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How Visual is Your Storytelling

Guest was Ekaterina Walter

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Transcription of the Podcast

Joe Dager: *Welcome everyone! This is Joe Dager the host of the Business901 podcast. With me today is Ekaterina Walter who is a social media trailblazer and author of the Wall Street Journal Bestseller "Think Like Zuck." She has a new book, "The Power of Visual Storytelling." Ekaterina has an extended list of accomplishments, and recognized by just about every major media outlet for them. Ekaterina, I would like to welcome you and can you start by maybe defining what Visual Storytelling is and is not?*

Ekaterina Walter: Hi Joe, great to be here. Thanks everybody for listening. So Visual Storytelling is storytelling as sort of focused in my book, is pretty much use of images, videos, infographics, presentations, and other visuals in social media platforms to craft that graphical story around key brand values and offerings. So basically, how do you tell stories around your brand in a very snack-able visual way so it's easy for people to digest?

Joe: *We've had the Big Data explosion that everybody talks about, and now what I'm seeing is a lot of talk in marketing about behaviors and visual, is there a connection between all this stuff?*

Ekaterina: Well you know it's interesting. Big Data is definitely a huge topic in the industry. The basic human behaviors didn't really change. We always wanted to know what

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works, what doesn't work when we talk about something or when we market something. We wanted to see the results in real-time. So it's the same with the trends that we're seeing right now which Visual Storytelling is one of them. Real-time marketing is another which I also mentioned in the book. There's a chapter on that. But the reality is that human behavior really didn't change. If you look at the history, language only existed for probably about 5,000 years. The rest of the time people communicated through visuals, through drawings.

It's easier for humans to process visuals. The human brain actually processes visuals 60,000 times faster than it processes text. We think in pictures. Thinking in pictures and images is in our nature. It's very much part of who we are. What happens is images act like shortcuts to the brain because studies show about 93% of communications are nonverbal. You get that communication from seeing how people communicate and also absorbing the imagery part of how the stories and the images kind of fit into the current environment or current context. That way there are a lot of tests that show you that our behaviors and how we absorb information naturally draws towards visuals and images – very short, very easy to digest in the overall context.

Joe: *Well is that kind of like the dumbing of us all because we really more on pictures and less on content?*

Ekaterina: Not really. Because again from the beginning of time we did rely on pictures for pretty much almost anything and we relied on our nonverbal skills and our intuition. And that's what human beings are all about. But what starts happening is what I call the

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“age of infobesity.” We are so inundated with information. I mean think about it this way, from the beginning of time – so go back all the way to the beginning of time – till the year 2003, that amount of information that we produced we are now cranking out every 48 hours. So if that’s the case, imagine how hard it is for us to process all this information that’s coming our way. So what happens is visuals and stories – which is stories are so much easier to digest – they now serve as filters for us to filter out the information that we truly want or might want to consume in particular contexts. So it’s not just content anymore. It’s content, context, and relevance. So because of that whole “age of infobesity” and because of society living sort of faster more intense, people need those filters to help them identify what portions of that information they’re going to consume. So for marketers and designers and pretty much any business owner, the visual portion becomes extremely critical of how you present not only yourself but your product, your brand, etc.

Joe: *Is that why I would think that most of the platforms that seem to go to that magic word viral seems to be more the YouTube or the Pinterest, right?*

Ekaterina: So there’s no such thing as viral. Viral doesn’t exist and I actually hate the fact that this word is actually part of our vocabulary. What we mean by viral is an overnight success. But if you look behind any overnight success, any business overnight success, any content strategy overnight success, anything, there’s always a lot of hard work, a lot of preparation, a lot of thought that got put into that viral aspect, and a lot of the times a lot of budget too. There’s no such thing as viral. There is such a thing as “How do I produce content that really truly hits the nerve? How do I produce the content that emotionally connects with people? How do I produce the content that not just everybody under the

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sun, but people in my community can relate to?” That is the most critical piece that everybody is missing. Please everybody; we want everybody to think this is funny. We want everybody to think this is cool. No it doesn’t matter. What matters is your brand, your product, your community, and reaching to that community in an important and sort of relevant way. That’s what we need to go after. When we say viral, all we mean is we created a cool piece of content that’s well thought out, that’s our own brand, and absolutely connects and resonates with our communities.

