



Brand storytelling: how to, and using AI

I guess we're all convinced of the importance of long-term storytelling, content, and the necessity to use this for building your brand. Unfortunately, in daily content practice, brands still focus on short-term content, campaigns, conversion, and performance-focused.

What's wrong here? It can't be a lack of knowledge. Is it fear, short-sightedness, a not-invented here, ego, or has senior management a hard time convincing the board on these long-term, not attributable investments?

Warning, this is a very long read; I give you the ammunition to fire your content guns and lock in significant budgets. And how you can use AI for this.

→ Part 1. Society and content behavioral changes, first-party data, and using AI

Some societal background information on why you need a brand storytelling platform to reach the new generations and collect first-party data along the way. This first-party data is the base of your business case.

- Our new society and a new generation
- Changes in content consumption
- First-party data
- How to use AI

→ Part 2. How to set up a brand storytelling platform, budget, business case, and more AI

The ballpark budget and five necessary steps to set up a brand storytelling platform. Including some tips for stakeholder management, reporting, and locking in next year's budget.

Spoiler on part two

The ballpark budget for your first year is 500k, of which 300k is for content production.

For the distribution, my advice is to invest in a newsletter strategy to get the most out of your first-party data, don't skip paid and rely on owned and earned, and invest in SEO; that's your fundament.

To be clear, pushing the content on organic social, will not move any needle. You need paid social to get any reach. And if you have some amazing strong hero content, you can have some reach via earned, keep in mind that will be shortlived and fades out quickly. More reasons to get a solid first-party data newsletter strategy in, invest in paid social and embrace SEO.

And to finish up, some examples by [Patagonia](#), [On Running](#), and [KLM's blog](#) .

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Part 1. Society and content behavioral changes and first-party data matter

Our new society and a new generation

Times have changed. We have changed. Digitization. Social media. COVID-19. Working from home. Climate changes. AI. Always on, never off.

Next to this are the recent hyper-fast developments of AI. It almost feels like the more efficient and productive we get with AI, the more we can lower our other pace. The recent trend, '[Quiet luxury](#),' is hopefully the first step in this direction.

It looks like the fast-consumption pushy marketing days are becoming a thing of the past (yay!). There is increasingly more focus on sustainability, diversity, and inclusion. We're tired of overconsumption and leaning into minimalism with high-quality goods, and [we're slowing down](#). Nowadays, we pay more attention to how we spend our money. Where and what we buy matters. Brands matter.

Today, a brand's mission, vision, and values become important again. The 'why' a brand does what it does and how it contributes to a better society, now is a crucial factor to buy the 'what' of the brand. Or not.

Brands can the brand storytelling content platform to show and tell their 'why', and collect first-party data along the way.

Changes in content consumption

The overload of content leads to scattered attention and content-tiredness. There is so much content out there, of which at least 60% is crap. Crappy content has the brand's interest in mind, focusing on short-term sales, jumping from campaign to campaign without an overarching storyline.

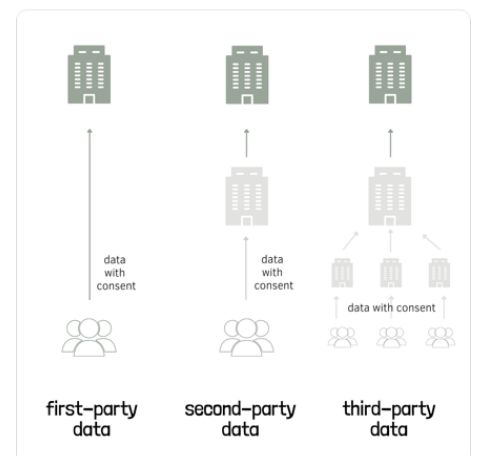
The result is a change in content consumption

- Content pull instead of a content push. The consumer decides if they want to see your content or not. One-click swipe, and your content is gone.
- Content abundance. Consumers don't want more content; they want better content. Content that adds value. Remember, nobody wants to be marketed to. It's not about the fast and very snackable; it's about leaving an impression and being remembered.
- In times of content abundance, there's a scarcity of attention. We become more and more selective about what we pay attention to and what we do not—resulting in quality over quantity.

First-party data

First-party data is the data directly collected by the brand, e.g., clicking behavior on web and app, purchase and transactional data, loyalty programme, or newsletter subscriptions. This first-party data becomes more important with all privacy concerns and tech no-trace developments. If you have the first-party data, you can contact your consumer directly and build a relationship with them.

