



#166 How To Build A Brand Story Customers Trust with John Elbing

Janice Hostager: [00:00:00] My husband and I have a longstanding tradition of going out to eat on Friday nights. He's more of, I would say, a routine guy, but I love trying new restaurants, so I'm always checking out new places in the city to eat. And when I find one, I add a little flag in Google Maps so I know where it's located and so that we can try it out on a Friday night.

Recently I found an Italian restaurant with this amazing story about how the owner emigrated from Italy and cooked these traditional meals using their grandmother's authentic Northern Italian recipes, and I knew I had to put it on our list.

Why? Well, it wasn't because they had the fanciest website, and they certainly are not the only Italian restaurant in Austin. They did have great reviews and testimonials, but it was because within seconds I thought, "These people get me. They know I love authentic Italian food, and I love doing business at an establishment that appreciates family and authenticity."

They spoke my language, and they seemed to understand exactly what I was looking for. In other words, I connected with their story, and that's what we're talking about today. I'm joined by Jon Elbing, a storytelling and branding expert.

Storytelling in marketing isn't new, and it's not just about sharing your origin story or posting customer success stories. Jon breaks down how the best storytelling helps customers answer these three questions: Is this for me? Can I trust this? And can I picture myself getting the result?

So here's my conversation with John

Hey, John. Welcome to My Weekly Marketing

John Elbing: Hi, Janice. Happy to be here

Janice Hostager: So for those who haven't met you before, tell us a little bit about you and the work you do because it's sort of different than what we typically run into

John Elbing: Well, I've specialized in, in storytelling, , business storytelling, sort of strategic business storytelling. [00:02:00] And so I help, companies, but it was startups and NGOs and all different kinds of organizations create a kind of foundational story that is from their customer standpoint or from their audience's standpoint.

Too often companies talk about themselves and pound their chest, and so the idea is to, to tell the story of, of who you help and how you fit in that story, and how you can, how you can help. And, and so yeah. So I, so I... That's, that's, that's been my, my path in these last few years.

Janice Hostager: So I've had episodes in the past where I talk about the importance of storytelling, you take a different approach. The framework that I use with my clients, I call it Trail to the Sale, and it really is based on the customer journey. Basically that they don't f- just fall into a funnel and become customers.

You have to be nurtured, and there has to be involvement. So talk about how storytelling is a way to guide customers through their journey, 'cause that's your focus, right?

John Elbing: Yes, exactly. So, so first there's this word storytelling, where I find that there's storytelling everywhere now. And so if you go onto YouTube or wherever and talk about storytelling, there's a million clips out there to tell you all these tips and tricks and how you have a hook and dance on one leg and all this kind of thing.

And somehow that's not what makes storytelling. , So I called it story building because the idea is to find the right story to tell. Then you can use, you know, create a website or a pitch deck or, you know, tell your story, and then you can use these tricks. But the idea is first to, to have that, that core, that core story.

And I guess the main idea is to flip the script and really see yourself from the outside. See yourself from your customer standpoint, and start from where they are, who they are, their aspiration, their challenge, how you can help, and how y- how they'll have a better future. I mean, how we can make their life better.

[00:04:00] Um, and, and so there, yeah, so I, I... There's a way that people, you know, encounter a brand, and if you can follow that normal way where you know what's going on in their head, they'll follow you along. You hold their hand along the story, which creates a trust and engagement and a lot of other nice side effects.

Janice Hostager: Okay. Okay. So with that in mind, do most businesses get storytelling wrong? 'Cause we all tell stories, right? On, on our websites. We all been... Like, this has been drilled into us. S-

so go ahead

John Elbing: know, I've seen, I've seen a lot of tips. Like, I, you know, coach a lot of startups and they talk about, you know, how to pitch and often it's, you know, t- start with your story. We started in our garage and all these things, and somehow you can create a fun, engaging story. But we want to create a story that leads to a sale, not just to, you know, random interest.

So I think a lot of... Well, I think the first thing is companies are caught in what they do every day. They're building a product or a service, and they're helping their clients, and they're trying to do better. They're trying to reduce the cost and, and you know, all this stuff. So, so what comes out naturally is, we do this.

Look what we do. Look how we do it. You know, look how good it is. And somehow the customer is missing in that story. And so the idea here is really to, to say, "Okay, you, you know, your ideal customer, we get you. We understand your, your, your aspiration, your challenge, and, and, and here's how we can help."

And, you know, people love when they talk... when, when you talk about them.

Janice Hostager: Hmm.

John Elbing: you know, if, I mean, if you were in a, in a, you know, cocktail party and, you know, you sit down for a dinner and there's two people on left and the right, and o- on one side there's someone saying, "Look, I, I, you know, I'm so successful.

I do this, and you can imagine the last, uh, vacation I went on," and you know, all this. And the other one says, "Hey, so tell me, you know, what are you excited about? What are you... What... Tell me about yourself." You know? You, you, you'll be a lot more [00:06:00] engaged when the person that's open to listening and to the exchange than someone is that's just shouting.

And w- with business it's the same. You know, if they're interested in you, um, that, uh, that's, that's a powerful posture to have.