Joe: *You make a great point there and the environmentalists make a great point. I see an analogy between the two because if you want to think global of how to help with these global problems and everything, you need to start local. You just told me if I want to spread the news is to start in my community and do well there first, right?*

Ekaterina: Absolutely. That’s something we always forget – especially marketers forget – because the shiny object for them is the new social network that came out, the number of people that are not yet my advocates, they’re not yet my buyers or customers. And that is the wrong approach. You know people always ask me Joe, “How did you grow your personal brand? How do people or influencers in the communities really grow their brand?” That’s how they do it. Do you want a secret? Here you go. Are you ready? Here’s a secret. They take the 50 people, or 100 people, they follow them and they take care of those people. They take care of their current communities first, of their current customers first. They engage with them first and that’s how that 100 grows into 100,000, into 1,000,000 etc., and the number goes on. That’s how everything starts. That’s what you need to do with your content, with your engagement strategy.

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Joe: *Well you covered a lot of space in your book.*

Ekaterina: I sure did.

Joe: *I am amazed by all the different platforms you addressed and the high level strategy you addressed. I think I made a mention of the fact that all once you went down to pixels and I was like, "Wow!" But you did it in a very engaging way and I want to compliment you on that.*

Ekaterina: Thank you.

Joe: *Was that the point of the book to be able to go to those different levels?*

Ekaterina: We wanted to write a book – my coauthor and I – that offers marketers a variety of things. Again we didn't want to be all things to all people. What we wanted to do was we wanted a book that says "Here's why first of all this is important. Here's how you think about strategic approach." So that's why there's a chapter on strategy. "What mentality you should utilize to build the strategies for that, sort of the content strategy." But then we also wanted to make sure that the book also serves very much as a how-to. How do you engage on different platforms? What are the tips if you're producing different types of content like images or videos or infographics or cartoons, which is becoming more and more popular? Your presentations, SlideShare and presentations become really powerful in the information age now. We wanted to make sure that it's a variety of if you

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want a bigger view, bird's eye view, here it is and here are the things that you need to ask yourself while building the strategy but also here are additional tips that if you want dig into tactics, you get that. From what I'm hearing from you hopefully we succeeded with that.

Joe: *Is Visual Storytelling just an extension of PowerPoint? Is it a little more than that?*

Ekaterina: Visual Storytelling is telling a story in any visual format. It's not just a PowerPoint, which we all know death by PowerPoint, they tell in corporate America. It's like unless it's in PowerPoint it doesn't exist. But the reality is it's important to tell your stories in a variety of formats. For example GIFs, quick animated sort of types of stories or animations; they're doing very well on Tumblr. If you want to relate to your audience on Tumblr, look at using just images and or animations. There is presentation and more informational educational presentations do well on SlideShare because SlideShare has now become sort of this depository of business information where people use it almost as Google to find a particular piece of information mostly on business and marketing. There's also a lot of other creative ways.

For example infographics, there's definitely a lot of bad ones out there – a ton of noise. But if you create an infographic in a smart way with a clean design and with just the right information that people are looking for, that infographic in itself becomes sort of a calling card. You don't need a press release to come with it, you don't need a blog post to come with it. People use it as something useful but also very fun to look at. There are also different types of images you can create. People love things like statistics and quotes and

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very unavailable information. There is also memes. The rise of memes in the last decade was insane. Just the whole cap memes and a lot of others. Now brands are starting to get on that bandwagon and using those trends to reach their audiences in smarter, maybe more fun ways. There are a lot of different content types that you could consider for sure.

Joe: *Do the same principles in Visual Storytelling apply from regular storytelling? Can I have a hero's journey?*

Ekaterina: The principles of storytelling are very sort of similar in whatever you do. Now obviously if you write a play that's different because you really need to make sure all the detail is thought out of how you tell that story. Brand marketers are specifically now learning to tell stories in six seconds on Vine, in ten seconds, half a minute on YouTube, etc. That is a true skill. Having to tell a story of your values, or what your brand is all about in a minute or two is becoming an invaluable skill and a very, very cool way to extend your brand if you will. I think the overall backbone of storytelling will never change.

We are humans and we like to tell stories and the stories always have the beginning, the middle, and the culmination of an end. If you craft it right all the way throughout, it's definitely a story that people want to stick around for but doing that in a now way shorter period of time because attention spans are shortening. That is a true art form because now every year scientists say that human or adult attention spans are now shortened. So now we are down to between three seconds and eight seconds. The question becomes, "As a brand, as a business owner, how can you tell a story in that specific short period of time to catch that attention?"

