Story-led positioning & messaging

Your step-by-step guide to narrative that sells.

By Lena Andican & Oren Greenberg

Watch this 6 min introduction video

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What is story-led positioning

By now you have probably heard a lot about positioning and its importance in your marketing strategy.

You most likely know that ‘traditional’ positioning focuses on what your product does, who it’s for, and how it compares to competitors. While this approach provides essential information, it can often miss the emotional connection that resonates with potential customers.

Story-led positioning, on the other hand, shifts the focus to your audience, placing them at the center of a compelling narrative. It allows customers to see themselves as part of a larger movement aligned with their values and goals.

Story-led positioning helps you to create **urgency around your product** and build the emotional connection to make your sales and product adoption easier.

It’s not just about promoting a product; it’s about **showing the bigger picture that explains why your product is relevant today and how it will help your audience win.**

What is story-led positioning

Traditional positioning:

Our cybersecurity platform detects up to 15% more threats, offers real-time monitoring, and compliance management to protect enterprise-level organisations from data breaches.

Story-led positioning:

Every year, a relentless wave of cyberattacks—from sophisticated phishing to elusive ransomware—costs financial services organizations $4.1B in losses.

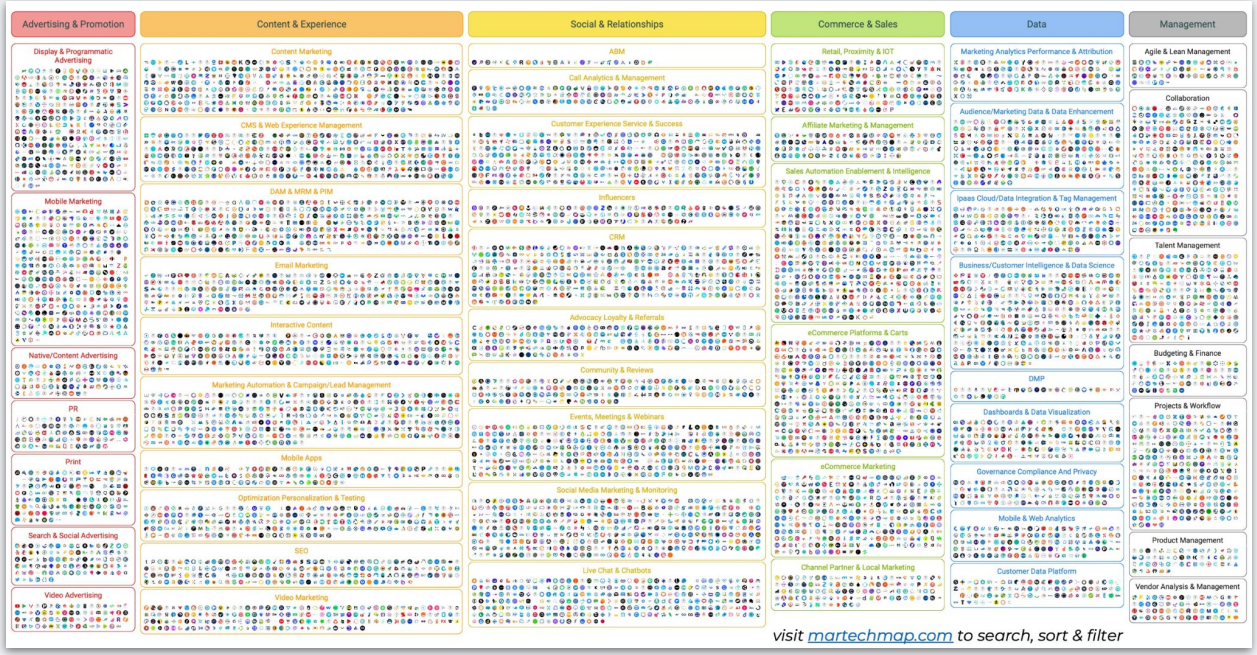
This evolving threat landscape leaves your organization vulnerable to crippling financial losses, reputational damage, and potential legal repercussions.

Traditional security measures are no longer sufficient against today's sophisticated threats. Many solutions rely on outdated technologies and static signatures, exposing critical vulnerabilities.

As a CIO, you want to protect your organization while enabling innovation and growth.

Our cybersecurity platform isn't just another tool; it's your strategic ally. We detect up to 15% more threats in real-time, empowering you to identify and neutralize them before they cause harm.

Why it matters



visit martechmap.com to search, sort & filter

By using storytelling, companies can set themselves apart—not just by talking about product features, but by tapping into the real challenges and aspirations of their audience. When you make your customers the heroes of the story, you create stronger connections, build loyalty, and foster a community around shared values.

Why story?



Jerome Bruner

Cognitive Psychologist, Harvard

"Information is 22x more memorable when delivered in a story"



Bill Gurley

Partner, Benchmark

"The Great storytellers have an unfair advantage. They are going to recruit better, they will be darlings in the press, they are going to raise more money more easily and at higher prices.. And, they are going to have a strong and cohesive corporate culture. Perhaps more to the point, they are more likely to deliver a positive investment return."