Janice Hostager: I, I love that because I used to tell clients, and I still do, especially on their about page, after you've got the whole thing written, just do, a simple word search and say, "All right, how many times can you find the word I or me or us, how many times can you find the word you on there?" But which I think is really eye-opening because we, we just do it because it's, it's a monologue, right? So from a practical standpoint, if I'm writing an about page on my website or if I'm writing, anything on, any brand or any part of marketing, how would I go ahead and create that dialogue when it's sort of one way?

John Elbing: Yeah. So the little trick, you know, in, in the UK they say, you know, you said I, us, but there's the we. And so there, so you're we-ing all over your, your website which is, uh ... I thought that was funny.

Janice Hostager: That is funny.

So they're not in front of us. How do we go ahead and create that two-way conversation?

John Elbing: So I'm not sure it's really a two-way conversation, but it's somehow where the person feels that the brand is c- is concerned, takes you into account, sees you, you know, even

if it's in a generic way. So, well, I guess to come to the, the, the, the, the method, I find that we have... When we encounter a brand, you know, it could be a website, could be a billboard, could be a store, we go through three steps, and I feel that customer-- that companies skip some of these steps.

So I've called it recognition, perception, projection. And so the idea is you, you-- The first, when you see a brand, you sort of have to recognize yourself in the brand. If you don't know who it's for, you sort of think, "Well, I'm [00:08:00] not sure it's for me," you're already, you know, you're already scrolling by or, or clicking onto the next, the next one.

You wanna go for a coffee with a friend, you walk down the street, you pass, you know, three cafes without even slowing down, and then one is the one because somehow you recognize yourself in that. And that can be linked to your identity, to your as-aspiration, to your challenge. If I say, "As a young father, you're worried about how you feed your newborn," well, young fathers will say, "Well, I'm not sure I was yet, but now I am."

And they, they feel concerned. If I landed on a website that said, "We specialize in services for independent consultants living in Geneva, Switzerland, with a white beard and a cat," I'll think, "Ooh, I'm not sure what they offer, but they work with people like me." , And so you start your presentation with a way saying, "You count."

And, and that creates that little extra trust at the beginning where you feel... You know, if I was, um, looking for an accountant and I'm a doctor, and I find one that says, "You know, we specialize in accounting for medical professionals," I think, "Ooh, well, damn, they're, they probably know me better than this other random accountant," because I sort of recognize myself in that.

So, and then on-once I sort of feel like, "Ooh, that's, that's for me," then perception is really understanding what is the offer, how, you know, the benefits. So it's about the people want to compare you to other things, put you in a box. There's ca- what category are you in? How are you different is really important because, you know, everyone, you know, whatever you're doing, someone else is doing it too.

So it's, you know, why-- how are you doing it differently? Clarity is important. You know, a lot of people wanna be clever in their marketing, and often clever isn't, isn't, isn't, you know... it just makes ads confusing. So then you get to that phase where I understand it's for me, and it's really good, and I wanna go forward.

And then [00:10:00] that third step is ca-- I call projection, is you sort of imagine what it'll be like And you sort of think, "Well, I'll have to buy it, and I'll have to install it, and, oh, you know, will it be easy to use? And if I have a problem, and what's gonna happen?" And all those little doubts, all those little obstacles sort of slow you down.

And even if you think, "Okay, I'm gonna do this, but next week I'll come back," and then I don't. You know, I would say I'm, I'm looking for a, a to-do app. So at the beginning, there's one that's best for teams, that's not for me, but there's one specialized in independent consultants, that's for me. It has all these great features.

And then I think, "Okay, then I have to go through my emails and my stuff." So if you... As you said before, if you can take the customer journey, imagine where those obstacles or those doubts will be, and explain how easy it'll be, how, h-how, you know, how... You can even talk about all the little problems that you solve.

In a story, you sort of have to choose the, the main problem you're solving. But then later on you can say, "Hey, then you, no more worries, and you don't have this, and you won't waste time." And close your eyes and imagine how your life will be better. You know, finally you'll be this and that. And so people sort of pre-live your offer and are that many steps closer to this engagement.

Instead of saying, "That sounds interesting, but I'm not sure," it's sort of like they're already thing, saying, "Oh, wow, yes, that would be, that would be good for me." So you sort of have the, the right people listening because they recognize, you know... They're the ones you chose that they recognize themselves, and then you bring them a few steps farther in this engagement, with these elements of clarity and trust and, and things.

So that's the... Those are those three steps that I work with.

Janice Hostager: I just love this so much, and probably because it fits so nicely in with my-- the framework that I use as well. So, so I'm gonna ask you a few questions about each one, if that's [00:12:00] okay. Okay. So you talked first about recognition. So where in the customer journey do you really start seeing recognition break down? Is it something that they only need when they're, when you're becoming aware of it? A lot of, lot of businesses will have different landing pages on their sites for different geographic regions, right?

So they'll have, let's say, they're accountants, right? So this could be an accountant in Chicago or an accountant in Paris or whatever, and it'll be the same company. It'll just kind of be s-specific for a certain region. But once they get past that landing page, it becomes very generic. there a point in which you have to keep that going, I mean, or is there a way in which you, do you have to... to say this.

John Elbing: get, I get the question

Janice Hostager: recog... Y-you understand what I'm asking?

