns are thought to contain three ingredients: Meaning, Explanation, and Story.[4] These ingredients help ensure that a message is relevant, understood, and captivating.
Consider these ingredients in the design communication tactics below:

	Report	Presentation	Video
Goals	Notify or Update	Simplify, Clarify, or Illuminate	Illuminate or Entertain
Delivery	Precise & Exhaustive	Believable & Credible	Express & Introduce
Results	Informed Audience	Motivated Audience	Moved Audience
Example	Case Study	Design Presentation	Online video

THE SCIENCE BEHIND WHY WE LIKE STORIES

Stories are often considered essential to the human experience. In fact, storyteller Kendall Haven refers to our species as *Homo narratus*.[5] There are several theories as to why we are so drawn to stories.[6]

The first theory is that stories are simply a byproduct of human existence. Supporters of this premise suggest that our brains are not designed to enjoy stories, but that they are susceptible to being seduced by them. The second theory is that our attraction to stories has been ingrained in our DNA via chance evolutionary adaptations. The third theory suggests that stories were a survival tool.[7] This final proposition may be surprising since stories do not outwardly seem to satisfy the fundamental needs of our hunter-gatherer ancestors (e.g., food, water, & procreation), although cave paintings suggest that our ancient ancestors used stories to recount life-altering experiences. A story about an epic hunting adventure, for example, provided lessons about which animals would make for a good dinner (and maybe even which would want them for dinner). At the same time, the storyteller likely appeared more attractive by showcasing the skills and qualities that would make for an ideal mate.

THE EVOLUTION OF STORY

Over time, stories became more complex, in turn, serving more purposes. As our societies advanced (and our survival became more secure), our stories no longer had to be grounded in facts. Our ancestors grew to love the intense drama and suspense made possible only by fictionalized stories. These stories provided entertainment and a release from the trials and tribulations of war, plague, and famine. However, even amidst the comforts of modern life, we continue to enjoy such escapes.

In fact, researchers Tooby and Cosmides asserted that our brains have a built-in reward system that attracts us to fictional experiences, even when we wouldn't enjoy an obvious payoff.[8] This may explain why, on a rainy Saturday afternoon, we may prefer to binge-watch our favorite show instead of reworking our portfolio.

However, evidence suggests that stories are more than merely tools of distraction, and research has provided some valuable insights surrounding how stories help us form social connections, organize information, and even learn right from wrong.

Figure 1.0
Stories help us form social connections, organize information, & learn right from wrong

STORIES IN BUILDING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

We are social creatures. Belonging to something bigger than ourselves gives us purpose, and affiliation brings us comfort. Our social yearnings influence how we spend our time. We live, work, and play beside each other in families, organizations, and communities. In fact, studies have suggested that we spend 80% of our waking hours alongside other people.[9] Much of this time is spent in conversation and it is estimated that we spend 6 –12 hours of each day engaged in dialogue.[10] We might assume that most of these conversations focus on goal-oriented matters such as career aspirations or finances but, when studied, the content of most conversations was centered on either ourselves or specific individuals – even in professional settings like university classrooms and corporate lunches.[11] We don't discuss business proposals or learning objectives; we discuss ourselves and each other – that is to say, we gossip.

GOSSIP

While our mothers may have warned us about the dangers of gossip, they also taught us to look after each other. In a sign of fellowship, our primate cousins spend much of their day performing acts of social grooming. In other words, to show affection, they clean their friends and family. While we humans have similar goals for expressing solidity and social order, gossip frees up our hands to perform other tasks.[12]

Gossip has a bad reputation, but not all of it is bad. Researchers have suggested that gossip serves several purposes, allowing us to seek and share information,[13] express opinions, obtain guidance, define social norms, and satisfy our desire to belong.[14] In these intimate exchanges, there can be benefits for both parties. Those listening may gain newfound insight, while the teller might benefit from added stature or reciprocity. Essentially, since you shared something with me, I'll return the favor.[15]

Gossip has worked so well for our species that it is considered universal across cultures.[16] Whether our gossip sessions stem from factual or fictional accounts (or somewhere in between), gossip is a form of storytelling, complete with characters, conflict, and intrigue.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt said that without gossip. . .
"there would be chaos and ignorance."[17]

Gossip is a form of intimate storytelling that we use to share information and connect with others.