A big prerequisite in the relationship is that you add value when you contact your consumer. You teach them something new, or you make them smile. Your primary reason for contacting them may never be to cold-sell them some new stuff. Remember, nobody wants to be marketed to.



Keep this in mind, the first-party data is the foundation of your business case and one of the main reasons to launch your brand storytelling platform.

In part two, you learn how to get a content strategy to use this first-party data.

How to use AI

The most obvious usage of AI would be content creation. I dare to say that the real success of AI is in using it to define your strategy and editorial formula. Use AI for research, competitors' analysis, and ideation.

It's good to know that ChatGPT is a generative AI. In short, it's a language model with a chat-like interface that works based on probabilities. This means ChatGPT doesn't give you genuinely new insights, strategies, or ideas.

That said, the best part of generative AI is that it has no bias, judgments, or view of its own. Use that to your advantage. ChatGPT can help you by giving rational arguments. Together you can sharpen your thinking, broaden your mind, and come up with a different approach.

Next to that, the content that ChatGPT can create for you is quite easy to recognize. To make ChatGPT's output your own, often takes more time rewriting than creating from scratch. At least, that's my experience.

→ Read more in '[ChatGPT, your wingman](#)' and in '[How to recognize ChatGPT copy](#)'

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Part 2. Five steps for set up, budgets needed, and the business case

Knowing we're in a new society with a different outlook and expectations on brands and our content behavior has changed, why not tap into this and vamp up your brand storytelling with a content platform?

These are the five steps to success

1. Business case, objectives, KPIs, and ballpark budget expectations
2. Editorial formula with content topics, reflecting your 'why'
3. Help-hub-hero content in line with your topics
4. Media strategy: how to get the eyeballs via earned, owned, and paid distribution
5. Using that first-party data

Step 1. Business case, objective, and KPIs

Let's be honest; mostly, the board says brand building matters, yet when push comes to shove, they rather focus on the short-term sales-driven stuff over the long-term brand stuff.

Convincing the board to invest in a long-term brand storytelling content platform to build the brand is a tough cookie. You have to show them that a brand storytelling content platform tells your 'why' at the end in the long-term to sell your 'what.'

Belief in content by the board

It all starts with a belief at the board level. If there is no belief in content and every content investment needs to be re-calculated and attributed to short-term sales – my kind advice is not to start a brand storytelling content platform.

Creating a brand storytelling content platform, it's a long-term investment of which you'll see the results in a few years. And still, by that time, you can't pinpoint or identify the exact cause of your brand's growth.

Business case

The business case is your ticket to build the brand storytelling platform; tell your why, and collect first-party data to sell your what. Ultimately, brands are here to make money by selling products to safeguard their existence. No sales equals no money equals no brand.

Below are a few elements, next to first-party data, of how a brand storytelling content platform can contribute to the business. These can vary per brand, their maturity, the market, the industry, what matters, and what does not.

- Long-term brand building: why you do what you do
- Showcase how the brand contributes to a better planet and society: sustainability, circularity, diversity, and inclusion
- Position the brand away from its competitors, how your brand is better
- SEO: to tell your story to be found on topics that matter
- Get first-party data to reach and build that relationship with your customer
- A very small percentage of your 'what'; the marketing content to sell your products. I suggest ten to a maximum of twenty percent of your content. See below in 'Step 2. Editorial formula' for some more details.

Ergo, the objective of your brand storytelling platform is to deliver proof of your brand's purpose and claim. And collect data along the way.

KPIs and stakeholder reporting

You define your KPIs accordingly. My advice is to differ in KPIs for the board and for daily management and reporting.

Keep your stakeholders on board to report on what's relevant to them. If you can showcase the added value of the brand storytelling content platform and can bridge to long-term overall sales, there is a big chance you'll get a budget for the next year. If you dip into vanity metrics, stick to the micro level, and can't place these content efforts into the bigger picture, it will become a difficult budget conversation.

For the board, you could have long-term macro KPIs as

- **Overall sales** plotted against the brand storytelling efforts. Minimal three years of data are needed.
- **Brand reputation** research. Minimal one year of data is needed, and this needle moves very subtly and slowly.
- **SEO ranking** of the brand, not just the platform. Minimal one year of data is needed.
- **Reach of the platform**, vanity metrics as unique visitors, dwell time, and pages visited. You have the first data within about six months.