John Elbing: Yeah, exactly.

So, so, so there, so there are many, there are different angles of this. So, so one is, this is about, as you say, you know, the first encounter, the awareness. Someone says, "Hey, go look at that website," and you arrive on the website, and you, you don't have that much, you know, background information, or you did a Google search and you land there, and you sort of...

Y- you're ready to s- you know, to, to jump from one to the other, you know, very quickly. And so if you have that strong recognition, you'll say, "Ooh, that one's interesting," and it'll get you to, to keep scrolling or keep listening. And, and then you can get into, you know, the, what your offer is, the benefits, and all the, all the rest.

So that's one part of recognition is really this idea that, it... that, that first encounter. 'Cause I sort of feel that once you have a salesperson in the room explaining the thing, I mean, y- you've gone farther than that. But even then, there's this, there's this mindset of, you know, coming from their standpoint.

You know, if you've, you know, y- you get that sales meeting and you come in and say, [00:14:00] "Okay, here's our features. Here's the thing. Here's the stuff," that, you know, people will say, "Well, yeah." But, but if you start by saying, "Okay, we understand that you're going through this. This is your issue, and this is what you're trying to accomplish, and these are your issues.

And, and this is how, how we can help," even there, that strengthens the whole, the whole, the whole connection, the whole relationship. There's also a question of consistency. You know, sometimes I get a feeling that, you know, the website is pretty good, but then, you know, the sales call tells a different story.

Or, and then there's a, an ad, and you sort of don't see the link. And by creating this sort of core story, it, you know, p- it confirms it. It, it feels that people are reassured that there, there's something strong there. They're not trying to, you know, trick you with one day with one trick and the next day a different one.

There's a, there's a real kind of a mission and values and a, and a, and a posture there that they can trust. And, and by, by, by being consistent, that also enhances this idea of a re- recognition in this second phase of kind of relationship and you're building.

Janice Hostager: Gotcha. Gotcha. But recognition definitely requires niching down. It has to, or right? Or can it be a broader audience?

John Elbing: So, so, uh, well, I, I think with all the companies and startups and everyone I work with, I mean, I always feel they don't niche down enough.

Janice Hostager: 100%.

John Elbing: You know, we were talking about, the accountant for medical professionals. You know, if you wanna be one more accountant gen- you know, whenever you live, you know, why would they choose you?

But by, by niching down. I find that companies, they're s- afraid to lose that one random sale. You

know, it's, if it's broad, they keep, keep it vague, you know, if, if someone stumbles there by, by chance, you know, there's still a chance that they'll buy. But being sort of, you know, lukewarm for everyone isn't very interesting compared to being really interesting for a, you know, a smaller group.

You can't... [00:16:00] I mean, you can't niche down to, you know, for if it's independent consultants with the cat, well, maybe you don't wanna go quite down far. But yes, being very specific. So once you get to big, you know, gigantic companies, you know, I, I don't work with Coca-Cola and Nike and things like that, but, well, th- I mean, y- how do you, how do you define that niche?

I find Nike interesting in the sense of a lot of these sports lifestyle brands, you know, have this idea that this is sports gear, and with this "Just Do It" slogan, it opens it up to an aspiration ins- you know, which can be, you know, get the girl, be p- part of the in crowd, look cool,

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm.

John Elbing: know, all what-- all everything else.

And, and that niche becomes a feeling more than a demographic.

Janice Hostager: Right

John Elbing: you know, I find that companies jump on these personas too quickly. Okay, it's between thir- you know, 30 and 50, and it's this and, you know, kind of thing. But I find if you're building a persona, start with the aspiration and the challenge, and you might find that, you know, the grandma has the same challenge as the y- young boy.

And if you talk about that, they'll both recognize themselves in this way. , It doesn't have to be about demographics. Yeah, so absolutely niche. But I found that also companies-- A lot of companies will come to me and say: "Hey, but, you know, we do this and that and, you know, we do too many things.

How can we have one story?" But, but that's where it becomes interesting 'cause we always arrive at that one core story because it's-- it takes them away from the product ranges. It, it goes down to their core kind of mission. You know, Apple does phones and watches and computers and things, but it's sort of like we give you...

You're as-- You're a creative, and we give you the tools to, to shine, and that's their niche kind of. And [00:18:00] yeah. So that's a, that's an interesting exercise. And, and often what comes out of it, you know, I've worked with companies. I had this group of 10, 10 people, and I said, "Okay, write down on a piece of paper what your company does."

And I got 10 different stories. And so when they build the story together, suddenly there's this thing that then carries over into marketing, into sales, into how they talk and what they're doing. You know, one said, "You know, I can finally tell my mom what we're doing," because it, you know, it made sense. So it's not just the message, it's this idea that it gives the company kind of focus.

You know, it clarifies this positioning. You know, these are the people we help. You know, it, it, you know, we talk about cu-customer centric so much, but here it's a way of saying you're seeing your company from your, through your customer's eyes, and it changes how you think. You know, w- it would-- Is that the best product we should do, or does that help our customer the best?

And I f- I can almost hear the click in people's minds, and that's, that's really powerful.