FICTIONAL STORIES

Gossiping about a co-worker is not the only way story shapes our social interactions. Since fictional stories simulate social experiences, evidence suggests that they also shape how we interact with others. When researchers compared both the emotional states and personality traits of individuals who read either a story-based or factual account about the same information, readers of the story version experienced significantly greater changes in their personality traits.[18] Since stories often contain vivid descriptions of a character's mental state, they are thought to improve our social awareness too.[19] Researchers found that fiction readers have greater sense of empathy,[20 21] and were more attuned to the intentions and opinions of others.[22]

STORIES FOR ORGANIZING INFORMATION

Along with building social connections, our brains have an innate desire to organize information, and stories can help us link information into a series of events, then align those events with our own experience.

LINKING EVENTS WITH A STORY

Our mothers may have also warned us about the consequences of making assumptions, and for a good reason, since our assumptions can often be wrong. To avoid accepting incorrect ideas, our brains seek to categorize these ideas into causes and corresponding effects; this is known as **causal reasoning**.[23] Stories can aid causal reasoning by helping the audience link a series of events rather than wrestle with disconnected anecdotes.[24] Author Lisa Cron explained cause and effect with the mantra of *If, Then,* and *Therefore.*[25]

> ***If*** there is an action,
> ***then*** another event will follow;
> ***therefore,*** we should either embark upon or avoid it.

As an example. . . *if* we work on our portfolio, *then* we might land the job; *therefore,* we should work on our portfolio.

Stories help audiences to more seamlessly connect the If, Then, and Therefore lines of reasoning.

LIFE LESSONS WITH *IF, THEN,* AND *THEREFORE*

Let's say your 7-year-old niece cannot be convinced that she was wrong to poke fun at a friend's outfit, choosing instead to project the blame on the classmate for making what she calls "a ghastly decision." Being a good auntie or uncle, you are hoping to share with her the ill effects of vanity.

To do so, you could outline the relationship between vanity and narcissism, suggest how vanity might damage her friendships, or advise her that her comments might hurt her reputation. While such insights are rational and valid, your niece is not likely to be moved by them, much less pass down these anecdotes to her own children.

Another option would be a thoughtful retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's fable, "The Emperor's New Clothes," wherein the emperor's vanity kept him from admitting that he could not see the weaver's magical thread. The effect was that he unwittingly paraded down the streets of his kingdom, completely naked, – her lesson, admit when you are wrong.

Figure 1.1 Stories shape how we interact with others

LINKING A STORY'S EVENTS TO OUR OWN EXPERIENCE

Another way our brains attempt to understand new information is to align it with our own experiences,[26] and stories have an uncanny way to help us do so. In a good story, when the main character is scared, we're scared, when they're triumphant, we too bask in their glory. Essentially, we share their emotions.

Our emotions are due to a chain of reactions set off in our brain. Dopamine causes our brains to anticipate the new experiences offered in the story.[27] Brain scans have shown that when the characters embark on these new experiences, various regions of the brain track different aspects of the story. Some of these areas actually mirror those that would be used by the characters themselves during the story's unfolding events; this is why we feel embarrassed when a character has an awkward conversation. We construct visual and motor representations that essentially mimic the story's events as if we are going through them ourselves.[28] This causes our brains to produce the stress hormone cortisol when our hero is struggling,[29]and oxytocin when a stranger offers kindness.[30] If the main character is pursuing a goal, even more regions of our brain are engaged.[31] Not only can we experience our hero's struggles and triumphs, but we can use them as a guide should we encounter a similar situation.