- **The number of subscribers**, that first-party data. Also, about six months before you have some valid data.

Next to this, you could also report on

- Alignment with marketing campaigns.
- Integration and cooperation between marketing, corporate communications, PR, customer care, and HR for talent recruitment.
- Budget for production and media.

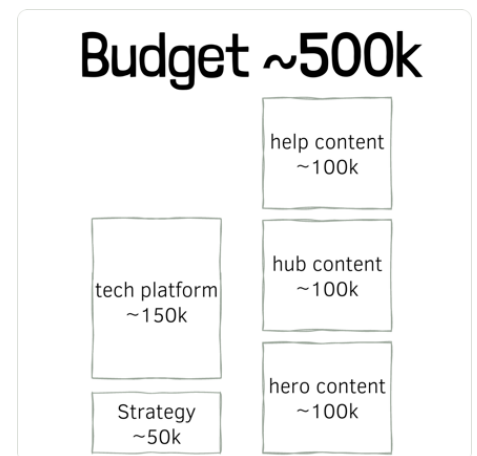
Read more on KPIs and reporting in '[Accountability of content](#)'

Budget ballpark numbers

Here are some ballpark numbers. Please keep in mind that these can vary per brand, industry, market, and maturity. You can do it for less; you can spend more. However, keep in mind for a brand storytelling content platform, you go big or you go home. Invest the budget, or don't do it at all. There's no such thing as half-assing content.

The costs for FTE to manage the project, content, and newsletter are not included. Nor is the budget for paid media included.

- Platform, content, and newsletter strategy: ~50k one-time investment
- Technical setup: ~150k one-time investment
- Hero content: ~ 100k per year
- Hub content: ~ 100k per year
- Help content: ~100k for first year, ~50k per subsequent year
- Webcare: piggyback on existing teams and processes



You'll find more information on the HHH content investments in 'Step 3. Help-hub-hero' below.

If you are on a budget

This 500k is a ballpark for a sexy top-notch brand. Most brands don't have these budgets. What to do if you have less to spend?

Or if you are a B2B and not so sexy? Skip the hero and use '[They ask, you answer](#)' as a starting point for your hub and help content.

1. Realize there's no such thing as a cheap brand storytelling content platform. Content is expensive and a long-term investment.
2. You can save on the expensive hero content. Then realize it takes longer to get the eyeballs, reach, and first-party data in.

3. You can also save on the hub content. Pre-producing and sticking to written content over videos or podcasts will save you a serious budget.
4. However, don't save on the help content. This is your SEO and your bread and butter. That said, two things you can do; A. Steal with pride from the corporate comms .com, the sustainability report, the annual report, careers .com. B. Re-use and re-publish over time. There's no need for continuous new content. If the content is engaging and well-read, why not re-use it after six or twelve months?
5. You can save on technology by combining your newsroom with brand storytelling. Use the same URL and software; most visitors will land via a deep-link so don't worry too much about combining press and consumer audiences on one website.
6. Never save on strategy and planning. Failing to plan is planning to fail. Without a long-term solid strategy for the storytelling, the content, and reaching out using first-party data, it's better not to start at all.
7. Also, don't save on seniority and hand over the brand storytelling to an eager Millennial. You need the senior for strategy, see point six, and for stakeholder management. At least have one dedicated senior in the team, and don't shuffle this in the already full basket of the marketing manager.

Again, there's no half-assing content. Do it well, or don't do it at all.

Step 2. Content strategy and editorial formula

Your content strategy in the brand storytelling platform is a no-brainer. You really need to think about your content. And not only for the release of the platform, is more about the next months and years. As the business case of the brand storytelling content platform is a long-term game, so should your content planning.

The most-made mistake by brands is to focus on the content for the release and some boring monthly updates. Wrong. You need to make an effort in the short-term for the launch and the long-term relationship.

Editorial formula

The editorial formula is like the recipe for the content platform. It's a plan or a structure that helps to keep the content consistent, connect with your audience, and contribute to the objective (and business case).

This blueprint includes

1. Themes or topics to focus on
2. Target audience; for whom are you writing
3. How to write; style and tone of voice, e.g., formal, casual, informative, or entertaining
4. How you look; your visuals, videos, or infographics

5. How to react; your webcare. A content platform is not a one-way sending thing. It's a two-way platform where you want to build a relationship. The least you can do is to have proper webcare in place for when people contact you.