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yeah, I know what you mean too about trying to... Well, this is really kind of focuses on branding, right? So are you a house of brand or are you branded house? Do you have one core mission and vision for your entire organization that manifests itself differently? I'm thinking about, like, Procter & Gamble or some of the huge, huge corporations out there. Or are you, d- like you were saying, Apple really, it has different for sale, but they really all to that same aspiration, right? Creativity or functionality. So I love that. I think that's really important. And I've had that, , exercise as well, working with consulting clients, and you do get different messages from just about everybody in the organization, especially when you're starting out, and trying to pull all those together.

It's like, what do we do? And like you said, you get different, different messages. So I think even as your company is growing, even if you're small, just making [00:20:00] sure you write that mission and vision down, just really understanding what it is that you do and what you're all about is so important because it's easy.

We start by ourselves, we start pulling in people part-time, and then pretty soon we have a team, and we have that sort of scattered approach.

John Elbing: Yeah, sometimes these mission and vision statements are a little bit empty.

Janice Hostager: Yes, I would say that.

John Elbing: there's the executive team goes on a retreat and comes back with these sentences and then puts them in a drawer and no one, you know... if you ask an employee, you know, a customer-facing employee, you know, "What is our mission?"

If they can't, you know, if they don't know that, then there's, there's no mission. I mean, it has to help you in decisions. How am I gonna respond to my customer? Well, I, you know, I rely on that foundational kind of mission, values, and, you know, all that. And yeah, so often it's a check-in-the-box kind of exercise, but when it's done well, that's really powerful

Janice Hostager: I agree. I agree. So what's a simple exercise that listeners could do, like this week to improve their recognition and their messaging?

John Elbing: So one thing is to sort of I- look at your, whatever, your website, your ads, your things, you know, from the outside. You know, ask your dad, you know, to come in and say, "Okay, who is this for?" And if, you know, if you don't... If your ideal customer recognizes themselves really strongly thinking, "Ooh, that's for me," that's a really strong position.

And if you come onto the website and you say, "Okay, well, that's sort of for everybody," or, "I'm not quite sure. You know, it could be, you know, but I'm not..." Well, then you have, you, you can, you, you sort of is a strong red flag of, okay, it's not really for s- for someone. It's we're, we're... It's too broad. And I think that, that flipping the, you know, stepping out and looking at yourself from the outside is, if you can do that, that's, that's an easy way to sort of see the generics, the j- the jargon, the [00:22:00] you're saying it, you know, the same thing as everyone else kind of, kind of thing.

Janice Hostager: Mm. Gotcha. That is powerful. Yeah, I agree. So let's move on to the next one, which was perception, right? So , how is that different from positioning?

John Elbing: Well, perception, I find that once you've, you know, y-you've caught the person's attention, they'll, they're, they're, they'll, they'll spend a little bit of energy. And, but they won't spend too much. So, you know, if, if, if you go through your-- There was a study that showed that people don't buy the best product or service, they buy the one they understand the quickest.

Janice Hostager: Hmm.

John Elbing: Uh, so there is this idea of it has to be clear. So I find that one thing pe-people do is they want to compare you to something, and if they compare you to the wrong thing, you're lost. I worked for this company that did a big automated coffee machine, and they tried to sell it to companies as their coffee machine, but this was high-end, you know, the kind of frappuccino multi milks and multi coffee kind of thing.

And they thought, "Why would we pay that price for a basically train station bad, you know, coffee machine?" Because in their mind, those big automated coffee machines, that's the only

one they knew. So we worked on saying, you know, "This is a coffee shop in a box. Compare us to a coffee shop experience. Don't compare us to a train station or, or gas station experience."

You know, your, your employees, you offer them free coffee, and they still stop at Starbucks on the way because that's not what they want. So bring that coffee shop into your company kind of thing, and to, to, to fit in the right, in the right category. You know, there's a, there's this whole s-almost science around category design.

If you own a category, that's a powerful position. , I-I've asked like 1,000 people to, to tell me... I, I won't-- I'll do this quickly just to not to take up too much time. But, give me three ener- name brands of [00:24:00] energy drinks, and people will say Red Bull, and there'll be a pause, and some will come up and say Monster, and then a very small minority can come up with a third brand

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm.

John Elbing: And Red Bull has 50% market share.

They own the category. When you think energy drink, I mean, they don't even advertise their product anymore. They advertise this concept of energy drink. There are 192 brands of energy drinks and, you know, I mean, I mean... And so if you can, if you can really define, you know, I'm an acc- even accountant for medical professionals is a category compared to accountant.

And if you can, you know, then you can apply that. So category differentiations are really important because often people will say, "Okay, it's a CRM." You know, it's not... You don't tell me what a CRM does, a customer relationship management. Tell me why it's different. And, and, and often they'll say, "Oh, you know, we have this many pixels and this many this," but, but it's really about, you know, m- most companies do it this way, but w- you know, and that's fine.

But if you-- But we do it a different way, and that's why it's interesting. And so perception is just this idea that you can come through and say, "Okay, you know," you could explain to someone else what this company does or what this offer is. You know, if you come out and you sort of think, "Oh, okay, that looks interesting," but they're gigantic.

There's a company called, damn, it slips my mind. This gigantic multi-billion dollar company, and I went out to their website. I had to ask ChatGPT what the hell the company did. You

know, and all the, you know, all the, the, the top biggest companies in the world use this company, but, but, but it's really not clear.

