



How Hollywood can give your brand great character

afia we help companies sound more human

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We've found that thinking about the characters behind brands is a handy way of helping companies really understand how they relate to their customers. And nobody builds better characters than Hollywood. So we've taken a look at how Hollywood character types relate to business brands, and how you can use this to develop your brand.

You'll read about:

- How Hollywood uses myth to inspire stories
- The eight basic character types in film
- The way those character types map onto brands
- What that means for your brand
- Where to go to explore these ideas

How Hollywood uses myth

Hollywood's storytellers have always drawn on ancient myths to tell blockbusting modern stories.

Sometimes the inspiration's very direct. In 2004 the Iliad resurfaced as Brad Pitt vehicle Troy. OK, it wasn't a great movie – but it took \$497,000,000 worldwide. Back in 2000, the Coen Brothers based *O Brother Where Art Thou?* on *The Odyssey*. It won an Oscar and four BAFTAs.

And that's just for starters. King Arthur, Snow White, Robin Hood, Mulan, Thor and Loki, the Little Mermaid, Beowulf and many others have all recently been given the big screen treatment and done well at the box office.

Sometimes, Hollywood's a bit more subtle about it. One person who's very well known for that is script doctor Christopher Vogler. He's spent a lot of time thinking about how myth works. He believes that all myths are, at heart, based on one archetypal story structure.

That structure's centred on a hero (of course). As the hero goes through the story, he or she meets eight different types of character. Some of them are helpful, and some of them aren't.

The eight basic character types in film

Vogler defines four helpful character types:

1. A **herald** motivates the hero by making it clear that things really have to change, like Princess Leia's hologram does at the start of Star Wars.
2. An **ally** gives specific, practical help along the way, often keeping things cheerful too. Think Sam Gamgee in The Lord of the Rings, or Bridget Jones' friends in Bridget Jones' Diary.
3. A **mentor** uses deep wisdom to help the hero achieve something he or she thought impossible – like Mr Miyagi in The Karate Kid or Yoda in The Empire Strikes Back.
4. A higher **self** embodies everything the hero wants to be and (hopefully) can become. The happily married couples who bookend When Harry Met Sally are a classic example.

And here are the unhelpful ones:

1. A **shapeshifter** is impossible to pin down. Sometimes they can be a force for good (think Han Solo in Star Wars), but mostly, like Sharon Stone's character in Basic Instinct, they're not to be trusted.
2. **Threshold guardians** are human obstacles. From the waitress who won't give Jack Nicholson his toast in Five Easy Pieces to the entire Nazi army in Raiders of the Lost Ark, they're just there to get in the way.
3. **Tricksters** are – as you'd expect – deeply tricky. They know what they're after and they don't care what tricks they need to play to get it. Loki's a classic trickster, as is 80s TV legend Arthur Daley.
4. And finally, there are **shadows**. They're the exact opposite of the hero, embodying everything he or she stands against. Darth Vader, Mr Hyde, the Terminator – all great shadows.

How these character types map onto brands

Everyone you do business with sees themselves as the hero of their own story. And as they move through their life story, they meet your brand. Ideally, it'll help them. Sometimes, it might hinder them.

Vogler's character types are a good way of thinking about those relationships. They can help you understand exactly what kind of personality your brand has, or should have. And if your brand's not working, they can help you pin down just how it's letting people down.

Let's look at how Vogler's different character types work for brands.

The good guys

When brands get it right, they break down into:

Challenger brands

In the marketing world, heralds become challenger brands. They challenge you to change your life, and then show you what that change is going to mean. They're a refreshing and inspiring wake-up call. They want to help you become a better person, living in a better world.

The Clipper Round the World Race points out that your life's probably a bit dull, and then dares you to radically change it. The Army does too. That's about as challenger brand as it gets.

Sidekick brands

Translated into brand terms, the ally becomes the sidekick brand. They leave it to you to set the destination, and help you overcome specific types of hurdles along the way. They tend to be very focused and practical. They'll always share the pain, and hopefully even cheer you up a bit.

The Swiss Army Knife is a classic sidekick brand. Its strapline – Your companion for life – says it all. Red Bull's another good example. It gives you wings, but you decide where you're going to fly.

Mentor brands

Mentor brands are far further down the path that you're hoping to travel. Their deep wisdom will show you where you need to be going, and then help you get there. They're much more experienced than you are, but they always share that experience in a helpful, positive way.

The Open University's a mentor brand. It gives deep, wide support at every step of the way, but it makes it clear that you're going to have to work very hard too.

Icon brands

The higher self becomes the icon brand. As you'd imagine, these brands are wildly aspirational. They embody the highest hopes and dreams we could possibly have for ourselves. When you buy into an icon brand, you should feel like you've really made it.

Fortnum & Mason, Aston Martin, Apple and Jimmy Choo are all great icon brands. When you buy them, you're not just buying a product – you're becoming part of a dream lifestyle.

The bad guys

When things aren't going so well, brands can become:

Shapeshifter brands

Brands turn into shapeshifters when they lose a clear sense of themselves. It's hard to understand exactly what they can do for you, because every communication seems to be coming from a different place.

At the moment, the Lib Dems are a shapeshifter brand. There doesn't seem to be any particularly coherent thinking or beliefs underpinning their behaviour, so it's very hard to trust them.