Example 1. Tech brand

Example of an editorial formula for a tech brand storytelling content platform to claim its leadership in the industry.

- Topics: New gadgets, software reviews, tech industry news, and how-to guides
- Target Audience: Tech enthusiasts, professionals, and anyone interested in the latest technology
- Writing Style and tone: Informative, tech-savvy, and user-friendly language, with an objective yet engaging and accessible tone
- Visuals are crisp and clear, focusing on function, not on a sexy form. Like screenshots, product images, and tech-related illustrations

Example 2. Travel brand

And for an airline travel brand storytelling platform (not KLM iFly or blog).

- Topics: Travel destinations, cultural experiences, adventure trips, and travel tips
- Target Audience: Travelers, explorers, and people with wanderlust
- Writing Style and tone: Descriptive, engaging, and evocative language to transport readers to the locations. The tone is exciting, inspiring, and adventurous
- Visuals are emotional, inspirational, rich, stunning travel photography, picturesque landscapes, and maps

How to use AI

The most obvious usage of AI would be content creation. I dare to say that the real success of AI is in using it to define your strategy and editorial formula. Use AI for research, competitors' analysis, and ideation.

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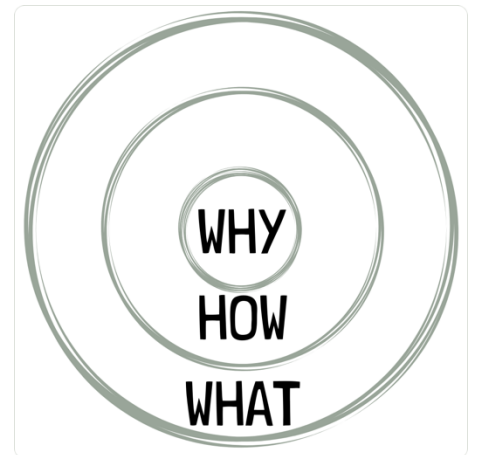
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Storytelling versus commercial

Of course, there can be a commercial link. Ultimately, the brand must sell its product to stay afloat and alive. Nothing wrong with that. Yet the focus of a brand storytelling content platform is to connect to your audience and broadcast your 'why,' not your 'what.'

If the board and marketing department really pushes you on some commercial messaging and you choose to lose the battle to win the war, I suggest you dedicate one or a maximum of two in ten posts to commerce. The other nine or eight you keep for non-commercial storytelling.



Brand storytelling and a newsroom

In my humble opinion, you can combine your newsroom with a brand storytelling platform. Both are content and tell the brand's story and bring news. The first is more focused on the press, and the second is more on the consumer. Yet, these days, both are blending in.

You want to feed the press with more brand and some product information to enable them to create a more integrated story. And you want the consumers to be the first to know about news, via the press or directly from you.

Next to that, if your distribution and media strategy is on par, most visitors will land via a deep-link directly on a specific page. They'll don't even see the homepage and click through to other content from that specific landing page.

Start with a launch campaign

This is making noise. Let the world know you have your platform. Big bang, here you are. Usually, a launch campaign lasts about four weeks, and you push your content via owned, earned (PR), and paid social.

Continue with weekly content for business as usual

Then, the real fun begins with the 'business as usual.' How to keep your audience engaged? When to publish and distribute what hero, hub, and help content? You really need to update your content frequently. Nobody is interested in a platform that's not alive.

If you plan your hero, hub, and help content in advance, it's quite easy to publish one piece of content weekly. And distribute asynchronously in your socials and newsletters to spread it out and get more reach with the same content.

This is also where the magic for the first-party data comes in. You can use this content to keep them informed and engaged. Please, do take notice of the prerequisites described below in 'Step 5. First-party data: have a newsletter strategy'

Step 3. Help-hub-hero

You need all three. The hero to shine and make some noise. The hub to pull in the interested ones and the help to explain who you are and what you do, and for your SEO.

To give a ballpark on how to divide your attention and budget over these three is difficult. In my humble opinion, brands usually focus too much on the hero and too little on the help. Yes, the hero is the sexy stuff, and you need it to make noise. Yet it's also the most expensive to produce and distribute. The help is SEO magic and pulls in long-term traffic without paid media.