It's, "Oh, we empower with AI and this and that and stuff, and work..." You know, I, I, I don't know. So clarity, is important. But, but somehow I feel that, you know, if I was gonna spend a t-time with a company talk- you know, explaining what they do, at least that's the thing they do. You know, they're not as bad.

[00:26:00] That, that, that middle part is usually the part that they're, you know, sometimes not doing as well as they could, but usually, you know, that's all they're doing. So I concentrate sort of more on, you know, on the recognition and the projection, which often they skip completely

Janice Hostager: Hmm. Right, right. Now, there is a risk at being, know, what you were just talking about, the complication. Well, let me back up here. I used to work with a, a company that had creative names for everything they did because they were unique, right? Nobody could find them online because nobody was searching for that thing that they did, right?

So, that would be a risk of being,, too clever and not clear, right? So how do you differentiate yourself, so that you are different? I, I think you touched on maybe the answer to this is just, like, analogies, is that so people understand what you do, but you still speak to your ideal customer in a way that they can understand as well.

Because a lot of times cus- customers or companies will, because they have a real unique niche, they will speak just in language that they would understand, , but it may not be clear to the outsider. Is that making sense?

John Elbing: Yeah. So I think that, I mean, even this idea of vocabulary, if you're using, you know, what does, what do, what do the u- what does your client, what do they call themselves? What, what are, you know, how do they frame their issue and their problem? You know, a lot of IT companies sort of talk about their users, and I don't know anyone that thinks of themselves as a user,

Because it sort of says, "You're defined as using my product," you know? I mean, how limiting is that? Instead of saying, you know, you know, "You're a professional that's trying to do this." If you can frame their, their problem in a way they understand, you don't even have to-- It's almost before talking about, you know, the details of your technical solution.

At some point you'll have to get into that, you

know,

selling something that is technically complicated. But you have to understand why it's interesting way before that. And then [00:28:00] finally, when you think, "Oh, that, that would really help us. How does that work?" Then you can get into the, the complicated part.

I worked with an NGO that was in water purification, and in developing countries, normally water purification, they-- you take, you ship by, you know, by truck, chlorine. You pour the chlorine in the water, and it kill, you know, and it makes the-- purifies the water. They have a solution where instead of shipping the chlorine, they produce the chlorine with a electrolyzer and salt and water on site.

You know, but at the end of the day, it's, it's chlorine and water. And I said, "Well, you know what? What problem do you solve?" And they started getting about people getting sick and all this kind of thing. But when we dig through it, the people in the field, their worry was that the truck wouldn't show up. If that truck got stuck in the mud, they wouldn't, wouldn't have the chlorine to put in the water.

And by producing it locally, they solved the logistic problem. So if you can say, "Hey, you know, you're, you're-- you stay up at night because you're worried the truck won't arrive without..." You know. Of course, at some point the whole point is that people don't get sick. But you, you understand the problem from their standpoint instead of, you know, from, from just the, the, the main benefit.

And so often with the companies I, I work with, that's where we play with these levels. You know, are people looking for a practical solution or something more aspirational? You know, do you wanna be the-- Does the manager wanna be the hero of his company by bringing in this great solution, or do they wanna, you know, solve the problem and reduce cost or...

And what is the... And, and often I find companies know more about their customers than, than they think. And when you sit down and try to, you know, take their standpoint and say, "Okay, we could say this or this or this," and say, "You know, that, that one resonates a lot more." I mean, you still have to test this and see how you're-- You know, I mean, there's no...

It's not magical.

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm.

John Elbing: But there's a sort of thing, well, since I have this solution, the problem must be exactly that. But, [00:30:00] but no, it's often there's, there are levels to that. And if you c- that, that's a way of kind of connecting where your customer will feel, "Ooh, okay. That's, that's how I feel," and that's really, that's a strong position.

Janice Hostager: That, that is so good, and that's not really hard either. , I love that you did a little digging. Even smaller businesses can do that. Just, Have a conversation with their customer, right? They don't need to a, you know, a big agency to go out and get some data.

This is to get, right?

John Elbing: And, and they probably already have it in the sense they've already had a million conversations with their customer.

Janice Hostager: Yes

John Elbing: And so they can sort of sit back and say, "Well, actually, you know, what I heard was this," you know, without even... But then of course you can go out and just say, you know,

"If I, if I, you, you, you're been a customer for a long time, you know, if I, if I describe what I do like this, how, how does it make you feel?"

You know?

Janice Hostager: Mm. Yeah. Okay, so the third step is projection, and I love this one so much because, I think it's something that people miss, I actually miss this one myself quite often. I have, The framework I use goes awareness, consider, compare, and evaluate before the, the sale. that evaluation stage is often, trying something. But I love what you did because sometimes that's not an option. You know, you can't always try something that you are going to purchase before you purchase it. So how do you do that? How do you visualize this process with them, and is it as effective as an evaluation?

John Elbing: So it doesn't necessarily replace the evaluation phase. It just brings you a little bit closer to that, that, that, that next formal evaluation stage. So, so there, there are, there are different parts of this. One is This sort of, that's gonna be complicated. And there's all-- You know, you don't necessarily think it through that [00:32:00] much.

