

2. The Three Rules

What makes an effective Brand Story®?



BRAND STORY

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What Makes an Effective Brand Story?

Learning Guide | with Bruce Miller

This learning guide captures the full content of Module 2 of the Brand Story course for readers who prefer text over video. All key concepts, examples, and insights from the video are preserved below.

Can a Shoestring Budget Brand Still Win?

In Module 1, we looked at really big brands: Southwest Airlines, Starbucks, and Chick-fil-A. But what if you're operating on a shoestring? Can someone with a limited budget still build an effective Brand Story?

I found the answer to that question right in my own neighborhood, when James Hammerl opened a hot dog shack named DoggyDogg.

James literally started with a hot dog cart, then gradually moved up to selling artisan dogs from a cinder block hut. His origin story captures everything a Brand Story needs to be:

"I was in Bavaria, coming out of a Christmas mass and walking towards the town square. Amid the fog and snow, I noticed a gentleman selling tasty sausages from a cart. From that moment, I knew I wanted to take hot dogs to another level back in Atlanta."

Doggy Dogg raises the foodie factor on the humble wiener. James takes locally sourced sausage, slathers it in farm-to-table kimchi or homemade kraut, and wraps the dog in a fresh bun from a local pastry chef. His tagline captures the Big Idea of his brand perfectly:

Bringing Cultural Ingredients to an American Classic.

By elevating a simple hot dog to foodie status, Doggy Dogg created an entirely new brand category: late-night, hipster hot dogs. More importantly, James affirmed the core idea of this entire course:

Key Insight: *A guy with a hot dog cart and some customer sense can successfully position a brand.*

A Brand Story Must Make Sense as a Story

Let me share a story from my life as a brand strategist. My business partner Michael and I were walking through a mall food court to meet a new client — past the Cinnabon, Sbarro, Orange Julius, and Jamba Juice. We were there to meet Mark Kaplan, the CEO of Great Wraps, America's original fast food wraps chain.

Mark was hiring us to give the Great Wraps brand a facelift. On paper, it was a dream job.

The first step in any brand strategy engagement is to determine whether the brand tells a cohesive story. So, I studied Mark's menu: Gyro Wrap, Santa Fe Wrap, Spicy Chipotle Wrap, Falafel Wrap, Hummus Veggie Wrap, Buffalo Wrap, California Wrap.

"Mark, these all make sense," I said. "People are moving away from bread."

Mark agreed and explained the brand further:

"Yes, and we have bowls for those who want to go completely bread-free. And smoothies. That's our tagline: 'Eat Great. Feel Great.'"

I was with him completely — until I walked along the counter and a sign stopped me in my tracks.

"Mark, tell me about the Philly Cheesesteak," I said.

"Isn't that great? No one's got a cheesesteak in the food court, so we added it to the menu."

"But aren't wraps — great wraps, the world's greatest wraps — isn't that the Big Idea?" I pressed.

"The way I see it, if someone's in the mood for a cheesesteak, we get that sale."

I understood his logic, but the problem was clear. "Eat Great, Feel Great" — but doesn't a cheesesteak negate the entire healthy wrap concept? The brand story?

"Imagine if Chick-fil-A added a burger to their menu," I continued. "That would kill the brand — the cows on the billboard, all of it."

At that point, Michael, my business partner, stepped in and stopped me from going further. But the lesson was already made.

Three Rules for an Effective Brand Story

The contrast between Doggy Dogg and Great Wraps illustrates what separates a coherent brand story from a confused one. Doggy Dogg — with no budget but a lot of common sense — created a brand that tells a tight, coherent story: gourmet hot dogs for hipsters. Great Wraps, by contrast, was all over the map.

An effective brand story follows three rules:

1. **Align your brand with the needs of your target customer.** For Great Wraps, that means owning a clear position: "We're the healthy alternative in the food court." Every menu item, every piece of marketing, should reinforce that promise.
2. **Establish a differentiator that sets you apart.** If you are "The Home of the Original Wrap," own it. Say it loudly. Run with it. Your differentiator is the foundation of your brand story.
3. **Keep a firm grip on your brand concept — and never let go.** This means resisting the urge to add something to the menu — like a cheesesteak — that is off-brand. Every off-brand decision dilutes the story you've worked to build.

Key Insight: *Brand story discipline is not about limiting your business. It's about protecting the emotional position you've earned in your customer's mind.*