Ben Horowitz

Partner, Andreessen Horowitz

"If you don't have a clearly articulated story, you don't have a clear and well thought-out strategy.

The story is the strategy."



David Cancel

C.E.O, Drift.com

"Product based differentiation is going away. Act accordingly."

Strategy→ Story → Positioning → Messaging → Copy

Strategic story

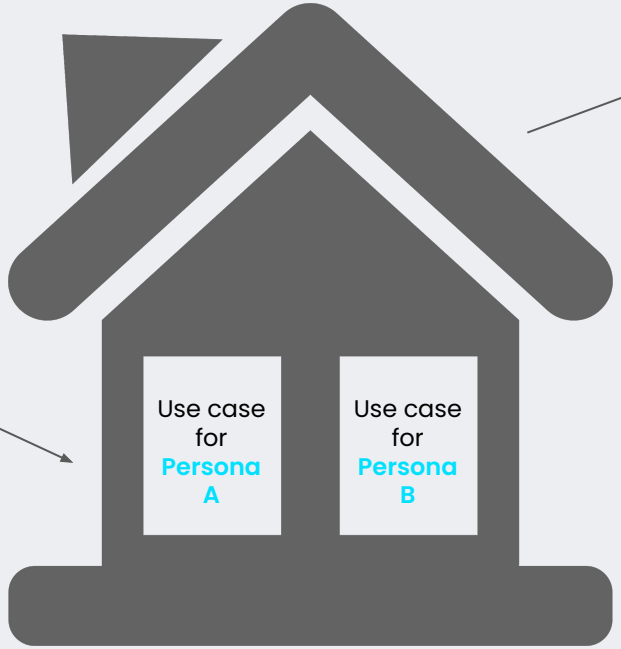
It's the **bigger picture that explains why your product is relevant now** and how it will help your audience to win. It bridges your buying committee, your investors and employees

Copy

How you communicate it all to the rest of the world

Product messaging

Key points we want to say to each Persona



FOR SALE

Good old house looking for a new owner

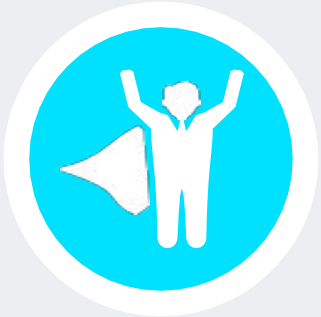
Positioning

It is about **what your product is, who it is for and how it is different**

PART 1:
STRATEGIC STORY

The story-led positioning & messaging framework





Hero

Watch this 5 min video

Hero

Your narrative will play out around **three characters: hero, guide and villain.** The hero is the main character in your narrative. The hero of your story is your audience - it's not you.

Your hero - your audience exists in the subpar status quo - burdened by inefficiencies of their current processes, costly solutions etc.

However, you are the Guide who'll get from A to B by giving them the superpowers - the technology that helps them overcome the inefficiencies and get to the ideal case scenario (their Promised Land).



Luke Skywalker
Hero (your audience)



Obi wan Kenobe
Guide (you)



Darth Vader
Villain

Hero

Whether it's B2B or B2C, the concept of the strategic story is the same as in Star Wars: In the Tesla's example, Tesla is guiding us, its hero, into the Promised Land - the sustainable carbon free future.

Tesla's products are the superpowers that will help us to get there while defeating the villain (the CO2) and eliminating multiple problems the villain is causing (droughts, pollution, extreme weather conditions etc.)



Hero

Guide



Villain

Defining Hero

Here's what makes someone your narrative's hero:

1. Spends the most
2. Most frequently
3. Most quickly
4. Has the most to gain/lose



Change & Stakes

Watch this 4 min video

Change & Stakes

Your audience is not isolated; they inhabit a dynamic market that is constantly evolving. To survive and succeed, they must be willing to adapt to these changes.

Those who fail to adapt risk being left behind.

Change provides the necessary context. It shapes the discussion so your most valuable customers recognise that their current approaches may be insufficient. When customers engage with the change narrative, they realise something has shifted and that they might be falling behind.

Change is inherently tied to stakes.

When considering stakes, we ask ourselves:

- ➔ “What is the worst possible outcome if I don’t adjust to the change?”
- ➔ “Who stands to gain, and who stands to lose?”