You know, you say, "Oh, I'm, I'm gonna buy a house," and say, "Oh, fff." You know, you're not sure what it entails, but that's, that's complicated. So if, if the-- if this company is gonna say, "Okay, we're gonna sit down. We're gonna understand your, your dreams, but your budget, your constraints, your, your family situation, and then we're gonna find a few houses, and you're gonna fall in love with one of those houses, and then we're gonna work with you to get it for the best price, and you're gonna, you know, have a thing."

And by, by having them just imagine the process, that lowers the stake-- that sort of lowers the fear quite a bit. Instead of going in saying, "Ooh, I'm not sure what's gonna happen," they can already feel like, okay, those are the steps. You see it in something like, say you sign up for Spotify, and they say, "Okay, create an account, you know, create your first playlist to share with friends," and you sort of think, "Oh, that's easy to do."

But even something like SAP, which is this big enterprise-level software that costs fifty million, takes five year to install, with 10 people having a burnout and, and always late, and it's a horror story. But somehow it's-- you can sort of walk people through to say, you know, "We have, a, a method. We know what we're doing."

We analyze your company in a w- way. We, we deploy our proven methodology. We level up. We, we test, we think, you know. And so we come up and you, you know..." A- and, and, and by, by trusting the, you know, sort of seeing the process, that, that's already one step. Sometimes there's a transformation involved. You're sort of going from you, you know, stop being reactive to your issue, be proactive and things and, you know, people will feel that, that, that, that transformation.

And then there's this idea of stakes and positive future. So often when I talk with a company, they'll say, "Hey, but we have all these benefits, and we solve all these problems, and there's no way we can say a story. Oh, you have, [00:34:00] the problem one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10, 11. We have solution one..."

You know, you have to create a story where you say, you know, "You're in this situation, you have this aspiration, but you have this challenge. We can help you." But-- And then once they've got down to the, the down, down the page or further in the, in the discussion, you can say, "You know, w- if you don't, if you don't do this, you're gonna keep your worries."

You're gonna continue wasting time. Your, your error rate will still be a problem. So if, if you can come back and raise the stakes and sort of remind people to say, "These are your frustrations, and, you know, if you don't, if you don't move forward, you're gonna keep, you know, keep having all these issues, problems, worries, uh, fr- uh, frustrations." But also close your eyes. Imagine finally you'll free up time for more interesting work or, you know, whatever it i- whatever these benefits are.

But have them... I mean, even the word imagine is really powerful. You know, it gets people to say, "Okay, so if I did this, you know, I won't miss, you know, the CRM. I won't miss the follow-up. I'll have more, you know, more conversions or..." And, and this extra part reassures because you go through kind of these worries, lever...

You know, sort of puts the knife back in the, you know, the wound to sort of say, you know, "Hey, you have all these problems. Don't forget. You know, you were sort of hesitating if it's worth the trouble, but, you know..." And then imagine how, you know, how your life will be better, and that they almost... They pre-live, you know, your solution and, and, yeah, they're, they're really a few steps farther.

So it's a kind of a pre-evaluation where they've pre-lived it. They, they, they know how it's gonna happen. They're reassured on that. They see, you know, how... And, and, and then they'll say, "Okay, I'll sign up for the trial."

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

John Elbing: even some simple... You know, I keep talking about a CRM, and so you say, "Hey, you have, you know, a week or two of free trial."

But a, [00:36:00] a trial like that is ter... I mean, really? I'm going to input all my data. I'm gonna change all my workflows. I'm going to, you know, spend, you know, all my nights to try this system. I mean, that's... You're, you're asking me for a crazy commitment to do the trial. You know, for you it sort of seems like, oh, it's f- we're offering a free service.

No, you're asking for a crazy commitment. So I mean, if you can bring people in to say, "Okay, this is gonna really change my life," then they'll be more open to that commitment, which is the

real evaluation, than, than if they sort of say, "Okay, I should do this, but I'll come back next week and I, and then I don't."

Janice Hostager: Mm. Yeah. It kind of reminds me of what Donald Miller says on websites, how to have, mid first page, have three simple steps to achieving what you want. And if you can break it down easily for people, it doesn't seem as daunting. I think about this all the time because I-- we've had a bank account with a certain bank for years and years, and our bank's been bought and sold and all this, so it's just stayed with this giant bank in the US, we hate it.

All the fees. It's... They're terrible to work with. Their customer service is horrible. But the thought of switching banks is so daunting because we have to change our direct deposits. We have to change the bill pay, all this stuff that, you know...

'cause we get, postcards in the mail all the time say, "Well, you get \$200 if you switch your bank," or whatever. But that's not it, you know? If they would listen to and say, "This is a hassle," if you can help us through this part of the process that's such a big hassle," it's done, you know?

So,

John Elbing: Yeah, exactly. Very recently,

Janice Hostager: example

John Elbing: Apple Music came up with a thing where you can shift from Spotify to Apple Music. It'll take all your playlists, all your history, all this stuff. Because, you know, once you're, you know, once you've, you have your whole listening history, you're never gonna change. And, but by understanding [00:38:00] that, yeah, but yeah, you should go see some banks and say, "Hey, I can help you get a lot new customers."