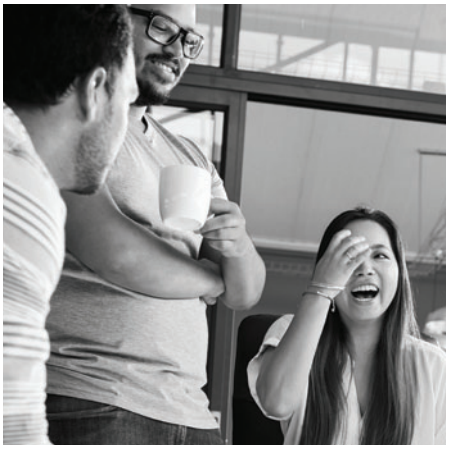

Figure 1.2
Stories can help us link events together & to our own experiences

ORGANIZATION OPPORTUNITY

To leverage the brain's naturally occurring chain of chemical reactions, designers can craft a story that helps their audience link events. For example, instead of discussing the merits of a floor plan, they can share a story about the experience one may have as they enter and move throughout the space. The designer weaves a story about the character's journey, highlighting design features along the way. The audience can then link the spaces in their minds and use causal reasoning to envision how others might use those spaces. In their minds, *if* the space is designed this way, *then* building occupants might be able to experience it in this manner; *therefore,* this is the best design. They might even align the story with a positive event in their own lives – the effect can be quite potent.

EXERCISE 1.0 USING STORY TO LINK EVENTS

Putting your linking skills to the test.

Look around the space you're currently in until you see three words.

Write a paragraph-long short story that links these three words together.

STORY AS MORAL GUIDEPOST

"Human beings share stories to remind each other of who they are and how they should act."[32]

Part **policeman** and part **teacher,** was how Haidt characterized the role of story in our society,[33] meaning that stories represent a society's values, along with the consequences of ignoring those values. And while we may no longer be asked to state the moral of a story, the reality is that whether they teach us to care for one another or warn us of the ills facing our society, almost all stories present us with a takeaway.

Many story morals are threaded into our everyday values. We shy away from giving false alarms for fear of *crying wolf.* Aesop taught us to value quality over quantity in the "Lioness and the Vixen," and not to count our chickens before they hatch in the "Milkmaid and her Pail." Greek mythology reminds us of our own vulnerabilities, or our *Achilles heel,* and even to be cautious of suspicious emails for fear of opening a *Trojan horse.* Such stories have been gifted to us so that we might know what would befall us if we were to follow a similar path. They prompt us to recall past experiences and what was learned from those experiences so that we can predict how others will react when facing them too.[34] The best part is that we can simulate these experiences without having to actually go through them ourselves, much less the aftermath. We don't have to be the naked emperor to learn from his missteps.

Stories ask us to recall past experiences & what we learned from those experiences.

INFLUENCING OUR BELIEFS

Evidence suggests that stories can also influence how we behave.[35] If we identify with a character, we may be more likely to embody their positive attributes. And these changes are thought to be relatively stable, meaning they do not change right after the story is over. In fact, researchers suggest that beliefs changed as a result of a story may even grow stronger over time.[36] This insight led researchers to suggest that a story's ability to psychologically transport an audience is a "powerful means of altering our view of the world."[37]

Listening to the stories of others is not the only way they frame our values. By generating our own stories, we can describe our experiences, and in turn, better understand ourselves. Mental health professionals have long used this tactic when treating their patients. In fact, psychiatrist and author Bradley Lewis wrote that "psychiatrists listen to stories more than anything else they do."[38] So, when we gossip about a coworker, not only are we attempting to bond with colleagues, but the act itself can be cathartic.