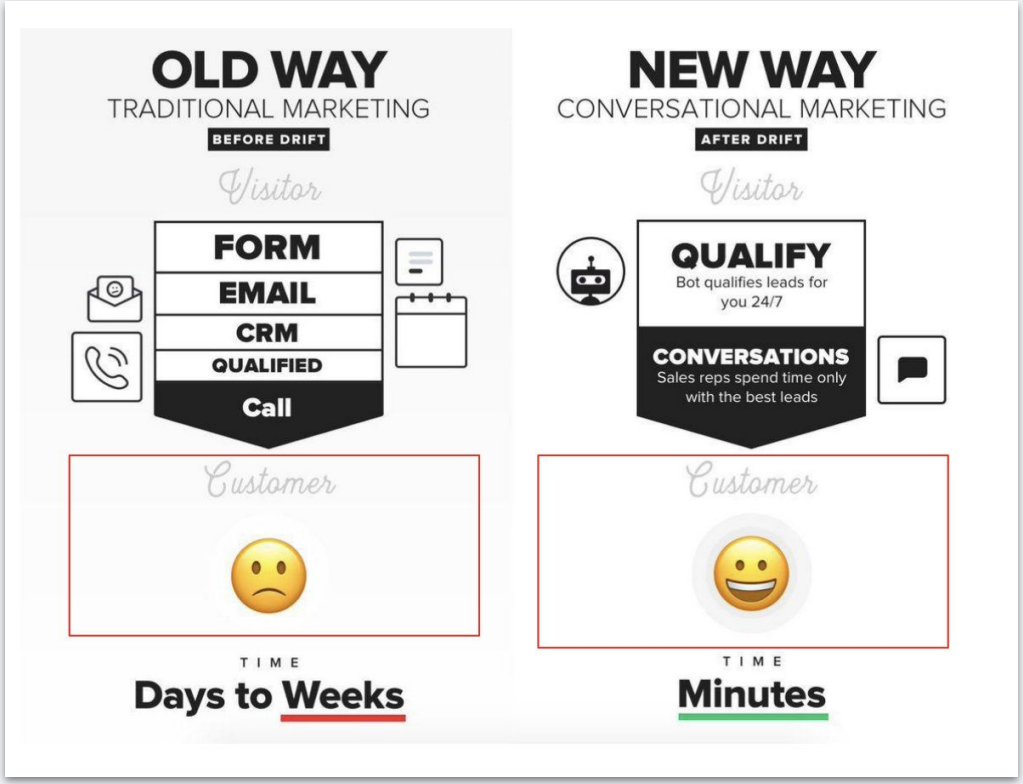
Finally, introducing change into your narrative is important because **your job is to position yourself as a catalyst for change—someone who identifies a challenge in your community and takes proactive steps to address it.**

Change & Stakes

Introducing change into your narrative allows you to do 4 things:

1. Get your audience's attention
2. Shift the conversation away from features
3. Define winners and losers
4. Position yourself as an agent of change

Change & Stakes examples

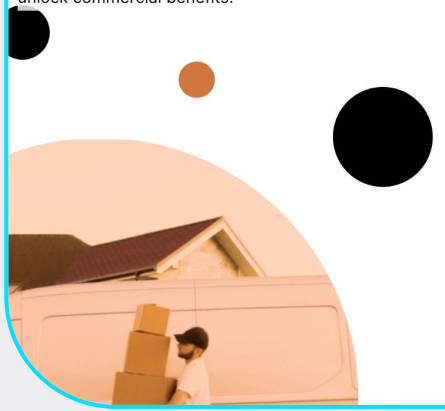


Drift positioned their chat bot as 'conversational marketing' because, they said, 'The way B2B customers want to buy has changed. They don't want to be waiting for days or weeks to be contacted. They want to be spoken with now. And, if businesses want to win in this new era, they have to adapt to their customers' wishes. And of course, Drift has the tool that will help businesses do exactly that.

Change & Stakes examples

Why the packaging industry is managing carbon

Carbon management is the process of tracking, analysing, and reducing your carbon emissions to protect your business and unlock commercial benefits.



Visibility from cradle to grave

Only focusing on the low-hanging fruit in packaging emissions, like the manufacturing process or waste management system, opens up your company to significant risk. Up to 90% of your emissions are driven by your suppliers before your product even exists, or by your customers after use. Not being able to measure these indirect emissions makes you vulnerable to changing regulation and accusations of greenwashing.

Keep pace with customer expectations

A recent study of more than 1,100 US-based online shoppers revealed that sustainable packaging is now the key driver for consumers. Downstream players like Amazon and Walmart are also piling the pressure on suppliers to meet customer demand. The packaging companies that can't prove their sustainability will lose commercial relevance.

Build trust with retailers and other suppliers

Packaging is a solutions business that needs to keep innovating products. To do this sustainably, you need to be able to partner across the supply chain to share materials, machinery, or transport. Building a reputation as a sustainability leader in packaging with strong carbon management skills will help you unlock relationships across retailers, suppliers, and even investo

Emitwise is doing a great job pointing out the stakes for a specific audience group they are working with - if you're a packaging industry, sustainability is not an option. Clearly articulated stakes:

- Vulnerability to changing regulation
- Being accused of greenwashing
- Losing commercial relevance

Defining Changes & Stakes

Change has to be **real, relevant** and **risky** to resonate with the audience..

Think about the following when defining the change:

- How were things different a few years ago?
- How has their industry changed?
- What business results are diminishing and why?
- What processes are becoming obsolete?
- How is technology or innovation disrupting the status quo?

Define the **stakes** by thinking of:

- What is your hero's worst-case scenario if they don't adapt to change?
- Who is going to win and who is going to lose in the changing world and why?



Villain

Watch this 4 min video

Villain

To grow and tackle challenges, your audience needs an adversary - the villain.