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Joe: *We talk about seeing the pictures and being able to recognize things in three to eight seconds do that, but can Visual Storytelling have deeper meaning? Can it be something people spend time with?*

Ekaterina: Absolutely. That's a great question. You have a lot of different types of content. You have short form content. You have long form content and obviously visuals. What I tell folks is you still have a very big impact with the long form content. For example your blogs; your blogs that tell stories, provide useful information or how to tips for your audience, something that provides a mixture of utility and entertainment. But to get them there how do you tell the right story? How do you draw them in with the right visuals so they can click through and actually spend more time on your website, spend more time with you and listening to your stories, watching your videos. I think its elements of how do you grab the attention but then, what is the content that you're offering to hold that attention. Storytelling is definitely way deeper than just three seconds and six seconds, but how do you bring those people to hear those stories, and how do you keep them there wherever there is – website, or your event, or just one face to face lunch. It doesn't matter. How do you then keep their attention longer term to the point where they want to become a part of your community? They are inspired to become a part of your movement.

Joe: *What's the mistake someone makes when they first enter into Visual Storytelling? What are some of the traps I need to avoid?*

Ekaterina: They try to cram a lot of marketing messaging or product messaging into a

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very small space. They try to force it down people's throats. And people don't want to build relationships with you just because all they want to see is your product information. They want to build relationships with you because they want to hear you but also be heard. They want that really two way relationship. So that biggest mistake is we're trying to design something really cool and really useful but let's make sure that our marketing product message is crammed everywhere where we can find a free corner. And another mistake is even doing that design wise. If you have something cool that works but "Oh well no there needs to be a bunch of text in here because people will really not get it." If you have to cram a bunch of text into a really cool visual that's self-explanatory, then that visual is not self-explanatory enough. So there are a lot of those mistakes where people still want to cram words in where they sometimes need to leave people to guess a little bit or give people whitespace to noodle on the image that you're providing or whatever message you're trying to convey without being too prescriptive.

Joe: *So we need whitespace?*

Ekaterina: You know whitespace – there are a lot of studies that have been done that say that whitespace is fantastic for creativity. Steve Jobs used to go away for a number of days to just go to an orchard or sit with Buddhas and just think and clear his mind and come back with amazing thoughts on product design. Whitespace is definitely a friend of creativity.

Joe: *I have a blog and I have been writing in it and I have been writing things on website design, I can't jump and go more visual to my audience because I'll lose my audience. Is*

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there a way that you can go gradually into Visual Storytelling and test it?

Ekaterina: Well you absolutely can and I'll tell you why. An example is a friend of mine Jeff Livingston, a great photographer, fantastic photographer – he's had a blog for years. He wrote on topics like social media and marketing and a number of others – just a really good writer. He's also a very avid photographer so when he puts out a blog post versus posting his pictures on social sites, he noticed-. I actually talked to him just a couple weeks ago and he said, "I notice that I get more leads from just posting pictures out there. The people are asking me to come do work for them or consult them than he's getting from off of the blog." You have a blog which is great but why don't you open an Instagram account or a Tumblr account that's more of an image/short-form network and connect with younger audiences there or different audiences that potentially come to your blog.

You can also do a combination and start transitioning. If you're used to writing 500, 800 word blog posts, start doing 300 words with very visual bullet points but then also a number of images that accompany that. Maybe even try to take images yourself even if it's what I call low-fi, which is images taken on your mobile phone on the go and incorporate it because it adds more personality. "Hey I've been to Seattle and here's the image of the waterfront and here's the story that happened to me there." Just personalize it more. Don't just spray it out there but just personalize it. Add a little bit more visuals and try to work on having your content become shorter and see if it works because your analytics will tell you whether this works with your audience. Your comments, your blog comments and your social network comments will tell you whether this works for your current audience. I think playing with it and trying new things in your approaches doesn't really hurt because it

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might surprise you.

Joe: *Now do you have a blog or a webpage?*

Ekaterina: Absolutely – ekaterinawalter.com.

Joe: *Very visual?*

Ekaterina: I think I have a combination of visuals plus copy but I'm moving more towards more of a visual style. I also have a Tumblr page that's purely visual that's focused not on topics specifically professional. It's more personal. It's a Tumblr page I created for my daughter. She's five. It is images that have meaningful quotes, meaningful advice there. So that's 100% visual. There are social networks. I'm mostly using visuals when I post on Facebook. I'm starting to move more towards 50-50 on Twitter as well. Absolutely it depends on the medium and what you use that medium for.