Within design, stories can be used as a call to action or to justify ideals. For example, if a designer wants to defend a price increase following a voluntary pay raise for their apparel workers, they might tell a story about a young employee who can more easily provide for her family given the higher living wage. The key is to be authentic. If the same designer was to tell this story, but only to conceal their own self-serving goals, their message will likely fall flat. It will be delivered with less passion, conviction, and zeal. Worse yet, in time, they will likely be called out on their deception – especially given the access to information and the hyper-connectedness made possible with social media. Sachs defined these truth detectives as *agents of authenticity,*[39] stating that once an agent of authenticity uncovers a fabrication, they share it with others, thus destroying the teller's credibility. Stories only work if they are genuine.

ELEMENTS OF STORY

To understand why stories help the audience to connect with each other, organize information, and learn right from wrong, it's worth exploring the elements of story. Sachs likened the structure of a story to that of a baseball, the surface of which holds the story's visible elements, such as its setting and characters.[40] Under this layer lie its morals, which provide the story's structure and relevance. Finally, within its core, rests the values that inform it all.

We will begin our exploration at the core of the story.

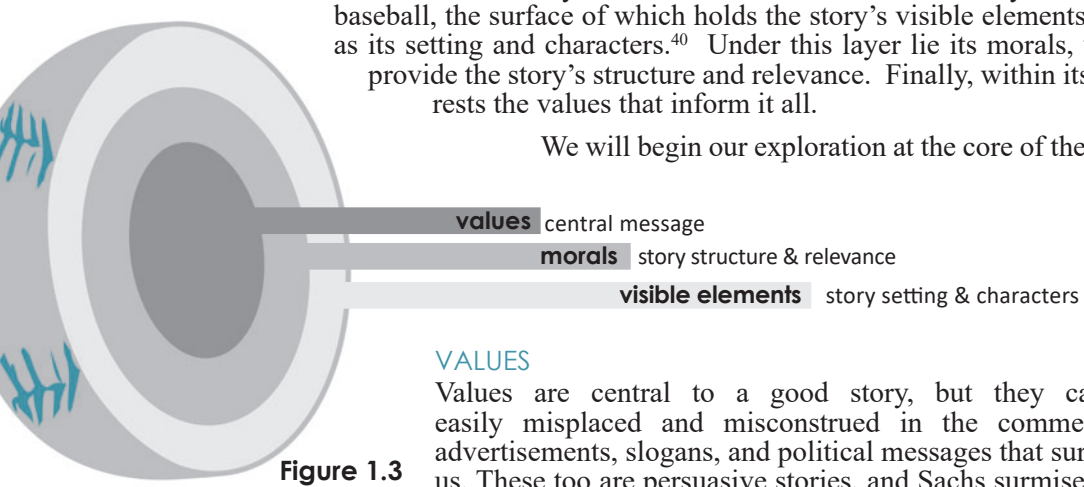

Figure 1.3
Consider the structure of story as being similar to that of a baseball

VALUES

Values are central to a good story, but they can be easily misplaced and misconstrued in the commercials, advertisements, slogans, and political messages that surround us. These too are persuasive stories, and Sachs surmises they follow one of two aims: making the audience feel either inadequate or empowered.[41]

INADEQUACY MARKETING

Sachs attributed inadequacy marketing to Freudian drives of materialism and lust. Stories based in these values exploit a person's anxieties by stressing their shortcomings. The only cure, of course, is the product or idea that they happen to be touting. For example, wearing label "X" will help the struggling professional finally gain the respect of their colleagues. The underlining message is that the consumer does not currently enjoy their coworkers' respect, but the product will guarantee that respect. The moral of inadequacy marketing is that the product is the hero, and acquiring it is the only way to achieve happiness.