The villain represents the internal or external obstacle that the hero must confront.

It serves as the focal point for conflict.

Usually, it's something that **hinders progress and transformation.** In the case of Tesla, the villain is CO2 emissions.

These emissions obstruct our path to a sustainable, carbon-free future, which is what our hero aims to overcome.

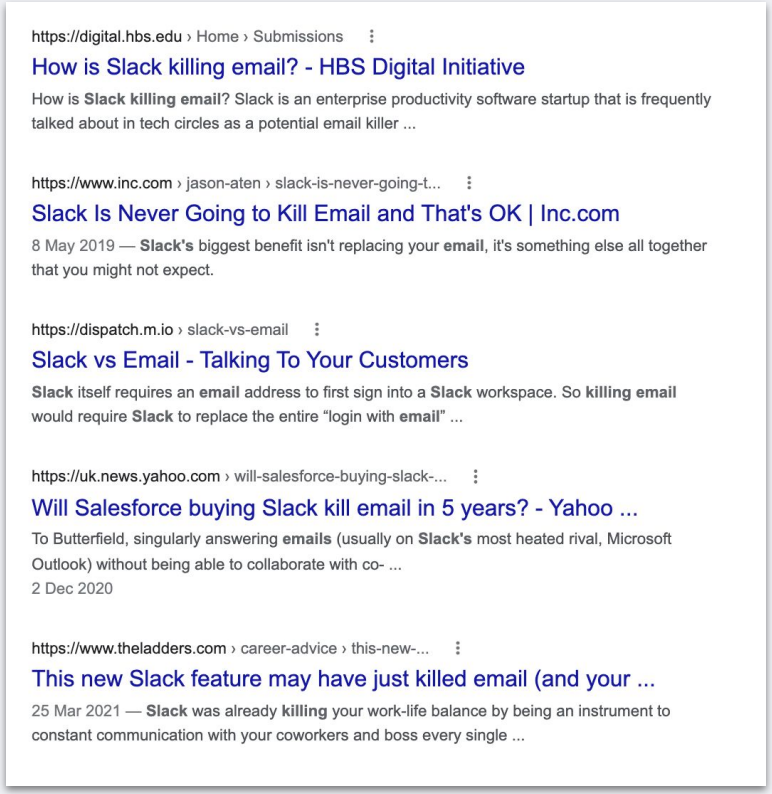
The villain amplifies suffering. Due to CO2, the planet is warming, leading to heat waves, hurricanes, and storms.

The more evil the villain, the greater our empathy for the hero's mission. We root for the hero to win.

People are drawn to a relatable villain because they want to eliminate it.

Most importantly, having a villain **allows us to position our products as 'tools' that customers can use to defeat it.**

Villain - examples



Slack took on email because of it is exclusive, slow and makes its users feel overwhelmed.

Villain - examples



Villain - examples



“I definitely am afraid of needles. It’s the only thing that actually scares me.”

- Elizabeth Holmes

The infamous Elizabeth Holmes is a great storyteller, whether you like her or not. She picked on a relatable villain that everyone disliked and rallied the crowds of admirers around her mission to defeat it.

Villain - examples





The concept of villain doesn't just work in movies or tech businesses. This is one of my favourites: Trump has made China his villain and built a successful campaign around it.

Defining Villain

Villain should be:

1. A root source of a problem
2. Relatable
3. Singular
4. Real



Promised Land

Watch this 5 min video

Promised Land

Your hero knows that if they don't adapt to the change that's happening in their market, the consequences might be grim.

They know they needs to defeat the villain that is causing them multiple problems.

But there is that little voice inside their head that keeps saying: "You're doing just fine. Yes, your life is not perfect, but it's kind of OK. You'll manage. All this villain fighting business is not worth the effort".

You see, their brain is trying to save calories.

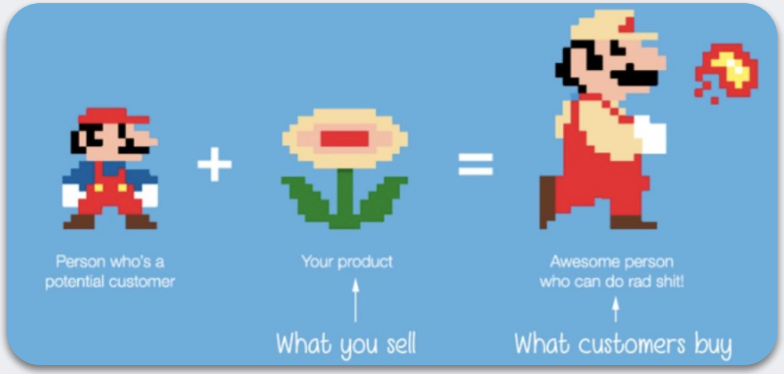
That's why a lot of B2B purchases end up not going anywhere.

Up to 30% of all purchasing decisions are lost to 'no decision' because the buyers were not convinced that their status quo is bad enough.

Most of your prospecting customers are 'satisficing' - they are satisfied enough with their current situation not to be bothered to do anything about it.