Joe: *Who are the visual people that you follow? I mean is it Ansel Adams? Is it Dan Roam? Who intrigues you?*

Ekaterina: I love Dan Roam. Dan Roam also wrote a foreword for our book which I'm grateful for. I loved his back of the napkin books forever. I have them all, even the workbook that allows you to go step by step and create your own sort of strategy and learn how to do things visually. There's also Nancy Duarte who does really well. She wrote several books on Zen of presentation. She's an expert in how to build the presentation the

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right way. I am a big fan of her because being on the corporate side for so long, in my life presentations were everything. So like I said, if it's not in a presentation format the idea doesn't exist. She's done a lot of great work in that department of design presentations etc.

Joe: *Well I think you did a great job on your book. I thought that it covered such a wide area for me. But it was like I wanted to tear pages out of it when I was on certain sites or when I was working and doing certain things because it had, like I said before, it had that type of pixel mentality in certain parts of it.*

Ekaterina: Well thank you, thank you. That's a huge compliment and I really appreciate it. I'm glad you enjoyed it.

Joe: *Is there anything you left out of the book that you wish you would have put in afterwards?*

Ekaterina: You know there are always new things. So it's interesting when I go and speak on the topic I always find new things and new examples of visual sort of key studies and some additional statistics that you always can put in the book. H&R Block just launched the campaign they call "hipsterfication" of taxes. And they've done such an amazing job on it. They try to reach younger audiences, millennial audiences, to tell them to do their taxes, to tell them to spread the word about doing their taxes right. And they came up with the whole website for that campaign but some of the fun elements are images that sort of the hipster tax facts. Like the growing grass isn't really a tax deductible thing. So like literally

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hilarious images that you can share on social networks that really truly resonate with the audience, especially younger audiences. You could have created your own images. There's also video. So they really went all in on the use of images so there's always something cool that you can pick up on and there's always new tips because social networks they change so fast. Twitter just today actually announced that they're coming in with a new web layout for profiles that looks very similar to Facebook. There's always something going on.

Joe: *I have to ask you one last question because it's a phrase I use a lot and I'm trying to validate it a little bit. As I always say the more professional something looks the less I trust it. So in Visual Storytelling, should it be me? Should I worry more about the great picture, the great video or should I worry about authenticity?*

Ekaterina: You know I think it's definitely a combination and it also depends on your brand. Authenticity is always your brand image and your authenticity comes as number one. But what happens is a lot of corporate world things that brand image really comes with a high resolution anything. So I take six months to shoot a commercial. I take months and months with a professional photographer to just shoot a couple pictures of my product. That's not the case anymore. We're such a on-the-go, real-time society. I think your customers prefer to see real-time images of you in your own environment of you building certain pieces of your brand, etc. That said, there are some places where you would probably want to have high quality imagery where it fits. I think you need to ask yourself "Who are you? What's your brand? What would best represent that?"

Joe: *What's next on the horizon? You got another book in you already? I mean this was*

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just published a month ago or so.



Ekaterina: Joe that's a great question. Everybody is asking me that and I have to tell you quite honestly, two books in two years is a little bit too much. Next on the horizon is just to continue to build cool things and write and share my experience with folks and consult. I consult startups and work with startups as an advisor, in an advisory role, and just do a lot of fun stuff and hopefully this summer finally spend more time with my family and my daughter who can't wait. So that's what's in it for me in the foreseeable future.

Joe: *What's the best way for someone to contact you and also learn about the book more? I'm sure it's on Amazon and everything.*

Ekaterina: Absolutely. The book's everywhere. And the best way to find me is Google.com. I'm literally on most of the social networks. I'm very accessible on Twitter. My blog is ekaterinawalter.com, so you drop me a note there as well. But you can easily reach me anywhere and I'm very accessible. I try to reply to almost all of the inquiries. Just hit me up on Twitter @ekaterina or on my blog or anywhere else.

Joe: *Well I would like to thank you very much. I appreciate the time that you spent here and the description of the book. I highly recommend it. It was a lot of fun reading it. It was a nice flavor of technical and storytelling in itself. I would like to thank you very much.*

Ekaterina: Well thank you. It's a pleasure to be here and it was a fun conversation. The pleasure is all mine.

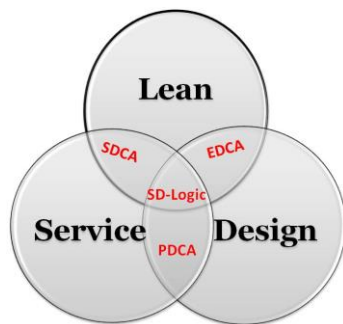
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Joe: This podcast will be available on the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 blog site. So thanks everyone.



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Joe Dager is president of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

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