Content budget ballpark numbers

- Amazing sexy hero videos: about 15k to 25k a piece. You need a minimum of four per year; six is better and gives you more wiggle room. Starts around 100k.
- Hub content as a reason for your audience to come back: 100k a year for content series in blogs, videos, or podcasts. You need at least one update per month, two a month is better.
- Hero content. This is where the magic happens. You can reuse marketing, corporate comms, PR, HR, and customer care content. That's your basis, and then you need to rework it to fit it in the brand storytelling platform. I would say four to six posts per month. You want to keep the platform alive—another 100k per year.



In total, let's say you need to invest around 300k in content production per year for a vibrant content platform. Of course, you can do it with less, which will reflect in the results.

Great, amazing, engaging content is crazy expensive.

Using AI for content production

Of course, you can ask AI to create a blog for you. Be aware that the content that ChatGPT creates is quite easy to recognize. To make ChatGPT's output your own often takes more time rewriting than creating from scratch. At least, that's my experience.

Below is a recap of the eight recognizable elements. Read more in '[How to recognize ChatGPT copy](#)'

1. No real intro; immediate dive into the listicle
2. Listicles or similar structure
3. The text feels generic
4. No first-person point of view
5. No sources or credits
6. No bias or personality in the copy
7. Too clean copy
8. No consistency between the multiple posts

Step 4. Media strategy for distribution

Creating content is one thing; getting reach and collecting first-party data along the way is something else.

My advice is not to skip paid and to include SEO

Pushing the content on organic social, will not move any needle. You need paid social to get any reach. And if you have some amazing strong hero content, you can have some reach via earned, keep in mind that will be shortlived and fades out quickly. More reasons to get a solid first-party data newsletter strategy in, invest in paid social and embrace SEO.

1. Invest in a newsletter strategy to get the most out of your first-party data.
2. Please, don't skip paid and rely on owned and earned; those will not make the impact you need to comply with your business case.
3. And invest in SEO; that's your fundament.

Below you'll find some more explanation and details on my advice.

We know the difference between owned, earned, and paid. To refresh your mind, here is a short and simplified description.

- **Owned:** you use your socials to push your content. This is also where the newsletter for the first-party data fits in.
- **Earned:** others share your content. The prerequisite is that your content is worth sharing. The content that gets shared is uncommon, remarkable, and noteworthy – easy on the eye and visually attractive. If your content doesn't meet any of these conditions, it will not be shared.
- **Paid:** you pay a social channel to push your content. We all know we have to pay to play. Organic content died quite some time ago.

SEO is not really a media strategy, yet it should generate about 50% of the brand's traffic. So don't wipe out SEO. I would rank SEO in owned, as the brand can influence the ranking in SEO with content quality and continuous publication on the relevant topics. Producing content with SEO in mind also helps; answering customers' concerns and questions, using keywords, H1 H2 strategies, adding transcripts to videos, etcetera.

AI and SEO?

And for the near AI future, we don't know where the bots will get their content. Big chance SEO, scanability, and searchability of your content will play a huge role in how AI uses your content to answer prompts.

Step 5. First-party data: have a newsletter strategy

Circling back to the business case, why a brand should invest in a brand storytelling content platform.

1. Show and tell your 'why,' to, in the end, sell your 'what'
2. Get first-party data to build a relationship; mostly, this will be via a newsletter

Please notice that first party-data is broader than just sending newsletters; it's also web or app behavior, purchase history, loyalty status, etcetera.

However, for most brands using first-party data in a content platform, it will consist of sending a push message to their customer to notify them there's new or relevant content. Probably, this will be via email.

Newsletter objective and requirements

To get the most out of that first-party data, you need a solid newsletter strategy with firm, non-negotiable requirements

The objective of the newsletter is to build a relationship. Every time the newsletter drops in the inbox, your brand shortly becomes top of mind. And if they like what they read, they will like your brand. And if they like your brand, over time, that will influence their purchase intention.

You use your HHH content in the newsletter. Please notice that just sending the latest content update will not move the needle. That is a lazy ass marketing trick. Your audience will not read that.

In line with the brand storytelling content platform's objective and content strategy, you develop a bespoke newsletter strategy. What matters at the moment? That can be the newest content; however, that can also be an older piece that becomes relevant again.

Here are a few requirements to create a likable newsletter

1. It has the interest of the audience in mind. Not the interest of the brand.
2. It's new content for them. Something they didn't know (yet).
3. It's relevant and adds value.
4. It's recognizable from the brand

5. It's consistent and more or less frequent
6. Mobile by design

Crafting a great value-adding newsletter is not something easy. This needs a solid strategy and a long-term vision.