And that's exactly why you need to paint the picture of a promised land in order to motivate your hero to act.

Promised Land



Let's borrow this Super Mario example to better understand what the Promised Land is.

Most companies would typically focus on the flower, or their product, during their pitch.

They would describe the flower by listing all its features and capabilities, like 5 cm long; bright green stem; a red centre, and it smells like a combination of a daffodil and rose.

But the truth is - no one really cares. The thing your audience cares about is what happens to them ***after*** they consume this magic flower.

The questions running through their minds are:

- How is this going to make me more efficient?
- How is this going to help me get a promotion?
- How is this going to help me grow my business faster?

And so on...

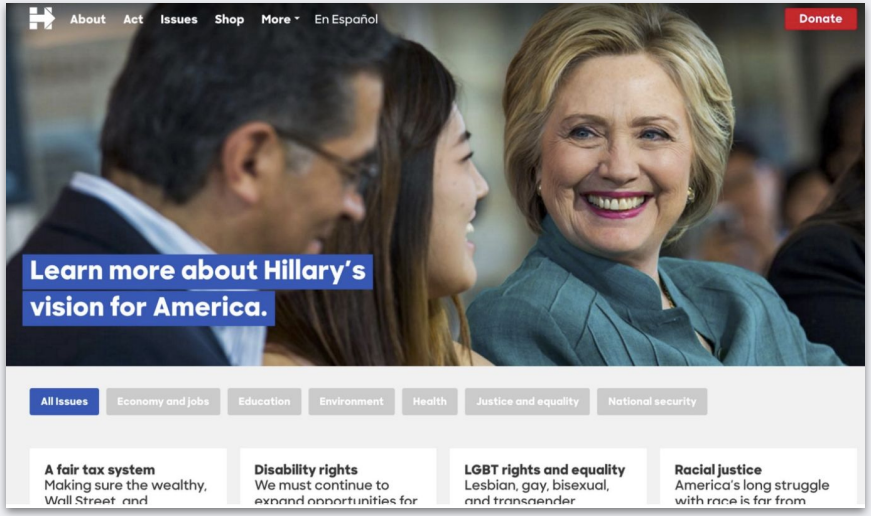
So. this bigger, better version of Super Mario after he consumes your flower ***is*** their Promised Land.

Promised Land - examples

We all know that Trump promised to take America to greatness. And we have no idea where Hillary was going.

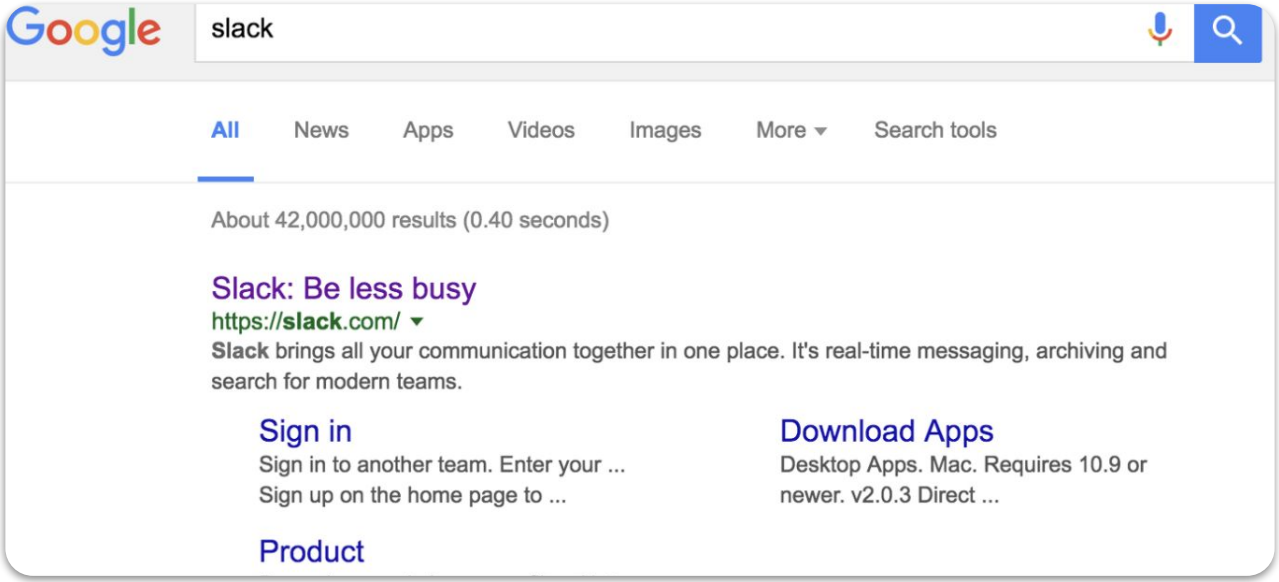


VS.



Promised Land - examples

Slacks promises we'll be less busy.