Obstacle brands

The marketing equivalent of the threshold guardian is the obstacle brand. They tell you they're going to help you do something, but then just get in the way. Ever spent an hour on hold before speaking to an advisor who can't really help at all? Classic obstacle brand behaviour...

Microsoft Windows is one of the great obstacle brands. Computers were meant to create a science fiction utopia. Instead, Bill Gates gave us the blue screen of death and a talking paperclip.

Trickster brands

Trickster brands leave you feeling that you've been sold a pup. They make extravagant promises they can never keep, or sell you a product that falls apart as soon as you get it back home. They're only worried about making a sale – they don't care how they do it.

When chain jeweller Gerald Ratner announced that his products were 'crap',

he created a true trickster brand. That's because he made it very clear that his company was consciously fooling his customers.

Shadow brands

Shadow brands are brands that become the opposite of everything they should be. They very publicly sign up for a particular set of ethics or behaviours, and then behave in a way that completely contradicts them.

The horsemeat scandal has turned Findus into a shadow brand. It always claimed to be obsessed by great food, but post-lasagne-gate it's become a poster child for how not to nourish people.

So what does all this mean for your brand?

When people try to define their brand's personality, they can often disappear into modish-but-incomprehensible marketing speak or start talking in a far-too-technical way about research methodologies and consumer types.

Starting from the eight personality types helps keeps things human. It's also a lot more fun – and far simpler.

All you need to do is:

1. Ask yourself: 'if my brand was a character in a film, who would it be?' Maybe one particular character leaps out at you. It's more likely that several come to mind. Note them all down.
2. Don't be afraid to identify with the bad guys. They can help you see which parts of your brand aren't working, and understand exactly what to do about that.
3. If you're struggling a bit, go and watch some movies! Nothing will bring all of this to life more than seeing the characters you're thinking about in action.
4. Once you've matched your brand to film characters, think about the kind of role they play in each film. What do they have in common? Which character types do they tend to be?
5. If you've homed in on a particular personality type, that's your brand. If you've got more than one to think about, focus on the one that really stands out.
6. Once you've pinned down one personality type, dig into it. Think about the kinds of behaviour it embodies. How does your brand reflect them? And what can you do to become the character you'd like your brand to be?

Let's start with the four positives.

Could your brand do more of any of these?

- **Challenger brands** are disruptive. They force you to think about what you really want, often using shock tactics to do it. They don't soothe or comfort – they can be very in your face.
- **Sidekick brands** are cheerful and optimistic. They help you out in practical, specific ways. They'll never talk to you in a vague and imprecise or high-falutin' and exclusive way.
- **Mentor brands** can be quite serious. They never waste your time, but they don't wrap you in cotton wool. Sometimes they can set you very tough challenges indeed.
- **Icon brands** are demonstrably the best. They always exceed your expectations. They'll want to build a deep, long-term relationship with you – they're never trashy or disposable

And now for the four negatives.

Are any of these useful solutions to problems you're facing?

- **Shapeshifter brands** need to work out the one big thing they really need to say and then get out there and start saying it, as loudly and clearly as possible.
- **Obstacle brands** need to make it easy for their customers to get what they need. Take a scythe to anything that stands between your customers' needs and you meeting them.
- **Trickster brands** have to stop chasing short-term sales and start building long-term relationships. Help people feel that you've got their interests at heart, not just your own.
- **Shadow brands** have to act fast to reclaim the moral high ground, regardless of expense or difficulty. If you don't, the dark side will win out and nobody will ever trust your brand again.

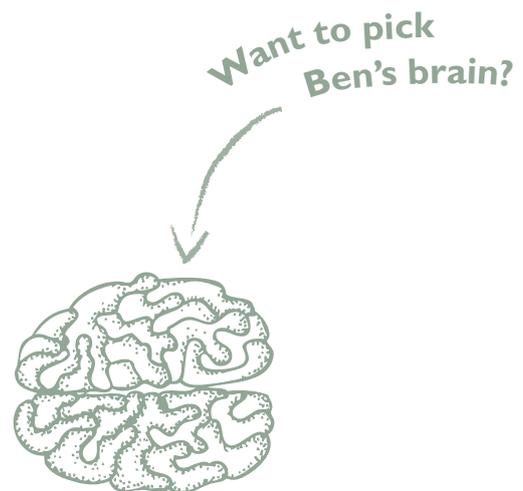
Hopefully you've found some interesting insights here. But of course, these eight character types are really just the starting point, because it's over to you now. You've probably got a film or two to watch, and then some really fascinating conversations to have about the type of character your brand really is, and how you can make this even better.

Exploring these ideas

What we've said in this article is inspired by Christopher Vogler. If you want to dig a bit deeper into archetypal narratives in film, then his book The Writer's Journey is a great starting point.

Vogler's one of many to have been inspired by Joseph Campbell. If you want to think more generally about how myths work, then his book The Hero with a Thousand Faces is a must-read.

And of course, that book wouldn't exist without Carl Jung's work on archetypes and the subconscious. Man and his Symbols is Jung's own very readable introduction to where it all began.



We help companies sound more human

When we talk to someone face-to-face, we instinctively know how to get on with them, don't we?

But when we sit down to write, it somehow seems harder to be ourselves, or our brand.

We'll help your business use the right tone of voice to get and keep more customers.

And have more fun doing it.

We're always happy to get out from behind our desks. So if you'd like to chat or meet up, get in touch with Ben Afia.

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