A few tips

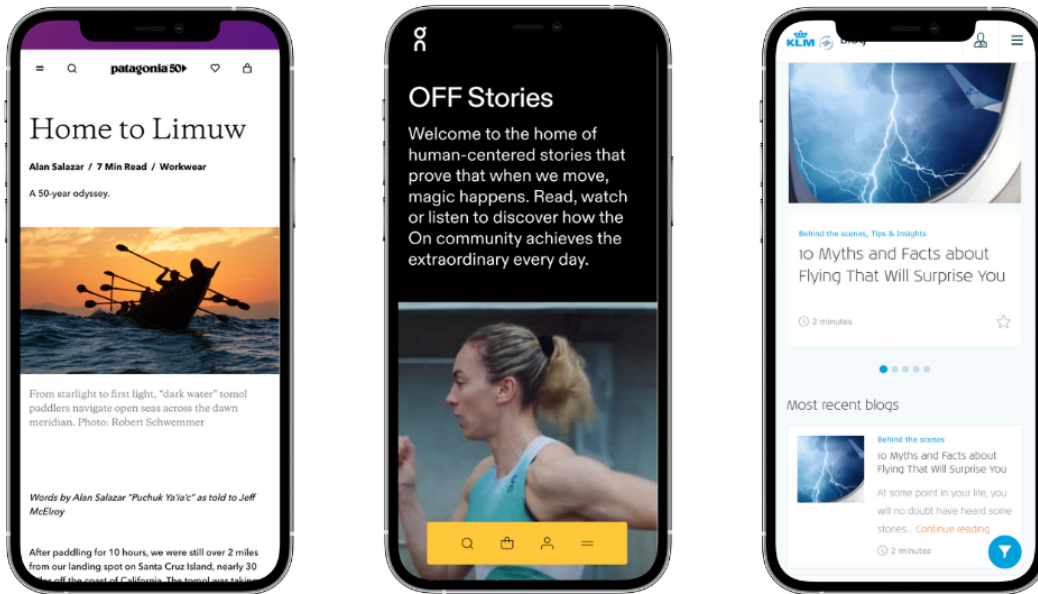
- Keep your email short, about one main to three slots or topics.
- Always sanity check, does this newsletter adds value to the receiver or to the sender? Be honest with yourself and keep the reader in mind. Nobody wants to be marketed to.
- The subject line is the golden nugget from one of the topics, so your reader can decide instantly to read or delete.
- If you insist on a marketing or more commercial message, that's always the very last slot, never the first or second.
- Don't have a no-reply sender address. Nobody wants to receive an email from someone who doesn't want a reply. A relationship is a two-way thing.
- It's not about a predictable frequency, like once a week, every Tuesday at 11 am. Only send it if you have something relevant to tell. Yet, make sure you have at least once a month to stay somewhat top of mind.
- Again, mobile by design. Check the first view fold on a mobile screen. And check the readability of the font and visuals. And the CTAs.
- Announce the one-click easiness of unsubscribing in the subscription process. It sounds contradictive, yet if you know it's very easy to unsubscribe, it triggers you to subscribe. Out of curiosity and by persuasion as a very confident brand that is sure their newsletter will add value.

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Examples

Here are three brands that excel in content for storytelling. Showing their 'why' and daring to tap into something bigger than their 'what,' the product.

[Patagonia](#), [On Running](#), and [KLM's blog](#) all have in common that they seldom to no posts about their products; they tell a story that weaves seamlessly into their mission, vision, and values—jobs well done. Small sidenote, it looks like KLM's blog is not updated anymore. Nevertheless, it still is a great example.



Wrapping up...

Very long two-part story short, I guess we're all convinced of the importance of long-term storytelling, content, and the necessity to use this for building your brand.

Unfortunately, in daily content practice, brands still focus on short-term content, campaigns, conversion, and performance-focused. It can't be a lack of knowledge. Is it fear, short-sightedness, a not-invented here, ego, or has senior management a hard time convincing the board on these long-term, not attributable investments?

I hope you now have the ammunition to fire your content guns and lock in significant budgets. And how you can use AI for this.

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Disclaimer

All information, ballpark numbers, budget indications, and insights are my own. These are not related to any of my clients. The costs for FTE, agencies, and paid media are not included in the budgets.