Promised Land - examples

Emitwise video



Here's how the story comes together in this Emitwise video:

Change: investors & regulators require ESG disclosures

Stakes: businesses that failed to become digital-first have now perished. Same will have with those who fail to adapt to ESG requirements

Villain: Old tools of gathering and analysing carbon data have not been built for purpose

Promised land: Being part of the 'Climate First Era'

Superpower: The full-stack decarbonisation platform - Emitwise

Defining Promised Land

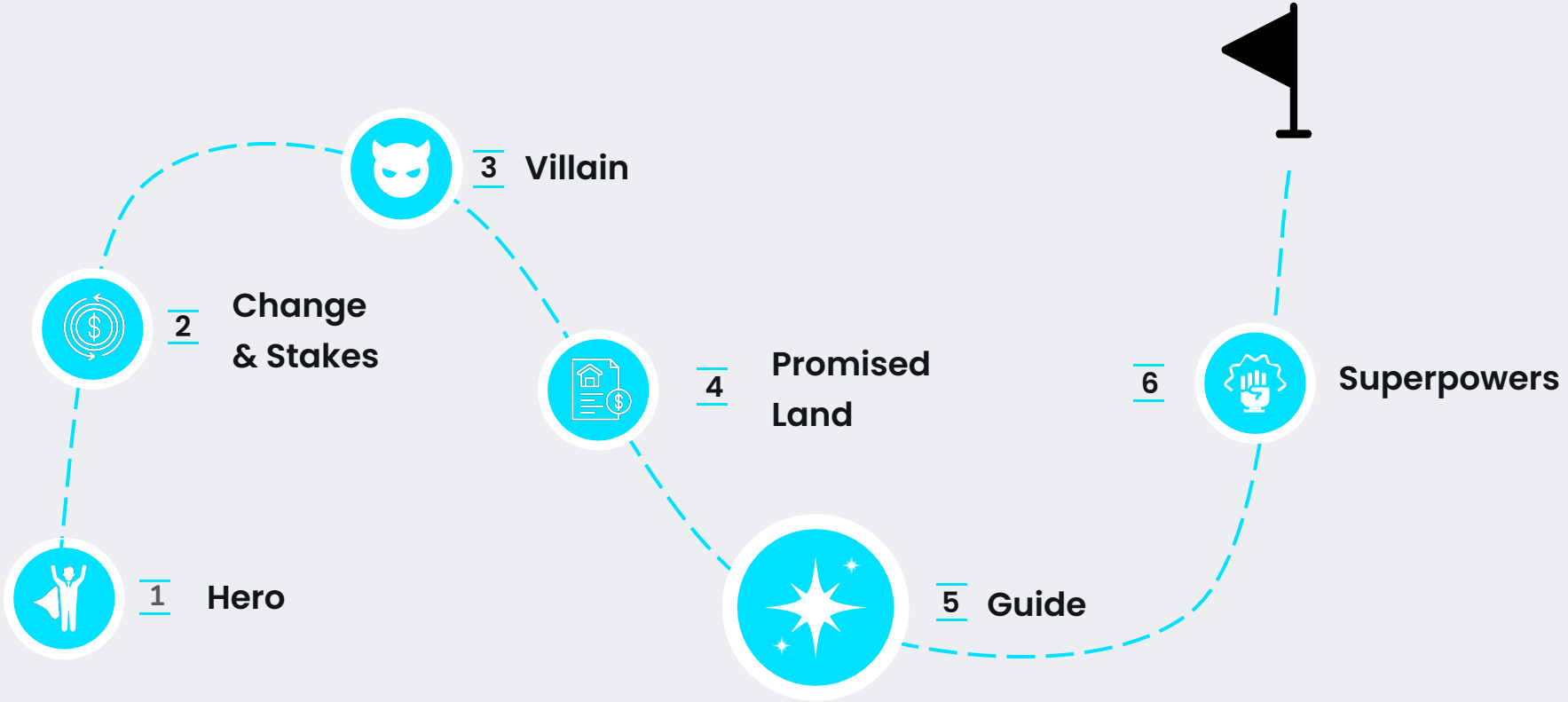
Key criteria:

1. Your hero thrives in the new world
2. It’s difficult to reach (without your help)
3. Defeated villain
4. The hero is a better version of themselves (their business is thriving)
5. It’s what the hero gets or becomes thanks to your product

PART 2: POSITIONING

Watch this 5 min video

The story-led positioning & messaging framework



"Positioning defines what your product is, who it is for and why it is better than the alternatives."

Answering key questions

1. What your product is? (your category)
2. What is your competition?
3. How is your product different?
4. What is the value it offers to your ICP?