EMPOWERMENT MARKETING

The audience is the hero in empowerment marketing. Instead of being merely a consumer of a product or idea, Sachs suggested that the audience rises to the role of the *citizen*. The moral is that you can accomplish something great, and a product or idea can help you to do so. In empowerment stories, the audience rallies behind inclusive mantras such as *better together*, or *we can*. Sachs suggests this tactic is more successful. His premise is that an inspired citizen makes for a loyal evangelist for a product or idea.[42] He also observed that empowerment stories tend to be shared with others far more frequently. As case in point, would you be more apt to *like* a video that has left you feeling inspired, or one that calls out your flaws? To understand empowerment marketing, Sachs referred to **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** (see page 26).

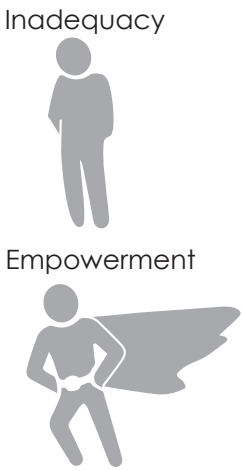

Figure 1.4
Inadequacy marketing reminds consumers of their shortcomings while consumers are the hero in empowerment marketing

TYPES OF VALUES

Maslow was a psychologist who, unlike Freud, primarily studied people who were generally content with their lives. Instead of coveting items or goods, he found them seeking higher level needs, such as finding purpose or making a difference.[43] Sach's lists nine such values which can be used to frame persuasive empowerment stories.[44] Your story won't call upon all nine values; doing so would only dilute your message. The key is to focus on one value that you know will resonate with your audience, which will be considered in Chapter 3.

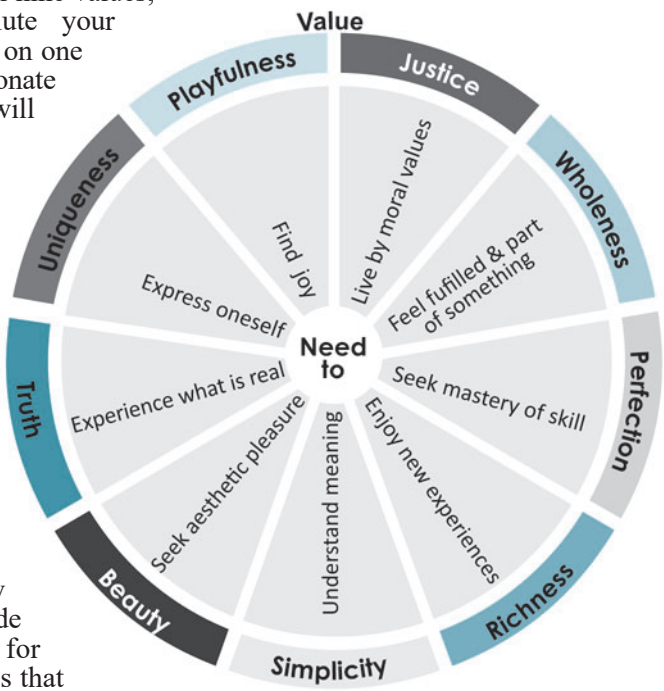

Figure 1.5
Nine values from which a persuasive story might emerge

VALUE TO MORAL

The story's moral is how its values comes to life. For instance, if the audience values *justice,* a designer might focus on how new production techniques provide better working conditions for their employees. The moral is that the audience should purchase from this brand because they care for their employees.

If the audience values *richness,* the designer might vividly narrate the experience one would have when using the product for the first time. The moral for the audience is that they too could enjoy this experience.

EXERCISE 1.1 UNCOVERING PROJECT VALUES

Use the chart above to frame discussions for the scenario below.

You are interviewing with an airport's board of directors in hopes of winning their upcoming signage and branding project. The city itself is small but rapidly growing, and rich in culture.

List 2–3 bullet points conceptualizing how you might base your interview upon each of the 9 values.

Write a paragraph discussing which one of the values you feel is most appropriate.

Remember, more than one value would dilute your message.

EXERCISE 1.2 UNCOVERING PROJECT VALUES IN YOUR WORK

Follow the steps from Exercise 1.1 for your own project.