You just offer a service

Janice Hostager: I

John Elbing: is,

Janice Hostager: it.

John Elbing: we facilitate the transition. You know, we go through all your payments, we go through your history, we check all the things, we double, you know, to be sure that, you know, you're set up to go with the new thing. I'm sure that'll, that would be... Yes.

Janice Hostager: So do you think that testimonials are part of projection or could they be part of projection? I would imagine they could be, right?

John Elbing: Yeah, I mean, I-- there's a big part around, around trust in, in all these transactions. And so-- and testimonials, you know, of c- you know, we all know that, you know, if your friend tells you good things about a company, you'll trust them more than the ads. I'm, I'm not 100% sure that people actually read the testimonials.

It's sort of like if they're there, that must mean that there, there's someone out, you know, someone out there that did something ni- said something nice. Or you're really confirming, you know, you say, "Okay, I'm almost... Let, let me check and what they say," kind of thing. But that, yeah, I mean, you're really pretty...

The, the, the fact they exist is one more little trust bump, and then it can, can serve as, uh... You know, it, it's funny how somehow there was this coffee company, and they was wondering, "What's the best way to sell coffee online?" And so they did cr- three websites, one really trendy, fun Gen Z, one, you know, pretty traditional e-commerce, and one was the encyclopedia of coffee.

It was 10,000 pages where it had the first name of every coffee bean and wh- where the farmers were and all this kind of stuff. And surprisingly, this drab encipl- encyc- encyclopedia site sold more coffee, but no one ever read any of it. But the fact that it sort of said, "We're the experts," and they said, "Wow, they have all this content.

They must really be the expert." I don't have to check. I'm not, I'm not interested in the farmer in Peru or whatever. But just [00:40:00] by... And, and, you know, these testimonials are a little bit, a little bit like that. And especially, you know, if you give people's picture and their, their maybe their job title or, you know, you can have things stand out.

I mean, yeah. There, there are several ways of trust, and, and testimonials is one, that's important. Sometimes you also have logos of recognizable companies. You know, we work with... Oh, yeah, they work with Coca-Cola. That must be, you know, they must be really good, you know, whatever.

Janice Hostager: Right. So that's interesting. If you're just starting out, or you are s- very small business, you may not have those big names on your site. You may not have had an article in a big newspaper somewhere, but just having some testimonials on that gives you some credibility and trust

John Elbing: I found one is, you know, asking for testimonials isn't necessarily easy in a small business and things.

Janice Hostager: Yeah

John Elbing: But so you have to, you have to sort of do that, you know? And one way I found is to f- to frame the question by saying, "If you were going to talk to, about us to a friend, what would you say? If you were going to, you know, kind of, uh,

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm.

John Elbing: our business to a friend, what would you say?"

'Cause then they say, "Hey, you know, they were really," you know... If you say, "Can you m-write a testimonial?" A lot of people will, don't know where to start. What, what, what do I say? The- it was good, you know? And then, and then they don't do it. But if there's this kind of template to say, "Well," or, you know, "What was different?"

W- you know, once you use... Depending on your service, you know? H- how did that, how did that help or something, you know? By asking these more specific questions, you'll get more answers, and answers in a format that you can, you know, put on your website because they read as a, as a, as something that, you know, people, someone would say

Janice Hostager: A full sentence. Yeah I have a form which I send, clients to, but you know, I get three or four words it's really hard to put that into s- something that looks like a [00:42:00] testimonial. You know? You get, part of a sentence, but okay. So all right. Let's kind of pull this together.

When, when somebody doesn't buy, is it usually because they maybe didn't recognize themselves or didn't trust what they saw, or maybe they couldn't picture the outcome? So how do you know where along that trail basically that you fell short?

John Elbing: So there, there are some technical ways of seeing, you know, what people actually, you know, how, how far they go down on your page and how long they stayed. If people come in and then immediately leave. There's, there's also some sort of metrics, you know, if you do kind of an ad that goes to a specific landing page that follows this and, and you get a certain, you know, 0.5% of people actually, you know, you can-- You- Th- There are technical ways of finding that something is wrong.

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm.

John Elbing: One trick that I found that was really interesting is to ask your actual customers to say, "What was the thing where you almost didn't buy?" Because you can never a- You, you can never talk to the people who just didn't buy, but you can talk to the people who just did buy, and what was that thing that made them hesitate?

You know, if you have enough, enough customers, you know, sort of say, "Oh, I doubted that, but then I went anyways," kind of thing, where you think, "Oh, well, other people doubted that and, and gave up." So by, by actually interviewing your customers, you can figure... But in that way of saying, you know, "If you had hesitated, you know, what would be the thing that would have made you, give up?"

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm.

John Elbing: But, you know, this is a big... You know, if you, you change your, your-- You know, you change your website and you, you know, you try to make this all different and then y- you know, you, you hope that you'll see different metrics. You know, it-- But then it's a whole other, you know, sort of I help build that story and then depending on your channel, is it a, you know, is it a pitch deck?