Category	Competition	Differentiation	Value
By choosing to position within a specific market, you're giving your prospects clues about what products they should compare you with. It's like giving customers an answer to the question 'What are you?'  **Head to head** Compete directly in an established market by positioning yourself as the best solution to surpass the current leader. Think Zoom vs. Skype.  **Big fish in a small pond** Dominate a specific subsegment of a market by addressing unique needs unmet by broader market leaders. Think Basecamp (project mngmnt for SMEs) vs. Asana or Trello.  **Create a new category** Define and lead a brand-new market category by proving its value and setting the standards for it. Think Salesforce back in the day pioneering cloud-based CRM.	What would your ICP do if you didn't exist: Very often your competition is not another vendor. It can be anything from the status quo - the old way of doing things to hiring an intern or using an excel spreadsheet. Or doing nothing.	Your differentiation is found at the intersection of: • What your business does exceptionally well • What your competition can't or won't do • What your customers want or need Differentiation is being different in a way that your ideal customers care about and that you can build your entire business around. Note: your differentiation is not your personality, founder, team, awards, design, certifications	Value proposition is a simple explanation of why someone should choose your product, showing how it solves their problem or makes their life better compared to other options. ❌Not a tagline "Just Do It' or "I'm Lovin It" ✅Serves as the opening introduction for your product or company and it must be strong enough to stand on its own. **Specificity:** a strong value proposition should provide concrete details and measurable outcomes, allowing potential customers to understand exactly what they can expect. **Differentiation:** your value proposition should clearly communicate how your product stands out from competitors, emphasising unique features or benefits that are not offered by others in the market. **Honesty:** It should be something your product can honestly deliver.

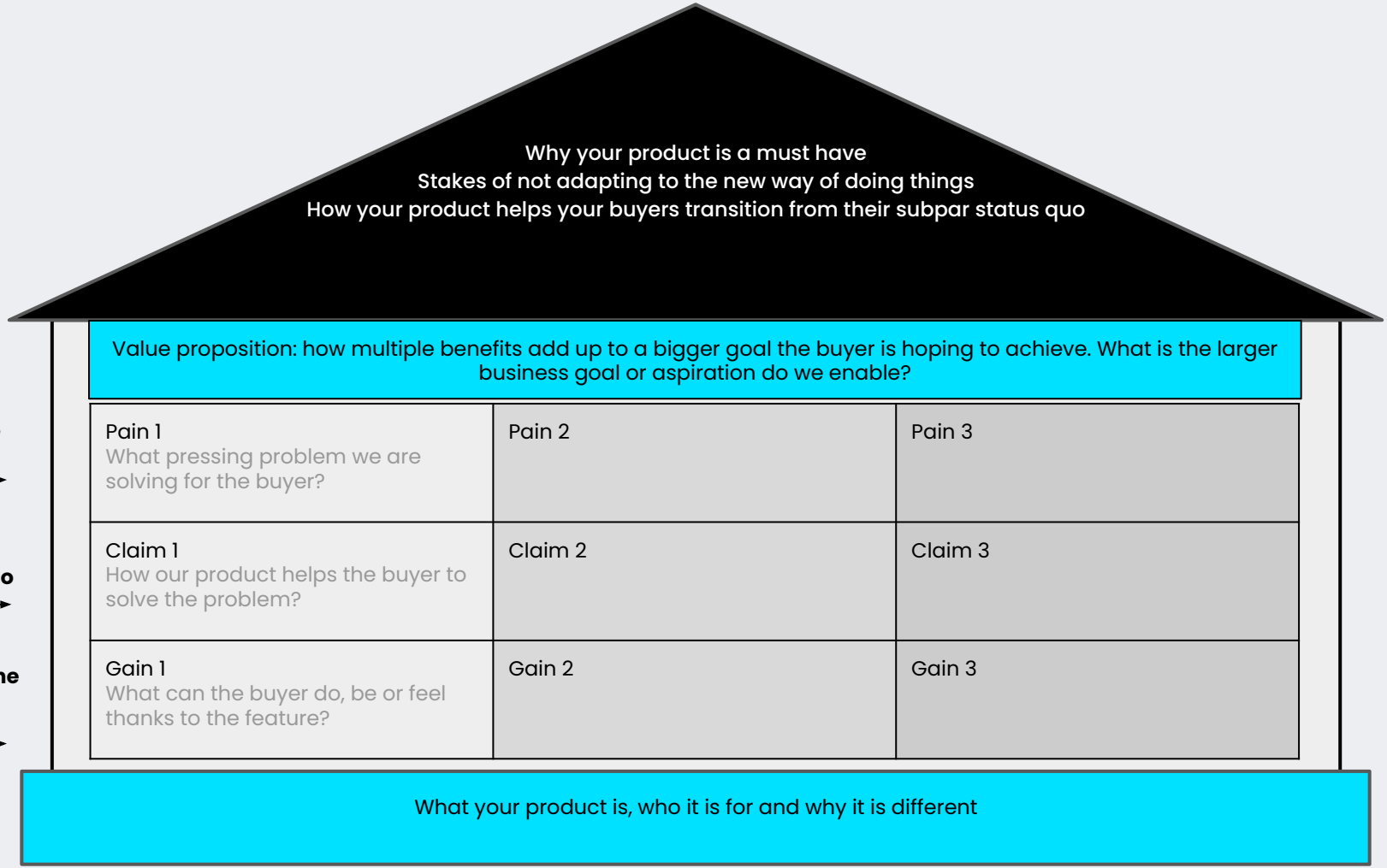
PART 3: MESSAGING

Watch this 4 min video

"Messaging explains how your product delivers unique value and brings positioning to life."