Is it a website? Is it a com- You know. What... How to then [00:44:00] optimize that. I mean, there's all these techniques if you go to a, you know, an agency to then do A/B testing and, and all and then... Or, or have even there are some companies that specialize in, in sort of customer tests, and things like that. But that goes, you know, beyond my, my, my expertise.

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm.

John Elbing: so, but, but somehow you feel that already these, th- these shifts, make a, you know, a big enough difference that, you know, then, then you can optimize, later.

Janice Hostager: Well, where, if you're a small business and you're busy, where should you focus on adding that storytelling first? Is it your website, or your homepage, your sales page, email, social media? Where would be, do you think personally that is the most powerful place to start?

John Elbing: I sort of feel that still today, you know, that your website is sort of this central thing. I mean, w- w- we haven't really defined who we're talking to, but, you know, I mean, if

if you're, if you're a, the corner shop selling milk, well, I mean, I'm not sure you have to concentrate on your web- your website.

But say you're offering, you know, a service or, you know, a product and you... somehow people will... The- they could have seen an ad, seen a thing, even seen the object or someone have talked about it. They're gonna, they're gonna go to your website to say, "Okay, what is this? Who are these people? Do I trust them?"

And that'll be a kind of reference point. And it's also a way, kind of a long form way. A lot of people are obsessed with making the, the, the, the homepage really short because people will, you know, they're not gonna read too much. But if you follow those steps, you know, people, you know, you catch that next question as it comes, and they'll actually go through.

So yes, I would start with that because then that make... That's the, that's the core story. So then if you wanted to do a, a post, you can do a short version.

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

John Elbing: to start with this, this long version, and then take bits and pieces. You know, if I, if I... You're in a cocktail party and I say, you know, "What do you [00:46:00] do?"

Instead of saying, you know, "I, I do storytelling," it's sort of like, you know, "Companies struggle with how they talk, and this is how I make their life better." And, you know, there, even there's these, these sort of, short versions that come from that, that core version that you built

Janice Hostager: Hmm. Do you feel like one of those gets neglected more often, like recognition, perception, , projection is one of those most often skipped?

John Elbing: Well, first of all, if you're gonna... I think the recognition one is not only powerful, but it sort of opens the door to the next step. People will be a little bit more engaged when they're reading, you know, how you ex- explain what you do. And so sure, you can help them down the line with, with this projection part, but if they never arrive, they'll never get there, you know?

So start, you

know, start

at the beginning. Start at the beginning. A- and I find that recognition's a little bit more tricky. You know, how, what's the best way to describe your ideal customer, their aspiration, their challenge, where they really feel, "Ooh, this is for me"? That's quite a, that's quite an exercise.

Two, at the end of the, you know, at the bottom of the page to say, "One, two, three, this is how it's gonna work. This is our process. These are the problems we solve. These are your, you know, positive future benefits." Th- those are things that people know about. They just forget to talk about them. So it's, it's less c- You know, you have to remember to put them in a certain order and in a certain way, so you feel that people, you know, you know, they will actually stop and, and read them.

But finding that way, daring, daring to say, "These are the people we serve. These are the people we work with." You know, pe- they, you know, well, then I'm gonna miss out on some. And

Janice Hostager: Mm-hmm.

John Elbing: that recognition exercise, you know, not only brings the, you know, the change of perception of the website, but changes the mindset of the people in the company about, you know, the focus and the [00:48:00] positioning.

So that's, so I think that's, that's very powerful.

Janice Hostager: Right, it's scary as a small business owner to do that, 100%, but it's a big pie.

John Elbing: Yeah, exactly

Janice Hostager: John, where can people find out more about you?

John Elbing: So my company name is Standpoint because it's so important to take the other person's standpoint. I think I've used the word standpoint 12 times during this thing. So, but it's standpoint.ch. I'm in Switzerland, and the .ch is the extension for Switzerland. And on the website you'll find a little bit of information about the method.

I, I wrote a best-selling book, so you can actually get all the whole method. There are canvases that you use with Post-its and AI prompts that you can use to help you do all this, you know, this, this thing. Um, you can just go to, there's a calendar at the bottom of the page where you can book a half an hour with me.

We'll talk about your brand and see, you know, what insights we can give. I also have a tagline generator, so you can go in and you describe your company and it asks things about your company and sort of you get this idea of what kind of questions and what kind of things you have to think about, and then goes through this whole process with, you know, different formats and things until you come up with a real powerful, uh, tagline, and that can be, that can be fun

Janice Hostager: Great. And we'll put all of those in the show notes, of course. So thank you so much, John. This has been awesome. I love, love talking about storytelling.

John Elbing: Well, thank you, Janice. This has been fun, and I can't wait to, for this to come out and to, to show everyone

Speaker 2: So here's a challenge for you this week. Take a look at your website and your social media or a sales page, and then ask yourself, "Where am I helping people recognize themselves? Where am I building trust? And where am I helping them visualize the outcome?" I can tell you that I'll be doing the same thing.

If you enjoyed today's episode, I'd love it if you could share it with another business owner who could use a little more clarity in their [00:50:00] marketing too. And if you're not already subscribed to My Weekly Marketing, please make sure you hit the follow button so you don't miss another episode. For more information about anything we talked about today, visit myweeklymarketing.com/166.

Thanks so much for joining me today. I'll see you next time. Bye for now.