It 'lives' on the intersection of buyers' motivation and your product's best qualities.
The job of the messaging is to highlight your product's best qualities that will inspire them to take the next step.

- *Emma Stratton*


Why your product is a must have
Stakes of not adapting to the new way of doing things
How your product helps your buyers transition from their subpar status quo
Value proposition: how multiple benefits add up to a bigger goal the buyer is hoping to achieve. What is the larger business goal or aspiration do we enable?
Pains we solve
Claims - how we do it
Gains - the value we offer
Pain 1
What pressing problem we are solving for the buyer?
Pain 2
Pain 3
Claim 1
How our product helps the buyer to solve the problem?
Claim 2
Claim 3
Gain 1
What can the buyer do, be or feel thanks to the feature?
Gain 2
Gain 3
What your product is, who it is for and why it is different

Pains, claims, gains

#1 Pain *What is the pain your key buyer persona experiences?*	**#1 Claim** *What capability and features helps the buyer to solve the problem?*	**#1 Gain** *What value will they gain by getting it?*
Long process of gathering and presenting information to regulators. The customer often ends up with incomplete documents, inaccurate data and high costs due to a large number of third parties involved in the gathering process.	Capability: You can instantly gather required data with the smart system interface. Feature: Automatic data processing.	• Saves up to 5 weeks on gathering data manually • Get the most accurate information • Remove the costs of having to deal with multiple third parties along the process

Messaging vs. copy example

Messaging	Copy
Pain: Long process of gathering and presenting information to regulators. The company often ends up with incomplete documents, inaccurate data and high costs due to a large number of third parties involved in the gathering process.	*Tired of spending weeks gathering and presenting regulatory information, only to end up with incomplete documents and inaccurate data?* *Say goodbye to manual data entry, costly third-party integrations, and the risk of human error.* *Save up to 5 weeks on data gathering, ensure regulatory compliance with accurate data, and reduce the overall costs associated with regulatory reporting.* LEARN MORE →
Claim: - **Capability:** You can instantly gather required data with the smart system interface. - **Feature:** Automatic data processing	
Gain: • Saves up to 5 weeks on gathering data manually • Get the most accurate information • Remove the costs of having to deal with multiple third parties along the process	

PART 4: IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation

You've crafted your story, clarified positioning and build resonating messaging. Now, it is crucial to implement it and not let the hard work die in your google drive. Here are the key steps to follow to bring it to life:

1. Internal alignment

- Train your team to ensure that all members of your sales and marketing teams understand the narrative and can articulate it consistently. Conduct a workshop to practice delivering the narrative.
- Create resources: develop materials (e.g., pitch decks, FAQs, brochures) that encapsulate the narrative for easy reference by your team.

2. Website integration

- Place the narrative prominently on your website, but **NOT on your homepage.** Your narrative should live in a dedicated page e.g. About/Our Story etc. See the **example from Grin** and how to implement the story on your web.
- Reserve your homepage for your value proposition, description of the problem that you solve, your differentiation and outlining capabilities and benefits of your solution.

3. Content marketing

- Write articles and blog posts that explore different aspects of your narrative, providing deeper insights and value to your audience.
- Produce video content or host webinars that tell your story, showcase customer success, and discuss industry trends related to your narrative. See this **Emitwise video** example outlining their narrative.

Implementation

4. Email campaigns

- Use your narrative as the basis for targeted email campaigns. Tailor messages for different segments of your audience, highlighting relevant parts of the narrative.

5. Sales enablement

- Equip your sales team with a playbook that includes the narrative and key talking points (see **example of a discover prompter sales deck structure on the next page**).

6. Improve & iterate:

- Regularly gather feedback from your team and customers about how the narrative is perceived and understood.
- Be prepared to evolve the narrative based on market changes, customer needs, and emerging trends to keep it fresh and relevant.

Discovery prompter sales deck

Introduce Change	Highlight the Pain	Show what's NOT working	Tell a Painful Narrative	Pass the Torch	Describe the Promised Land	Showcase your Super powers
That represents both threat and opportunity.	That is, the pain that's caused by the change.	That your buyer is likely doing.	One that feels painfully familiar.	Stop and get THEM talking.	What is their alternative.	The outcomes you enable.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

About the authors



Lena Andican is a positioning and messaging expert specialising in working with complex technical products.

In addition to crafting compelling business narratives, her key skill is turning geek speak into a clear and concise value proposition.

Contact



Oren Greenberg is a leading B2B SaaS marketer and strategic advisor.

Having worked with over 100 startups, scaleups and corporates, Oren offers an unparalleled expertise and experience to his clients.

Contact

APPENDIX

Sources & further learning

This guide stands on the shoulders of giants. Below is a list of sources used in this guide and books & links that will help you with deeper learning.

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3. Duarte, Nancy. Resonate: Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences, 2010
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5. Miller, Donald. Building a StoryBrand: Clarify Your Message So Customers Will Listen, 2017
6. Orlob, Chris https://www.youtube.com/@chris_orlob
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